

SITES OF INSTRUCTION: EDUCATION, KINSHIP AND NATION IN AFRICAN  
AMERICAN LITERATURE

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

### SITES OF INSTRUCTION: EDUCATION, KINSHIP AND NATION IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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“Sites of Instruction: Education, Kinship and Nation in African American Literature” explores education as a site of racial subjection and identity making in African American Literature and culture. Through close readings of selected narratives, I explore how writers use education to represent the navigation, and imagining, of the relationships between community, the individual and the nation. In chapter one, I explore Sutton Griggs and Frances Harper’s post-bellum narratives of education as attempts to recuperate both Southern landscapes and kinship through articulation of the black teacher as communal healer and sacrificial leader. Griggs and Harper represent scenes of instruction which engage with education as a negotiation between generations, occurring within intimate scenes of domesticity, and on larger public stages. In chapter two, I identify black teachers, and intellectuals, in flight as a symptomatic response to the constraints and contradictions of early twentieth century racial uplift ideology, with a focus on Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*. In the face of anxieties about race purity, national borders and miscegenation, Larsen and McKay center characters whose immigrant and marginal status provide alternative insights, and perspectives, that critique and challenge conservative discourses of both citizenship and

black instruction. The third chapter focuses on the literary production of narratives about school desegregation by exploring critically neglected civil rights fiction by Ntozake Shange and Thulani Davis. Shange's *Betsey Brown* and Davis's *1959* articulate the meaning of desegregation through an exploration of adolescent subjectivity and gender. The prominence of children's voices, within civil rights fiction, suggests that children can write a different narrative of their political agency and participation in school desegregation politics, one that moves beyond both a damage thesis of black childhood and surface representations of black children's innocence. My epilogue contemplates the meaning, and construction, of post- Civil Rights subjectivities and communities by looking at representations of educational spaces in the works of Lorene Cary, Sapphire and Andrea Lee. I ultimately conclude that fictions of education embody educational history and also propose narrative as a source of pedagogical intervention.

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## Introduction: Lineages of Education and Literature

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color-line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the trajectory of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America?

W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*

One day near the end of my second term at school the principal came into our room, and after talking to the teacher, for some reason said, "I wish all of the white scholars to stand for a moment." I rose with the others. The teacher looked at me, and calling my name said, "You sit down for the present, and rise with the others." I did not quite understand her, and questioned, "Ma'm?" She repeated with a softer tone in her voice, "You sit down now, and rise with the others." I sat down dazed. I saw and heard nothing. When the others were asked to rise I did not know it. When school was dismissed I went out in a kind of stupor. A few of the white boys jeered me, saying, "Oh, you're a nigger too." I heard some black children say, "We knew he was colored." "Shiny" said to them, "Come along, don't tease him," and thereby won my undying gratitude.

James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

In January of 2011 the media and internet began to circulate the story of the "Akron mom," and, more specifically, the narrative of her quest to give her daughters access to, what she believed would be, a quality education. Kelley Williams-Bolar, an African-American single mother, and resident of Akron Ohio stood accused of "theft of educational services." Williams-Bolar allegedly used her father's address, in violation of residency requirements, in order to send her children, from 2006 to 2008, to the Copley-Fairlawn schools, a school district rated excellent by the state of Ohio. Williams-Bolar usurped a tuition fee of \$800 a month per student by falsifying her residency. The major discrepancy in the case was whether Williams-Bolar's two daughters' primary residence was with their grandfather, who did reside in the Copley-Fairlawn district or with their mother in Akron. Williams-Bolar faced felony charges of tampering with

records and was initially sentenced to five years in prison. The initial sentence was eventually overturned and Williams-Bolar served nine-days of a ten day jail sentence. Subsequently, Superintendent Brian Poe explained that reports of residency violation were a routine occurrence in the district. Describing the school board as “good stewards” of “taxpayers’ dollars,” in news reports and interviews, Superintendent Poe stood by his commitment to reduce the number of non-resident students who illegally entered the district. <sup>1</sup>

When confronted with the possible racial implications of his residency enforcement efforts, Poe explained that white families had also been targeted; out of 47 cases from 2005 to 2011, twenty-nine of them involved African-Americans, fifteen involved whites and three involved Asian-Americans. <sup>2</sup> In response to the controversy surrounding her case and imprisonment, Williams-Bolar was also reluctant to conclude that it was because of her race that she faced prosecution. In an interview with NPR journalist Michel Martin, Williams-Bolar, and her attorney, suggested that it was *cultural*, not racial, difference which fueled the conflict with the school district. She proposed that within her culture, grandparents acted as surrogate parents to their grandchildren, and, relatedly, that home for her daughters was a shifting location, with various adults acting as authority figures. <sup>3</sup> This amorphous understanding of location and family was expressed by Williams-Bolar in decidedly cultural terms; nevertheless, her explanation still gestures towards a racial reality, and it stands in sharp contrast to the public and judicial reaction to her case. Similar to the judge’s decision, residents of the district

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Jones in “Unusual Copley-Fairlawn school residency trial under way.”

<sup>2</sup> Brian Poe Interview with Michel Martin. *Tell Me More*.

<sup>3</sup> Kelley Williams-Bolar Interview with Michel Martin.

and many internet commenters argued that this case was simply about the violation of the law and the rightful protection of taxpayers.

In April of 2011, another case made the headlines, as Tanya McDowell, a then thirty-three year old homeless, single mother, was arrested by Connecticut police on a first-degree larceny charge for “stealing her son’s education” from the Norwalk, Connecticut school district. McDowell was accused of using her babysitter’s public housing complex address to enroll her son in school. The issue first surfaced during an eviction hearing for the babysitter, who was accused of violating her lease by allowing McDowell and her son to stay in the apartment. After the babysitter was evicted, the housing authority attorney passed the information about McDowell onto the Assistant State’s Attorney Suzanne Vieux. Convinced that McDowell had committed a theft, Vieux in an unprecedented move, pushed for the criminal prosecution of McDowell. Typically, parents accused of sending their children to out of district schools were called into a school hearing, and eventually withdrew their children from the school. By February of 2012, McDowell was sentenced to 12 years in prison for the larceny charge and four counts of drug possession and sales charges.<sup>4</sup> The complexity of her sentencing, which combines the drug and “theft” of education charges, is disconcerting, and suggestive. If the War on Drugs has, since the 1980s, been sub-culturally defined as, in actuality, a war on poor, black people, what do we make of these real-life educational thefts stories that involve single black mothers? Are these cases signaling the maintenance of education as another site to enforce constructions of race, criminality and geographical transgression?

The maintenance of strict borders between poor school districts and wealthier districts, because of historical precedent, suggests the continuity of neighborhoods carved by racial

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<sup>4</sup> John Nickerson in “Homeless woman’s arrest for sending son to Norwalk school stirs debate” and Associated Press “Conn Mom pleads guilty to stealing son’s education.”

phenotype and class distinctions. Despite the gains made in the desegregation of schools during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, racial segregation and inequality within schools remain a 21<sup>st</sup> century problem. It is a quandary that, quite often, grasps for an appropriate language. As demonstrated by Superintendent Poe's response, accusations of racism within schools are met by a rhetoric that downplays racial subtext, and proclaims universal equality under the banner of the law and taxation. The language of fair taxation is evoked to suggest racial and class neutrality. Thus, in the final moments of Williams-Bolar's interview with Martin, perhaps, due to the trauma of her incarceration, Williams-Bolar seems unable to find the language to interpret what has occurred, or directly answer whether she will continue her own journey towards becoming a teacher.<sup>5</sup>

The Williams-Bolar debate resonated with me not only because of my current research into the literary representation of education, but, also because of the spatial logic of education and race that I experienced growing up outside of the city of Camden, NJ. Considered, infamously dangerous, Camden was named America's most dangerous city in 2008. In 2007, Diane Sawyer drew attention to the plight of the poor, when she chronicled the lives of Camden's students in a widely viewed nightly news special. I grew up in a then predominately white, working class, township that bordered Camden, and witnessed firsthand the efforts put forward to protect the borders of the peripheral neighborhoods of my township. Police presence was strategically bolstered in certain areas; a car leaving Camden and entering our town would, most often, attract the attention of the local police force. These policing efforts also infiltrated the school system. Black and Latino students who entered as a minority presence were typically suspected of being from Camden. Similar to the efforts put forth to monitor residency requirements in the Williams-Bolar case, students suspected of falsification of residency were

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<sup>5</sup> In her interview with Martin, Williams-Bolar was asked if she would continue to seek a degree and license to teach. She responded "I'm just trying to take every day as it is. I just appreciate being out of jail . . . I used to be a person of planning, you know, like always had my goals and objectives. But right now that's all, like, at a halt."

often followed after school, in order to identify their true homes. Family members allowed the use of their address in order to allow young students the opportunity to be educated in a safer, seemingly better, school system. Although a black student, I was assured of my distinctiveness from Camden City's predominately black and Latino population because of where I lived and where I attended school.

The Williams-Bolar case not only spoke to me about the persistence of racial segregation and educational inequality in the contested "post-racial" era; I also noted a familiar motif that revealed a complicated narrative of family, geography and education. The black mother desires to educate her children, and in that pursuit she will sacrifice herself. She is both teacher and protecting mother; she proclaims education as the essential factor toward equality, despite legacies of racism and inequality. In addition, I wondered what structures of sacrifice, exclusion, and even criminality do the children, in these highly publicized cases, come to associate with the educational pursuit? To be sure, the quest and denial of education is not solely an interior family drama. Education, within the United States, has been the means by which African-Americans asserted their shared humanity and right to equal citizenship, as the possession of education came to be read as a marker of progress. Concurrently, the black educational quest is also articulated in a language of geographical infiltration. Space and location matter, as the attainment of education is often described as a type of physical, and figurative, border crossing.

A significant number of scholars have documented the role that the pursuit of literacy played in the African-American quest for freedom and self-determination. As seen in Frederick Douglass's construction of a "classroom" on the street of Baltimore, where white children acted as his teachers, literacy figured as a location where the ideology of black inferiority could be contested. Representations of "coming to literacy" were a recurring motif and site of *rebirth*. In

addition, these representations not only signaled a politics of communal liberation, and self-possession; it also can be argued that a poetic and rhetoric of instruction emerged from these narratives. This poetic and rhetoric of instruction would not only contain revised and (re)contextualized metaphors of education, but it would also bare the mark of racial and class difference. As seen in the epigraph by James Weldon Johnson, while authors used sites of education as a place where liberation could be imagined, it also was the place where one would potentially be coded as black, or poor. Additionally, education also became the site where one attempted to counter this coding by differentiating one's self from an imagined black collective. Thus, as I will explore throughout this dissertation, the classroom, and other spaces of instruction, act as the primary locations where the *black child* discovers not only his/her humanity through a love of books, but also the meaning of racial, gender, and class difference. As I will outline, constructions of the child and childhood figure prominently in African-American representations of education as a means to ground, an often politicized, performance of collective memory and racial kinship.

### Historical Overview

Early in the formation of the American nation, educators and political leaders widely debated who was entitled to education, and what form a "common" education should take, if there should be one at all. Following the American Revolution, debates about education were deeply tied to how the promises of equality that had been laid out in the Declaration of Independence would be actualized through particular institutions. While all could agree that there needed to be an educated leadership class, there was no uniform opinion about what to do about the education of the larger population. The establishment of a sovereign nation built upon the notion of an individual pursuit of happiness also called into question how much this pursuit would rest upon the establishment of an educated citizenry.

The late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the emergence of various educational theories and proposals, as well as attempts to establish coherent educational policies, if not nationally, at least, at the state level . Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book* and *American Dictionary of the English Language* worked to textually and linguistically define the new nation. Intent to do away with "European domination in literature and language as well as in politics and social practices," Webster sought to produce a uniquely, American identity through his speller, dictionary and other text books. <sup>6</sup> Webster envisioned a nation of "quiet Christians" and expressed anxiety about some of the proposals of Benjamin Rush, a professor of chemistry and medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. Webster was particularly concerned about Rush's suggestion that the Bible should be read in American classrooms. For Webster, and others, this treatment of the Bible was controversial in its casual approach to the sacred text. Many of Rush's propositions centered on his desire for homogeneity within the burgeoning nation. The use of the Bible in the classroom would make Christianity central in the education and character formation of American citizens. Rush called for the establishment of institutions of learning at home, instead of abroad, proposing not only that his home state of Pennsylvania open schools, but also that education was a national concern, as seen in his later call for a federal university. <sup>7</sup>

The calls for homogeneity among Republican education theorists reveal, according to historian of education, David Tyack, the "fundamental tension and paradox in republican

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<sup>6</sup> Wayne J. Urban and Jennings L. Wagoner Jr. in *American Education: A History* 91.

<sup>7</sup> Rush argued for the establishment of a "comprehensive system of education" in Pennsylvania. Although Rush was educated abroad, in Edinburgh, he asserted that "the business has acquired a new complexion" because of American independence. In the October 29 1788 issue of the Philadelphia Federal Gazette Rush proposed that one of the "first act of Congress should be to create a federal university" (Ibid, 85-83).

educational theory.” Republican educational theory defined the “internalization of restraint,” and the pursuit of commonality, as essential to the practice of freedom. In order for freedom to work, American liberty “was to be ordered or bounded liberty.”<sup>8</sup> The deeper paradox of this conceptualization of a disciplined American liberty is what it would mean for those “non-citizens” of African descent who were already *both* symbolically and physically *bound* within the borders of the new nation. Prior to the American Revolution, a “carefully policed educational boundary between blacks and whites” revealed the deep-rooted fear of African American literacy. Events such as the 1740 Stono Rebellion of South Carolinian slaves, led to the further proscription of formal education for African Americans. Similar laws would be erected after the publication of David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) and Nat Turner’s insurrection in 1830.<sup>9</sup>

Through an exploration of Thomas Jefferson’s thoughts concerning American education, and more specifically, the education of enslaved African Americans, I hope to pull out the contradictions, ambiguities, and ambivalence that emerged from the post-Revolutionary discussion of the relationship between race and education. Thomas Jefferson joined Webster and Rush in their sentiment that education was of strategic importance to the future of the republic. After the Continental Congress, he returned to the commonwealth of Virginia with educational proposals for his state. Joining the Virginia House of Delegates in the fall of 1776, Jefferson joined a special legislative committee that was designated to revise the laws of the state. Within three short years, the committee had drafted 126 bills and by 1786, 50 of those bills were law. According to Wayne J. Urban and Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., Jefferson labored to “lay

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid 87.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald E. Butchart in *Schooling the freed people: Teaching, Learning, and the struggle for black freedom 1861-1876* 14-15.

the ax to the roots of pseudo-aristocracy” through legislation dismantling traditional inheritance codes, Jefferson was not against the ownership of private property; he maintained that only men who owned property were entitled to the right to vote, because they had “a stake or investment in society.”<sup>10</sup> Here as in later education policy proposals, Jefferson was not necessarily interested in eliminating all pre-Revolutionary social hierarchy, but instead hoped to open the social and economic fields to a broader range of men, albeit that these men met specific criteria.

Within the field of education, Jefferson proposed “The Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” for the state of Virginia. Coming before the legislator in 1779, this bill would divide the state into counties or wards with each ensuring the education of free boys and girls. These boys and girls would only be guaranteed three year of free public education. Yet, only promising boys would move into the second tier of Jefferson’s educational plan. This second tier would be comprised of boarding schools with the purpose of narrowing the student body down until one superior scholar emerged from the ranks. This student, funded through a scholarship, would remain for an additional four years of study. Eventually each *ward* would produce a man intellectually qualified to attend a publicly supported university, and eventually, join the political and social arena of the American aristocracy. “The Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” and subsequent proposals, made by Jefferson, highlight both the “meritocratic and democratic principles” undergirding Jefferson’s conceptualization of American education. A lower tier education would give free children the opportunity to develop a common understanding of history and other subject matters. The subsequent tiers of Jefferson’s plan were meant to produce a “natural aristocracy” as opposed to an “artificial aristocracy” who only through the proxy of social and material inheritance, rather than through their own merit, were elevated. Jefferson was not necessarily concerned with using education as

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<sup>10</sup> Urban and Wagoner 80.

a means to establish economic equality or facilitate material gain for *all* who were to be educated, but saw education as a means to identify and properly educate “those capable of leadership and worthy of public trust.”<sup>11</sup>

Jefferson attempted to establish this system of merit and natural aristocracy within a patriarchal society which was economically bolstered and socially defined by the enslavement and oppression of people of African descent, as well as the colonization of native peoples. During the composition of the Declaration of Independence, descendants of Africans composed about 20 percent of the total population in 1776, with all but 25, 000 being slaves. Jefferson did not ignore what the presence of slaves meant for the young nation, or his prescriptions for American education, but their presence did not call into relief his constructions of educational “merit” or “natural” ability. Instead, in order for Jefferson’s renderings of education to function, Jefferson questioned whether the debasement of slavery could produce individuals capable of learning and, if so, if they could be educated on the same land that had enslaved them.

Jefferson formulated divergent paths for the education of native people and for those of African descent. In his conceptualization, native people could assimilate and be “civilized” enough to eventually be educated in a manner similar to whites. While in the name of Western expansion, he promoted the removal of native people from their land, but he also saw a future where *the blood* of whites and Native Americans would mix. He proposed educating them by first attaining a deeper understanding of their cultures. During his tenure as governor of Virginia, in 1779, he changed the Indian School that functioned at the College of William and Mary to an institution for studying Native American culture. Jefferson wished to anthropologically codify Native American culture, and even go as far as to claim its heritage as

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid 82-83.

his own, while simultaneously diminishing the possibilities for natives to claim their homeland and define their own lives.

In contrast, Jefferson did not foresee African Americans maintaining a home within the American nation. In 1778, Jefferson proposed a plan for the future emancipation of slaves. Within this plan, he articulated an educational model where slave children would be “offered training at public expense in farming, the arts, or the sciences, according to their abilities.” Once these children were to reach adulthood they were to be “provided with arms, tools, household implements, and domestic animals” and then removed to Africa as a “free and independent people” under the temporary protection of the United States.<sup>12</sup> It is both the *natural* distinction between master and slave, *and* the weight of the enmity produced by a past state of enslavement that informed Jefferson’s sense that those of African descent could not be reconciled to a shared citizenship, or a common domestic educational plan, post emancipation. Jefferson, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, conceives of slavery as a form of bad instruction, a perverse classroom where white children are corrupted. He writes:

There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it...This quality is the germ of all education in him. (*Notes* 155)

In acknowledging that there was a potential for slaves to revolt and destroy those who had enslaved them, Jefferson admits that slavery fosters a consciousness that would reject, and seek vengeance, against brutality. Yet, absent from Jefferson’s discussion is an acknowledgment that emancipated slaves, or Native Americans, could eventually *speak* about how their education should be defined. As historian Heather Andrea Williams explains, the maintenance of “a

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid 99-100.

system of bondage in the Age of Enlightenment” depended “upon the master’s being able to speak for the slave” in order to “deny his or her humanity, and to draw a link between slave consciousness and human will.” Literate slaves gave “lie to the entire system. Reading indicated to the world that this so-called property had a mind, and writing foretold the ability to construct an alternative narrative about bondage itself.”<sup>13</sup> I argue that the very pursuit of unsanctioned information and knowledge, whether demonstrated through the acquisition of literacy, or through participation in circuits of underground epistemologies, also gave lie to the system of slavery.

### The Pursuit of Educational Spaces

Prior to emancipation, slaves participated in the organization of educational activities both within and outside the confines of the master/slave paradigm. The literary representation of educational activities that could be defined as underground or “outside” of a master’s coercion would allow authors the ability to present the African-American thirst for education as innate, as a desire that quintessentially defined their humanity. The danger represented by an educated slave, or communal participation in alternate circuits of knowledge, is apparent upon a cursory reading of the various punitive codes, edicts and legislation enacted against the education of both slaves and free blacks. The enslaved African in America “was deemed chattel or moveable property without need of formal education.”<sup>14</sup> The relationship between possession, mobility, and money produces a web of signification which defines the field of education in both the antebellum and post bellum periods. Teaching a slave to read imbued human chattel with, a system challenging, ownership of his/her social identity and physical movement. Legislation

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<sup>13</sup> Heather Andrea Williams in *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* 1.

<sup>14</sup> Gloria J. Browne-Marshall in *Race, Law, and American Society: 1607 to present* 17.

made it illegal for whites to teach slaves and imposed fines on those who did teach slaves. Physical brutality against slaves was measured as less of an offense than teaching a slave to read or write. For example, in Georgia, whites who taught a slave to read faced a financial penalty 50 percent higher than the penalty for intentionally castrating or cutting of the limb of a slave. <sup>15</sup>

In the post Revolution North, African Americans understood that the right to American education was predicated on both race and economics. African Americans sought to gain access to a racially integrated, equal education through their identities as taxpayers. Although the state of Massachusetts abolished slavery in 1781, it still excluded black children from public education. As early as 1787, a Black Mason, Prince Hall, petitioned the city to provide an education for the children of Black taxpayers. If blacks were allowed to integrate into white schools, white hostility soon forced them to retreat from the schools, instead establishing their own school, the Smith school, in 1798. In 1846, African Americans would again petition the legislature asserting that separate schools for their children be abolished.

The 1850 case of *Sarah Roberts v. Boston* would set an ongoing precedent for the separate and unequal treatment of African Americans in the realm of education. The suit was brought against Boston by Benjamin F. Roberts on behalf of his daughter, Sarah. While Roberts maintained that separate schools violated the rights of black children, the Massachusetts court disagreed. The court conceded “that colored persons, the descendants of Africans, are entitled by law in the Commonwealth to equal rights,” yet the “question then arises whether the regulation in question which provides separate schools for colored children is a violation of any of their rights.” Roberts argued that “separate schools perpetuated caste distinction. The court responded that “this prejudice, if it exists, is not created by law, and probably cannot be changed

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid 17.

by law.” By 1855, the legislature repealed public school admission requirements based on race as well as color and religion. Yet, as Gloria J. Browne-Marshall maintains, the *Roberts v Boston* decision “sustaining racial separation, would form the cornerstone of future court decisions legally segregating children in public schools.”<sup>16</sup>

The efforts of Northern blacks to gain access to white schools highlight a crucial element of the conundrum that both the free born and the formerly enslaved would face during and after Reconstruction. In their argument against the forced segregation of their children, the black taxpayers of Massachusetts coded their petition against race-based discrimination in the language of land ownership and property. By nominally embracing the status of taxpayers, they sought to carve out a platform from which to advocate for educational equality that did not, initially, centralize the issue of racial discrimination. But Benjamin Robert’s assertion that schools be integrated to dismantle *caste* distinction was rejected by the court. The court ruled that the law could not alter or force the deconstruction of racial taboos surrounding the education of African- Americans.

The language embodied within the *Sarah Roberts v. Boston* case brings into focus a convergence of associated elements – education, the ownership of property, familial obligation, and communal identity. As seen in the post- Revolutionary Republican educational proposals, communal belonging and contribution through taxation worked so that housing would determine “employment opportunities, access to education, and health care.”<sup>17</sup> The impact of

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<sup>16</sup> Browne-Marshall, 18-19

<sup>17</sup> Gloria J. Browne-Marshall explains that The Homestead Act of 1862 applied only to non-Confederate Whites, giving them prized land in the South. In 1865, General William T. Sherman of the Union Army issued Special order #15, which set aside the Sea Islands of South Carolina and a tract of land on the southern coast of Charleston for Black ownership. Each black union leader was promised 40 acres of land and an Army mule to till the soil. This plan was eventually terminated under President Andrew Johnson. Johnson issued an executive order returning the land to the ex-Confederates. Other African Americans would earn land through the Southern Homestead Act of 1866. Yet this act also became a means for Whites to secure the best land for themselves. Despite these challenges, by the

the tightly woven bond between property rights and education would be especially stressed at the time of emancipation. With over four million blacks being left without homes and without a means to purchase land, the emancipation ushered in a series of complex negotiations, which ultimately had an impact on those who were already free, who were now confronted with how to identify themselves within this larger body of African Americans.

Even before the end of slavery, and during the Civil War, African Americans seized on the national fissure as a means to exercise a mobility, that would allow them to negotiate a new relationship to not only their education, but also to the land. If Douglass' free floating street education in reading epitomized the improvisational nature of clandestine attempts to be educated, the actions of numerous Black soldiers, during the Civil War, demonstrate the extent to which African Americans sought to lay claims to land as a means to build educational institutions. Black soldiers donated to the endowment of Wilberforce University in Ohio, soldiers in Georgia donated to support an orphanage and school, and soldiers of the Thirteenth Colored Regiment donated an organ to the Fisk Colored School in Tennessee. Other regiments worked to purchase lands in order to build schools. The 175<sup>th</sup> Battalion of New York Volunteers, with other African Americans, worked to purchase land for a school building and one of the Battalion's own served as the school's first teacher. Black soldiers, of the Arkansas based Fifty-sixth United States Infantry, in 1866, purchased thirty acres of land and built the school that would eventually become Arkansas's Southland Institute. They would eventually deed the land to a Quaker organization that was working with Black orphans.<sup>18</sup> These numerous episodes highlight both the centrality of education for African Americans, even during wartime, and the

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1870s blacks held significant land acreage in South Carolina, Virginia and Arkansas (*Race, Law and American Society* 47-49).

<sup>18</sup> Andrea Michelle Williams 57-58.

attempt of these Black soldiers to begin to suture broken family networks through institution building.

Historians of education have debunked the myth that whites were largely responsible for the education of the freed people. In *Schooling the Freed People*, Ronald Butchart asserts that metaphors used to describe “the ‘yankee’ teachers- schoolmarms,’ the ‘soldiers of light and love,’ the ‘gentle invaders’ conjure up images of the freedmen’s teachers as white New England woman” have “reified” these images. One in every six northern teachers was African-American, and, between 1861-1877, more than one-third of all the teachers in the Southern black schools were African Americans. The secret networks of black instruction that existed prior to 1861 continued, with a large majority of teachers being the neighbors of the freed people.<sup>19</sup> Historians, such as Heather Andrea Williams and Butchart have shown that African Americans were integral to the education of the freed people, which gives further evidence as to why representations of black teachers and educational spaces prove so central in the literature. In addition, the reality that white Southerners, who largely did not have abolitionist leanings, comprised a large body of the Reconstruction teachers brings to light the political and social battle at the heart of educational efforts.

Usually motivated by “poverty and desperation” rather than any benevolent desire to teach black students, whites who taught in black schools, were “often equivocal and contradictory to the best interests of a truly free people.” <sup>20</sup> In Sutton E. Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio*, the adversarial tendency of the white teacher is represented in its extreme by the character of Mr. Leonard, who works, obsessively, to undermine the efforts of Belton Piedmont. The difference in pedagogical intention and investment between white and black teachers,

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<sup>19</sup> Butchart xi-xii, 21-23.

<sup>20</sup> Butchart 5-13.

allows the educational setting to be constructed as a space of contention and intense socio-racial negotiation. The freed people's desire for self-actualization, often expressed through the embrace of an educational model that promoted this aim, ran counter to an educational model of dependency and containment embraced by white Southerners. Newly freed blacks seeking literacy and instruction sought "religious emancipation" in their quest to read the Bible for themselves. Matters of economics factored in also, as literacy was also conceived as a protection against fraud.

The freed people's goals "of emancipation and of literacy-a sense of agency and autonomy" were "often expressed in gendered language as a sense of manhood."<sup>21</sup> The high numbers of African Americans teachers, both men and women, had the potential to trouble the borders of Southern social stratification. In their act of "self-creation as the second group of southern black professionals, after the long established black ministry" the emergence of a large class of black teachers marked a "transgression across long-forbidden racial and class boundaries." Black women teachers "violated traditional southern gender boundaries" and Northern black teachers crossed another border "with both emotional and political freight, the geopolitical border between the North and South."<sup>22</sup> For African American woman teachers like Frances Harper, who already as an established orator pre-emancipation already transgressed racial, gender and geographical borders, their emergence as educational figures could potentially threaten not only Southern gender boundaries but also the establishment of an idealized black manhood identified as *the sole* means to produce leaders worthy of representing the race. Perhaps an awareness of this danger, in addition to the arguments about the politics of

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<sup>21</sup> Butchart writes that Frederick Douglass expressed this goal succinctly at the dedication of the Douglass Institute in Baltimore, Maryland. Douglass stated that "the mission of the Institution and that of the colored race are identical. It is to teach [the race] the true idea of manly independence and self-respect" (12).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 49-50.

black women's domesticity articulated by scholars like Hazel Carby and Claudia Tate, contributed to the cloaking of the instructional ambitions of black women in the language of maternity. As the school teacher, Mr. Thomas, notes in Harper's *Trial and Triumph*, black women teachers were expected to give birth to the new civilization through their educational and cultural work. Coinciding with a shift to a teacher model that would emphasize affection over stringent disciplinary codes, the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction era black classroom marks a space where the language of family and kinship meet in such a manner as to be an entry point into a discussion of the compounded identity of the black student and teacher. Both of these identities encountered a world of expectations. These expectations emerged from both revised and newly initiated post bellum constructions of obligation, subjectivity and community.

The emergence by 1870 of over four thousand institutions of learning across the South marked not only a shift in the visibility of African American instruction, it also allowed for the emergence of pedagogical models that were often foreign to Southern notions of education.<sup>23</sup> The freedmen's classrooms became a site where new expectations for the modern teacher were introduced, and combined with earlier African-American instructional models. With corporal punishment waning by the 1860s, the modern teacher was "expected to govern through force of personality." Teachers were instructed to maintain order by cultivation of "an emotional, maternal relationship with learners." The relationship between teacher and student was to be based on "relative mutuality, affection, enthusiasm, and respect" rather than one built upon physical dominance, threats and coercion. Modern, urban teachers, in lieu of force, were to facilitate an emotional attachment between student and teacher that guided a student to appropriate self-discipline and behavior. This attachment would develop through

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<sup>23</sup> Browne-Marshall 20.

demonstrations of character and morality, and appeals to the individual conscience of the student. The ultimate goal was to instill within the student a sense of “personal guilt.” <sup>24</sup>

The new emotional contract between teacher and students, as well as the introduction of self-guilt, emanated at a time when the newly freed people were negotiating the very meaning of kinship and family. Modern teacher models often contradicted the social and economic realities of agrarian Southern life. Competitive reward systems, drawing on the labor incentive systems of the industrial North, helped teachers to manage and hierarchize the classroom. Educators deployed the “language and mechanics” of efficiency in order to monitor students and qualify educational outcomes. Within the freed people’s classroom, punctuality was often emphasized just as much as literacy. <sup>25</sup>

Many African Americans envisioned education as one of the primary sites that would define their future and collective identity. It can be argued that, within their Southern classrooms, African American students and teachers existed *ahead* of the communities they populated, at least when juxtaposed to the lack of a precedent and desire for education among non-elite white Southerners. The new pedagogical models embraced within many of freed people’s classroom placed these educators and learners outside, *and* beyond, the logic of a Southern social structure.

This may help to explain why many post-bellum African-American representations of communities of learning depict, what I will call, instructional *non-places*. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, the imperium in Sutton Griggs’s novel is imagined as a grandiose underground university whose objects include tombs of knowledge. Likewise, the hope of claiming both land,

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<sup>24</sup> Butchart 134-135.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 137-142.

and recuperating racial kinship ties, meant that the educators in Harper's novels often return to fragrant, idyllic Southern locations of instruction, despite the fact that the site's borders are always vulnerable to white violence and intrusion. Despite the representation of educational non-places, post Reconstruction narratives of instruction are involved in the project of producing fictive histories of African American education. While the instructional settings depicted push imaginative boundaries, these texts often offer meditations on a longer narrative of African American education. Harper's *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* spans three decades, depicting clandestine circuits of knowledge within the slave community, before moving forward through time to note the backlash against African-American education, demonstrated forcefully through the fire that incinerates Iola's school. In a more subtle manner, Griggs alludes to a larger cultural memory by depicting characters' whose speech, actions and settings are inscribed with allusions to, and traces of the slave past.

These literary representations of instruction often confront white ambivalence and shifting perceptions of institutional segregation and attitudes towards the education of not only African Americans, but others who were perceived as non-white. The results of the post bellum surge towards education and literacy were staggering. Between 1880 and 1910, the illiteracy rates among African Americans decreased from 70 percent to 33 percent. In addition, after emancipation, some states were poised to educate African American children in an integrated environment. For example, in 1868, the constitution of South Carolina called for an integrated system of universal education that would serve both African American and white children. The emergence of post Reconstruction Black codes, such as ones that specifically targeted the homeless and jobless, demonstrate the extent to which the backlash against African Americans sought to dismantle any progressive agenda for integration and equality.

The increased white hostility towards integrated education was not a phenomenon specific to the South. In the North, segregated education continued to be debated; African Americans often found courts unsympathetic to their demands for an integrated education for their children. In 1883, a Brooklyn, New York, court considered the question of racial segregation in education in the case of *King vs. Gallagher*. The court ruled “that a Black child could not attend the school of her choice when a school designated for Blacks was made available.”<sup>26</sup> Soon after *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which upheld a state’s right to enact laws racially segregating social interaction, the U.S. Supreme Court was presented with the case of *Cumming v. Richmond County Board of Education* (1899). In *Cumming*, Black parents raised the same question that was central to the *Roberts v. Boston* case: could the children of taxpayers be excluded from public schools? Blacks in Richmond County were banned from the whites-only high school, and had to pay tuition towards a private black high school, in addition to taxes that supported the public high school for whites. Georgia statute required tax dollars from all residents to support free public schools, but also asserted that “separate schools shall be provided for the white and colored races.” Richmond County had converted the only Black high schools into a primary school on the ground that Blacks needed only “the rudimentary of education.” The Supreme Court determined “that the interest and convenience of the White majority did not require a high school for blacks,” concluding that the state could decide how it would distribute its funds.<sup>27</sup> In this case, state funds were to be used for the benefit of the white majority. While African Americans were to be economically bound to the state through taxation, their political and social power was limited, particularly in the context of education.

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<sup>26</sup> Browne-Marshall 21.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid 23.

In looking at constructions of black subjectivities after slavery, scholars have cited the ways in which structures of obligation, indebtedness and responsibility worked to bind the newly freed to a compromised citizenship. Saidiya Hartman, in *Scenes of Subjection*, writes that “indebtedness was central to the creation of a memory of the past in which white benefactors, courageous soldiers, and virtuous mothers sacrificed themselves for the enslaved. This memory was to be seared into the minds of the freed. Debt was at the center of a moral economy of submission and servitude and was instrumental in the production of peonage.”<sup>28</sup> Much like the new model of teacher-student relations, guilt would be one of the operative factors that would implicate African Americans in a social and economic arrangement that continued to entrench black servitude. Within this arrangement, education, and more specifically, instruments of instruction like textbooks, manuals and fiction often propagandized for the survival of an obligated African American subject.

Heather Andrea Williams suggests that we see “textbooks” as political tools that aim to transmit “particular ways of looking at the world and some mid-nineteenth-century textbook writers carried out ideological struggles in seeming politically inconsequential elementary spelling and reading books.”<sup>29</sup> Before the Civil War, textbooks were already being used to present apologist arguments for slavery and to carve out a distinct southern identity. In the late 1850s, as the tension increased between regions, white politicians and educators moved to remove the influence of Northern teachers and educators from the south. Two years into the war and months after the Emancipation Proclamation freedmen textbooks such as *Our Own Primer*, *Our Own Spelling Book* and *The Dixie Primer* could be found in Southern classrooms.

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<sup>28</sup> Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection* 131.

<sup>29</sup> Williams in *Self-Taught* 130.

In her discussion of the freedmen's textbooks,<sup>30</sup> Saidiya Hartman, maintains that freedom was defined in "contradictory terms in these textbooks." Ciphering out "proper doses of humility, responsibility, and restraint," these books encouraged "both a republican and free labor vision in which wage labor was the stepping-stone to small proprietorship and a liberal vision in which freedom was solely defined by the liberty of contract."<sup>31</sup> The convoluted definition of freedom and citizenship in these texts confirms Ronald E. Butchart's assertion that participation in the education of African Americans did not guarantee a belief in either complete emancipation or, as Hartman suggests, a reassessment of structures of inequality and debt, instead textbooks most often enforced these structures.

At the same time that these texts, produced by organizations like the American Tract Society and authored by former plantation managers like Isaac Brinckerhoof, sought to instill loyalty and obligation within African Americans, Heather Andrea Mitchell alerts us to the fact that text books were scarce commodities within the freed schools. Based on this fact, it may be pertinent not to read the textbook as the central organizing factor of the freed people's instruction or the place where we get a complete sense of what *obligation* and *responsibility* meant within classrooms and other communities of learning. In *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form*, Priscilla Wald, describes national narratives as shaping personal narratives by "delineating the cultural practices through which personhood is defined."

<sup>32</sup> The legal, legislative, and social maneuvers used to restrict access to education created a limited field of possibility. It is my sense that it is within this space that we confront

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<sup>30</sup> Hartman explores Isaac Brinckerhoof's *Advice to Freedmen*, Jared Bell Waterbury's *Friendly Counsels for Freedmen*, Helen E. Brown's *John Freedmen and His Family*, a fictional work and Clinton Bowen Fish's *Plain Counsels for Freedmen*.

<sup>31</sup> Hartman 128-129.

<sup>32</sup> Wald 4.

constructions of black personhoods embedded in, and emerging from, the social identities of teacher and student.

National narratives about the education of African Americans, as well as assertions of individual and communal obligation, produce unique social identities and relationships. These social identities and relationships are not only manifested through inter-racial conflict emerging from the South's embrace of segregationist educational policies and oppressive labor practices – such as sharecropping. I am interested in the emergence of the architecture of feelings between teacher and student, between the learned and the learning, and between students *within* African American sites of instruction. In post Reconstruction narratives of instruction, we encounter narratives that reinforce the historically accurate reality of African Americans primarily teaching each other in, sometimes, insulated environments. This does not mean that we do not take seriously that the educational imperatives within these locations intersected with, or collaborated with, the propagation of, to reference Hartman, a burdened racial subjection. The identifying and meaning of what one can call *interracial* educational encounter also needs to be interrogated. Despite the legal and social attempts to reify boundaries between black and white, the realities of racial identification remained amorphous and ambiguous. It is within works of fictions that we see authors revealing the contradictions, and arbitrariness, of racial distinctions, even as they make appeals for racial solidarity and collectivity.

Interpreting Etienne Balibar, Priscilla Wald writes that the “idea of individual existence cannot preexist a group identity, Balibar suggests that the formation of a new community entails a deconstitution of the old: ‘individual existence’ must first be dissociated from one collective identity (a tribe or region, for example) and then reimagined with another collective national

narrative.”<sup>33</sup> What communal deconstitutions took place in order for a slave to imagine herself as a scholar? What new narrative of community allowed for a collection of freed people to become a school? What possibilities did an ex-slave see that would make him just years after emancipation carry a collection of poems by Tennyson in his back pocket even though he did not yet know how to read that collection?<sup>34</sup> How did he imagine, and regard, the teacher that could teach him, letter by letter, how to unlock the language of poetry?

### Claiming Kin, Claiming Childhood

Education is simultaneously, and often conflictingly, within representations of African American education, a form of self-ownership and the means by which the individual is owned. Thus, as will often be the case throughout this study, the teacher owns/owes the community and the community owns/belongs to the teacher. For its very centrality to emerging definitions of racial identity and belonging, and of freedom, representations of educational spaces are complex sites where selfhood, kinship, knowledge, obligation and ownership meet. The narration of educational experiences may in itself constitute a cultural practice and performance of identity and memory. These narratives often become a means to mitigate the conflict between the slave past, and trauma, and the defining of kinship.

The shifting meanings of family and kinship, during the post bellum period, allow me to place the teacher and student, throughout this work, on a chain of revised kin relations. Nancy

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<sup>33</sup> Balibar quoted in Wald 2.

<sup>34</sup> In 1863, James E. Yeatman, a representative of the St. Louis-based Western Sanitary Commission toured contraband camps from Illinois to Mississippi to “observe the conditions of the freedpeople and gauge which of them were likely to become dependent on the government or charity.” Yeatman noted the significant presence of self-constructed schools within the camps. Describing the school began by Wm. McCutchen in Arkansas, Yeatman noted that the students were “using books of every kind and description, scarcely any two of them alike” and that one “had a volume of Tennyson’s poems, out of which he was learning his letters” (Williams in *Self Taught* 36-37).

Bentley defines kinlessness as –a condition “imposed by force” used by “regimes of power” in order to “isolate and extract a discourse of race built on a practical negation of kinship morphologies, racial thinking has theorized collective identities precisely by demoting or effacing the lived integrity of individual families, clans and moieties.”<sup>35</sup> According to Bentley, the localities where we come to an illuminated understanding of kinlessness are those “sites of novelistic departure or mutation, formal spaces that recognize and express meanings that exceed the constricted familism of the genre.” Kinlessness allows for the creation of “counterhistories of kinlessness,” of diasporic kin worlds, “a proper locale for recollecting the improper, traumatic exile from legal kinship and its afterlife in diasporic cultures.”<sup>36</sup> Bentley asserts that these narratives and locations of kinlessness appear after the failure of Reconstruction. Dylan Penningroth suggests that kinlessness be understood not so much as a literal fact but as “a socially accepted way to denote an extremely unequal relationship. Slaves could live near their blood relatives and yet be outside their arms of protection, cut off from all rights of family membership.”<sup>37</sup> Informal economies of exchange and property developed within this circumscribed network of relations. Pennigroth describes the post bellum moment as ushering in a series of difficult questions, and negotiations, of the meaning of family and the related accumulation of communal and personal property: “What was a family? Who belonged in it? And what kinds of claims did kinfolk have on one another?”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> In “The Fourth Dimension: Kinlessness and African American Narrative” Bentley writes: “Frederick Douglass expresses this exile from legal kinship when he writes, ‘My poor mother, like many other slave women had many children but NO FAMILY!’” (270-272).

<sup>36</sup> Bentley 278.

<sup>37</sup> Penningroth in *Claims of Kinfolk* 8-9.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 164.

The post-emancipation condition changed the complex relationship between communal and personal property, and this shifting relationship was mapped along the axis of kinship. Social relationships enabled one to obtain property, and property enabled the creation of new social relationships. I see the personal and communal “ownership” of education as another type of property relationship circulating with the African-American community and represented within African-American literatures of instruction. It is also important to note that the access to property, the actual possession of material space to instruct, is an essential aspect of the ability to carry out an educational endeavor within the American context.

Communal and kinship ties banded African Americans, but also, in Pennigroth’s analysis, “became touchstones of difference, exclusion, and even conflict” as claims to property and labor were predicated on whether one could be named as member of a community or family. Claims of kinship were a contested ground that often “emphasized the *differences* among black people; “between refugees and those who had grown up on a place, between the free and the freed, between blacks from different regions, states, or even different islands.” <sup>39</sup> The ability to claim children was an integral part of post-emancipation property and kinship negotiations. While those who sought education represented a wide range of ages, children bore the burden of increased demand on their labor, and were also implicated in a conception of communal uplift which would manifest itself through an investment in their education. Quite often the need for a child’s labor for material survival and security conflicted with a narrative of collective racial uplift built upon the education of youth. Children’s labor was increasingly claimed by a widening “circle of people who could claim familial authority” over them. <sup>40</sup> Children often found

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid* 173-175.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid* 167.

themselves under the control and authority of a wide range of adults as African Americans stretched the quantitative and social boundaries of what constituted a family.<sup>41</sup>

In both fictional and non-fictional representations, constructions of black children and childhood figured into prescriptions for, and debates about, the education of the black masses. As Robin Bernstein outlines, in *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Right*, by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century discourse about childhood had shifted, from the colonial era's Calvinist understanding of children as being born with eternal sin, to a new doctrine that came to view children as sinless and innocent. According to Bernstein, by the mid-nineteenth century, sentimental culture imagined children not only as innocent "but as innocence itself," and while this innocence was unequivocally perceived as white—*Uncle Tom's Cabin's* Little Eva is the embodiment of this standard of white childhood innocence—"sentimental childlike innocence" manifested itself through "the performed transcendence of social categories of class, gender, and race." Children's innocence was not a "literal state of being unraced but was, rather, the performance of not noticing, a performed claim of slipping beyond social categories."<sup>42</sup>

Bernstein's interpretations offer useful terminology for interrogating how childhood is performed and evoked in African American narratives of education. As a performer's body acts as an effigy which "bears and brings forth collectively remembered, meaningful gestures, and thus surrogates from that which a communities have lost," children serving as "effigies" substitute "uncannily for other, presumably adult, bodies and thus produce a surplus of

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<sup>41</sup> Penningroth explains that for ex-slaves the experience of being a refugee "changed ideas about family and community." As thousands of African Americans left their plantations and organized themselves into large groups that they called "families." One Union officer reported seeing a family with over 205 members (*Claims of Kinfolk*, 170).

<sup>42</sup> Bernstein 4-6.

meanings.” The pronouncement of loss and mourning, through a performance of childhood, is all the more meaningful for African American writers who utilized narratives of childhood to mark the loss of innocence as a consequence of racial oppression, rather than as an inherent racial condition. Post-bellum African Americans, like others who wrote in romantic and sentimental modes, did, as Bernstein notes, construct a childhood “defined by loss and consternated memory.”<sup>43</sup> Yet, their imaginings of black childhood perform a double duty. Their writings evoke childhood to both symbolize the historical and contemporaneous impediments towards full citizenship and equality, while also voicing the potential and hopes of the race.

### Literary Models and Educational Imperatives

Material and symbolic demands that emerged from a constricted socio-economic terrain and taboos of black inferiority produced competing narratives of black education articulated through rhetoric(s) of childhood. Post Reconstruction, African American writers evoke their own childhoods, and other black childhoods, as means to advance their educational missions/ideologies, and to facilitate their constructions of racial kinship and American citizenship. Within their work, we encounter rhetorical strategies that lay the groundwork for the central themes, and questions, that guide this dissertation. While the early 20<sup>th</sup> century debates between Booker T. Washington and Du Bois have been understood as a debate about classical versus vocational education, I want to also position the tensions between Washington and Du Bois as a battle of control over the ownership, construction and interpretation of black childhood, and youth, in the service of their respective educational models. Both Washington and Du Bois’s early educational theories fit into a shifting ideology of racial uplift. Kevin K. Gaines, in his *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth*

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<sup>43</sup> Bernstein 23-24.

*Century*, writes that within ideologies of racial uplift “African Americans have, with almost religious fervor, regarded education as the key to liberation. This sense of uplift as liberation theology flourished after emancipation and during the democratic reforms of Reconstruction.”<sup>44</sup> Within this context, writers proposing educational models, and fashioning portraits of instruction, infused their prose with a sense of urgency by depicting the race’s most valuable resources, black childhood and youth, as being under threat, from both internal and external forces. Relatedly, educational strategies were charted on the political terrain of black childhood and youth.

Narratives of education designed to engage a defiant politic of black childhood innocence had to grapple with the reality that black children and childhood were already indicated in the realities of physical labor. The solution offered by Booker T. Washington to this problematic was to define the embrace of labor as an essential moral and educational act. For Washington, education is not primarily about “literacy” or overall knowledge, instead, education is defined by utility, service and maintenance of economic relevance. In describing his educational journey,

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<sup>44</sup> Gaines explains, that African-Americans, since the post-Reconstruction era described themselves “as middle class through their ideals of racial uplift, espousing a vision of racial solidarity uniting black elites with the masses.” An “emphasis on class differentiation as race progress often involved struggling with the culturally dominant construction of “the Negro problem.” Amidst legal and extra-legal repression, many black elites sought status, moral authority, and recognition of their humanity by distinguishing themselves, as bourgeois agents of civilization, from the presumably undeveloped black majority, hence the phrase, so purposeful and earnest, yet so often of ambiguous significance, “uplifting the race.” Gaines describes this as a “shift from race to culture, stressing self-help and seemingly progressive in its contention that blacks, like immigrants, were assimilable into the American body politic, represented a limited, conditional claim to equality, citizenship, and human rights for African Americans. Black elites espoused a value system of bourgeois morality whose deeply embedded assumptions of racial difference were often invisible to them” (2-4). Gaines defines uplift as an ideology “meant to describe a black middle-class ideology, rather than an actual black middle class” (14). Thus “Black elites who spoke of uplift opposed racism by calling attention to class distinctions among African-Americans as a sign of evolutionary racial progress” (20).

in the autobiographical *Up from Slavery*, Washington foregrounds education—not as a means to transcendence, but as a materially bound endeavor. Washington details the financial constraints impacting his acquisition of education. For example, he describes the sixteen dollars that he owes after his first year at the Hampton Institute as a “debt of honour” (49). Defining education in these terms facilitates Washington’s pedagogical imperative that students must be taught the “dignity” and “beauty” of labor. It is at Hampton Institute that Washington learns what “education was expected to do for an individual.” He explains:

Before going there I had a good deal of the then rather prevalent idea among our people that to secure an education meant to have a good, easy time, free from all necessity for manual labour...At that institution I got my first taste of what it meant to live a life of unselfishness, my first knowledge of the fact that the happiest individual are those who do the most to make others useful and happy.  
(54)

The emphasis on labor, within Washington’s rhetoric of industrial education, is well-known and established. What I wish to highlight is the means by which Washington’s educational narrative constructs, to again invoke Saidiya Hartman, a particular moral economy. Moral traits like “unselfishness” are used to castigate the race against the immoral extravagance epitomized by his caricature of the “educated Negro, with a high hat, imitation gold eye-glasses, a showy walking stick, kid gloves, fancy boots, and what not ----- in a word, a man who was determined to live by his wits” (79). Famously, Washington uses a visual, quite counter to the aforementioned one, to critique the potential for an education-induced obsolescence. He writes that “one of the saddest things” he saw, during a month of travel, was “a young man, who had attended some high school, sitting down in a one-room cabin, with grease on his clothing, filth all around him, and weeds in the yard and garden, engaged in studying French grammar” (81).

Education fails the Negro, when it first, inclines him towards buffoonish notions of class ascension, and secondly, when escapism through book-knowledge blinds him to the realities of his condition. Washington’s warnings against economic and educational futility are grounded by

his concern that the younger generation, in particular, are in danger of losing the moral traits of service and unselfishness. In Washington DC, he finds students who, while wealthier and smarter than Hampton students, do not possess the desire to serve the race. These students are “not at much inclined as the Hampton students to go into the country districts of the South, where there was little comfort, to take up work for our people, and they were more inclined to yield to the temptation to become hotel waiters and Pullman-car porters as their lifework.” He laments that “six or eight years of book education” weans girls from emulating the occupations of their mothers. While the mothers earned their living by “laundrying,” the girls complete their schooling with a desire for “more costly dresses, more costly hats and shoes. In a word, while their wants had been increased, their ability to supply their wants had not been increased in the same degree” (62-64). Liberal arts education, without an investment in labor and the evolution of new technologies for older occupations, creates a younger generation of students who are drawn to beautiful things, but lack self-efficiency. More tellingly, the new found desires of these students are represented as a generational rift, as a break from the work ethic of their parents. In directing young students to reject materialism, by instructing them to embrace discomfort over frivolity, Washington acts as an intergenerational mediator. Education in this context signals the reproduction of attributes of sacrifice, service and racial duty that was, for many who read Washington, dangerously nostalgic.

In his narratives of education, W.E.B. Du Bois depicts the central threat to the young student as the loss of the individual opportunity to excel. While Du Bois is, like Washington, invested in racial uplift ideology, his portraits of education center on thwarted educational pursuits, on the narrow, physical and psycho-social, space allotted to the black student. In fact, where Washington laments the escapist tendencies of the young educated, Du Bois describes moments of intense transcendence as, simultaneously, a (sublime) consequence of education,

and a much needed survival mechanism. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folks* is, in some respects, the quintessential text of black instruction, as this genre-crossing text engages with the oft-recurring themes within literary representations of African American instruction. *Souls* depicts the elementary schoolhouse as the primary site of racial marking, the possibility of romanticized transcendence through education, and the intra-communal estrangement of the black educated subject, who is challenged and changed by what he has learned. Much of the literature under discussion begins with scenes of initial marking which subsequently come to set the tone and discourse of the narrative engagement with education as theme.

Before Du Bois theorizes double consciousness,<sup>45</sup> in *Souls*, he depicts what I identify as a primal scene of racial marking, a scene typical of what we encounter in other African- American narratives of education. Du Bois remembers “well when the shadow swept across” him. In romanticized language, he paints a portrait of a “rollicking boyhood.” The New England location is essentially northern; Du Bois describes the setting as being “away” up in the “hills Of New England, where the dark Housatonic winds between Hoosac and Taghkanic to the sea.” Through emphasizing the diminutive nature of his own body and educational setting – he describes himself as “a little thing,” he attends a “wee wooden schoolhouse” – he infuses his narration with childlike innocence; he asks his readers to imagine the adult man differently, as once unraced and innocent.

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<sup>45</sup> In his reading, Gaines interprets Du Bois's formulation of “double consciousness” as an experiential phenomenon impacting educated blacks. In Gaines's interpretation educated blacks “viewed themselves (and other blacks) through the judgmental gaze of whites, even while struggling to break free of falsified white images of blackness into self-consciousness, captures the inner conflicts of white black middle class ideology. Double consciousness captures the tragic difficulty of racial uplift ideology: its continuing struggle against an intellectual dependence on dominant ideologies of whiteness and white constructions of blackness” (9).

The inevitable fall within this Edenic scene is not the consequence of disobedience on the part of the young Du Bois, but is instead a result of the intrusion of race upon his boyhood. He writes:

something put it into the boys' and girls' head heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards---ten cents a package--- and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, -- refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination time, or beat them at a footrace, or even beat their stringy heads. Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the worlds I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine. But they should not keep these prizes, I said; some, all I would wrest from them. (8)

Notably, it is not an instructional, or academic, matter, which ostracizes Du Bois from his classmates; it is the suggestion of intra-racial liking, of the potential for a cross-racial childhood romance within the educational space. The passage imagines, in concise form, the educational space as a parallel reality; there is a psychic transcendent space, an “above” of blue skies, and then there are the material realities, where a triumphant Du Bois distinguishes himself from his seemingly antagonistic white schoolmates.

Du Bois's *The Talented Tenth*<sup>46</sup> like *Souls*, directly confronts the elements of Washington's industrial education model that Du Bois found to be the most disdainful.

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<sup>46</sup> Derrick P. Aldridge writes, that by 1930, Du Bois had revised his view of the Talented Tenth, “incorporating a technologically advanced form of vocational/industrial educational philosophy.” Aldridge explains that Du Bois, by this time, was concerned that “the talented tenth were using their educational advantage largely for their own self-advancement while neglecting the black masses.” By the 1940s, Du Bois would advocate for the “Guiding Hundredth,” an educational philosophy that called for the “education of the black masses for leadership” in *The Educational Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History* 6-7.

Appearing in *The Negro Problem*, a collection of essays by prominent African Americans in 1903, Du Bois's essay is crafted as both a polemic against Booker T. Washington and a descriptive, proclamation of black intellectualism and genius. Du Bois does not locate the talented tenth as a product of the contemporary moment, or a future hope, but as a traceable historical phenomenon within African American life, which dates back to colonial times. His vision of the talented tenth, even when gesturing towards the presence of black women, is ultimately centered on the affirmation that "manhood" should be the object of the "work of the schools" (33) Like many post-bellum articulations of the black educational mission, slavery is represented as a de-evolutionary project, an obstacle that "nullified and retarded" the efforts of the "natural internal leadership," a notion similar to the Jeffersonian concept of the natural aristocracy.

Du Bois's discussion of slavery is relatively brief; slavery is a terse *detour* before Du Bois moves on to applaud the antebellum Negro leadership that sought to "rid the race of this awful incubus that it might make way for natural selection and the survival of the fittest." Using a socio-historical methodology, Du Bois proceeds to provide a list of those exceptional African-Americans who have created a culture which filters downward to the given community, and offers statistics in order to chart the expansion of black colleges and to track black college students' post-graduation occupations. By the end of "The Talented Tenth" Du Bois evokes Washington's most provocative, and excessive, criticisms of a liberal arts education. Du Bois challenges these depictions by asserting that even at Tuskegee it is those individuals who have been trained in Greek, Latin, the humanities and mathematics who provide instruction within the institute. Du Bois writes that even Mrs. Washington, Booker T.'s wife, "read Virgil and Homer in the same class room with me." He continues: "indeed some thirty of his chief teachers

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are college graduates, and instead of studying French grammars in the midst of weeds, or buying pianos for dirty cabins, they are at Mr. Washington's right hand helping him in a noble work. And, yet, one of the effects of Mr. Washington's propaganda has been to throw doubt upon the expediency of such training for Negroes, as these persons have had" (74).

The training of Negroes is expedient as it not only allows for an understanding, and instructing, of culture proper, but also because this very understanding is predicated upon recognition of the almost sacred nature of the teacher. For Du Bois, teachers usurp the ministerial class in the transmittance of intergenerational standards of ethics and cultural values. The training of teachers "placed before the eyes of almost every Negro child an attainable ideal. It brought the masses of the blacks in contact with modern civilization, made black men the leaders of their communities and trainers of the new generation. (55) It is through the teacher that the black child is provided with a model, with the critical vision to interpret his own condition. Segregation orders that the "the black boy of the South" exists behind a veil, moving in a "black world – a world with its own leaders, its own thoughts, its own ideals." It is through a proper education, through contact with "broadly cultured" men and women, that the black student interprets "the veiled world beyond" (61). While Du Bois explains that a talented tenth exists cross-culturally and racially, here segregation creates both a spatial and educational condition. Moreover, the specter of slavery, and the reality of life behind the veil, calls for a mode of instruction that is more than the material erection of buildings, or specific curriculum. While Du Bois's primary emphasis is on the necessity of a liberal arts education, he also articulates a more expansive vision that locates the black educational mission as the site of birth, and the negation of cultural death. The teacher is the "trained, living human soul, cultivated and strengthened by long study and thought" that "breathes the real breath of life into boys and girls and makes them human whether they be black or white, Greek, Russian or American." The

themes of education as birth without blood ties, as a space that defies segregationist logic and that mediates narratives of familial loss and disruption, is recurrent in the literature I explore in this dissertation.

In “The Talented Tenth” and in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the black educative space emerges as an intergenerational site that attempts to defy the physical and social deaths that are a consequence of white supremacy. I identify *Souls* as a seminal text of the representation of black instruction for, both, what it is able to articulate, and also for its omissions, gaps, and profound moments of in-articulation. As Farah Jasmine Griffith explains, in *Souls* the frustrations of African-Americans are expressed through Du Bois’s exploration of the “failure of Reconstruction, the rise of industrial education, and the tragic figures of Du Bois’s deceased child, Alexander Crummel and fictional John.” Yet she also compellingly notes that the “greatest metaphor of thwarted desire lies in the text’s women and their cries for freedom: the grandmother’s captivity song, Josie’s desire for higher education in “Of the Meaning of Progress,” and Jennie’s intellectual longings to which even the author is incapable of giving full expression in “Of the Coming of John”(xx-xxi). In this context, Josie and Jennie’s half-expressed desires for education are definitive features of black fictions of education. Moreover, those circumstances, restrictions, and taboos which thwart the black woman’s possession of education, and which refuse her admission into narratives of educational transcendence, reveal the limits of the educational mission.

In the chapter “Of the Meaning of Progress,” Du Bois begins with an epilogue excerpted from Johan Christoph Friedrich von Schiller’s *The Maid of Orleans*. Attributed to Joan of Arc, it reads: “Choose instruments beyond desire! /Celestial spirits robed in light, /The leaders of the angel choir! / Obedient children of the spheres/They know no longing, know no tears.” Children represent promise and hope, the ability to transcend historical trauma, and in “Of the Meaning

of Progress” the Joan of Arc figure is, unquestionably, Josie. A “thin, homely girl of twenty, with a dark brown face and thick, hard hair,” it is Josie who aids the young Du Bois as he navigates his first teaching job. Josie longs to learn and possesses a “shadow of an unconscious moral heroism that would willingly give all of life to make life broader, deeper, and fuller for her and hers.” While Josie’s father is a “quiet, simple soul,” Josie’s mother was “different,---strong, bustling, and energetic, with a quick, restless tongue, and ambition to live “like folks” (48-50). The chapter explores several trajectories within the larger frame of remembrance: an older Du Bois, 10 years removed, narrates his early “trembling anxiety” as he sought to instruct Josie and the other children. He uncompromisingly criticizes the notion that industrial progress will, in itself, lead to black equality, for the chapter ends with Du Bois riding the Jim Crow car. Most notably, in describing his return to the small community, he informs the reader that Josie has died. With visions of “school fled,” Josie crawls into her mother’s arms and forever sleeps. For Du Bois, the lingering question is how can progress, henceforth, be measured “where the dark-faced Josie lies?”

Despite the force of Du Bois’ polemical and ideological rhetoric, the quest for black education is either still-born or arrested because of the finality of death. Metaphors of childbirth figure prominently into Du Bois’s vignettes of instruction, as the sites of instruction that he represents are quite often “half-awakened” gestational limbos (53). Much like the way that the politics of black respectability confronts notions of black licentiousness through proclaiming the virtuous nature of black women, reclamations of black children lays claim to black childhood innocence. This innocence is corrupted, not by education, by racism which robs the black community of the possibilities, and potential of youth. Du Bois uses the voice of a melancholic teacher to frame both the autobiographical “Of the Meaning of Progress” and “Of the Coming of John.”

It is after several pages, that one comes to understand that “Of the Coming of John’s” narrator is neither omniscient nor a direct witness to John’s eventual lynching. John is, in fact, the narrator’s former student. The narrator-teacher briefly inserts his self into the narrative, when he describes how “we at the Institute” sat in a “faculty meeting, worried and serious” at John’s initial lackadaisical attitude towards his studies. In “Of the Meaning Progress” and in “Of the Coming of John” the black teacher bears the burden of narrating and interpreting events. Over the course of the chapter, John’s education transforms him from a “respectful” and good natured young boy, to an educated subject grappling with the knowledge that the Veil of racism and segregation prohibits him from engaging with the higher forms of culture and aesthetics. His eventual cultural “outlaw” status is foreshadowed by the white folks sense that education will “spoil” and “ruin” him. Yet, as John departs to begin his journey “half the black folk followed him proudly to the station, and carried his queer little trunk and many bundles” (164). His mother’s advocacy of education becomes a communal investment and as soon as he leaves they “had thereafter one ever-recurring word, - ‘When John comes.’” Although there is no articulation of the expectation the black folks have of John’s education, or of education in general, his expected return represents communal spiritual deliverance.

What complicates the communal deliverance aspect of John’s narrative is that education allows him to peer “through and beyond the world of men into a world of thought.” The teacher-narrator describes how John “thought and puzzled along for himself, --pausing perplexed where others skipped merrily and walking steadily through the difficulties where the rest stopped and surrendered” (166). The acquisition of education is best expressed through a language of self-initiated movement and sojourn. Like the Harlem wanderers I will discuss in chapter two, intellectual awakening is dangerous because it not only interrogates the binaries of race that bolster segregation, but also because the migratory nature of thought eventually gives way to an

actual physical wandering that contests the boundaries of segregation. The “queer thought world” of intellectualism is but a starting point.

The moving men of New York City remind John of the sea and in following that movement, which to him is “the World,” he reaches the height of intellectual, and aesthetic, transcendence when he gains access to an opera (166-167). In emotive, grandiose prose, characteristic of Du Bois in his discussions of classic education and *high* culture, John feels “with the music the movement of power within him;” the opera produces in him a longing for some “master-work, some life-service.” Yet as a “last soft sorrow crept across the violins, there came to him the vision of a far-off home, --the great eyes of his sister, and the dark drawn face of his mother. And his heart sank below the waters, even as the sea-sand sinks by the shore of Altamaha, only to be lifted aloft again with that last ethereal wail of the swan that quivered and faded away into the sky” (168).

John’s opera-induced rapture is compromised by the intrusion of Jim Crowism, which is facilitated by the presence of his narrative double, the antagonist John—the white son of a judge from John’s hometown. John is subsequently asked to leave the opera. Yet, before segregation interposes, it is the obligations of kinship, and more notably the return to his sister and mothers, that complicates John’s movement into individualistic, intellectual, wandering. We cannot be sure that his return to his hometown, to teach, is the answer to his longing for a master-work, or merely a substitution for another type of life, one that does not obligate him to community, but that allows him access to the observance and cultivation of higher forms of “beauty.”

John’s homecoming at the Baptist Church, officially, marks him as outsider within his community of origin. John describes “his vision of uplift,” articulating a plan that includes education, commerce and the overcoming of religious difference. He invokes the crowd to “leave all littleness, and look higher” (170). After explaining his uplift ideology, a “painful hush” seizes

the crowd; his critique of intra-religious contention wounds them. His methodical speech is, to their ears, given in an “unknown tongue,” and their pain gives way to anger expressed by “a low suppressed snarl.” The next speaker, who has the “rapt look of the religious fanatic,” acts as the balm which soothes the pain and anger.

John’s community, like the folk throughout *Souls*, is a singular body; any distinctions within their plurality is obscured by a uniform communal personality that emotes in unison, and collectively anticipates John’s arrival and, now, binds together in both disappointment and outrage. The opacity of this characterization of the black folk enforces the singularity of the educated subject. Yet, Du Bois does not allow John to stumble from the ill-fated homecoming, into the dark night, alone. As articulated by Farah Jasmine Griffin, he is followed by his little sister Jennie, who questions him about the connection between education and discontent. Despite John’s affirmation that studying and learning “lots of things” leads to unhappiness, Jennie expresses her wish to also be unhappy, and confesses that she is already “a little” unhappy. (171) Of course, John misdiagnoses the cause of his discontent. It is not, wholly, studying that has made John unhappy; it is the realization of the limited world he moves within, of the indignities of the Jim Crow car, and of beauties forbidden. Education has only allowed him to become aware. But what has made Jennie a little unhappy?

The narrative offers her sexual vulnerability as the probable source of Jennie’s unhappiness. Through the abrupt closing of the black school in an effort to suppress John’s pedagogical impact, and through the sexual assault of Jennie at the hands of white John, the closing scenes articulate the physical and ideological manifestations of white supremacy. John fatally assaults Jennie’s attacker, and is lynched. The heroic characterization of John as protector, and the narrative dissonance between the unrealized possibilities of his education and his tragic and brutal end, overshadows a true reckoning with the discontent that Jennie

expressed. Du Bois has left Jennie's story open and unexplored; he has inscribed the correlative relationship of sexual taboo and vulnerability in depictions of black women's desire and quest for education. Notably, when education is used as a means to chart citizenship through an annunciation of black masculinity, black women are, consequentially, relegated to the background of narratives of education.

A caveat to this type of marginalization of black women within narratives of education is the position Anna Julia Cooper occupies in her "Sketches from a Teacher's Notebook: Loss of Speech through Isolation," published in 1923. Cooper, like the frame of "The Coming of John" uses the subject position of teacher to speak for her students, and more specifically, to contemplate the reality of violence against black men. Yet, Cooper's short essay seeks to describe the *aftermath* of a lynching and its consequences for the family that is left behind. Written about a summer she spent during World War I as a director of War Camp Community Service in West Virginia, Cooper describes her encounter with the "Berry" children as she oversees the playground. With a record of suspensions and expulsions, characterized as "decidedly anti-social," the Berry children break into the playground to "enjoy criminally what they may have had freely by simply being in the current with other people" (225). Cooper must literally teach the youngest of the Berry children to speak, as they are inarticulate due to their social isolation, and more pointedly, because of their trauma. Ultimately, Cooper seeks out the mother of the children, who asserts that she "don' want nothin' to do wit nobody" (228). Later, Cooper comes to understand the "tragedy of Mrs. Berry's grim struggle with life." Her husband having been lynched by an infuriated mob, despite his innocence, is the catalyst for this "humble drama of the obscure black woman like a wounded animal with her cubs literally digging herself in and then at bay dumbly turning to face --- America --- her "head bloody but unbowed." This "humble drama" of an "obscure" black woman enables Cooper to critique popular

understandings of the relationship between education, the home and citizenship during the Progressive era.

And I wondered what our brand of education, what our smug injunction that the home is “expected” to cooperate with the school will find or create for the help and guidance of such a home, a type as truly evolved from American environmental conditions as are the blind fish in the Mammoth Cave or the broncos of the western plains. A problem--- Will isolation solve it? (229)

In this passage, Coopers makes a many-folded critique. The idea of home as hermetically closed, as private, is a luxury not afforded people like the Berrys, where men can be wrested away from the arms of their wives. This domestic vulnerability is not an abstraction but is produced from the racial conditions of American life. The implication is that, until the American environment changes, the home and school cannot be constructed as spaces of progress or safety.

Furthermore, Cooper also launches a subtle critique against the silencing of the black woman intellectual and teacher. As Vivian M. May notes, Cooper, from her earliest educational experiences at St Augustine’s Normal School and Collegiate Institute, <sup>47</sup> understood that introduction to “the political philosophy of a Black Diaspora” also acted as an introduction “to sexism.” The coupling of “forward-thinking race advocacy” with “simultaneous sex discrimination” consequently affected Cooper’s “political worldview,” so that “for the rest of her life she would advocate both race and gender liberation without ranking one form of freedom over the other.” <sup>48</sup> Cooper, through her instructional authority asserts that, like Du Bois and Washington, she can also tell an educative story of the race through black children and childhood.

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<sup>47</sup> Cooper was a member of the entering class of St. Augustine’s in January of 1868. St. Augustine, created by the Freedmen’s Bureau and the Episcopal Church, centered a liberal arts education (May 15).

<sup>48</sup> May in *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction* 15.

Washington and Du Bois's disagreement over the nature of black education highlights rhetoric, and concerns, central to contemporaneous, and future, narratives of black instruction. Both men contemplate the degree to which education can foster communal estrangement. Yet both are, acutely, aware that there is a danger in the singularity of the educated subject. This educated subject must, precariously, differentiate his self, while also legitimize his ability to speak to, from and for a black community. Cooper's positioning of herself as teacher and public intellectual highlights the legacy of black girls and women striving to decouple sexism from spaces of instruction and activism, as well as the struggle to underscore the representational value of their lives and experiences. The gender politics of black sites of instruction remain a central thematic in the literature.

#### Reading Segregation and 'Post-Segregation' through Educational Spaces

It is because of the shape of intra- and interracial encounters, the locations of instruction and the racial specificity of the dilemmas confronted during the quest for education, particularly after the failure of Reconstruction, that I identify the literature within my first chapters as segregation literature. In fact it is the realities of the judicial codification of racial difference, and separation, through *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that segregation became the structuring feature of American education. Piper Kendrix Williams and Brian Norman in *Representing Segregation: Towards an Aesthetics of Living Jim Crow, and Other Forms of Racial Division* (2010) describe the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which upheld the doctrine of separate-but-equal, as creating a dilemma where writers had to grapple with how to represent race segregation without inscribing it.

As a springboard for future generic inquiry, Kendrix-Williams and Norman make three generalizations about what constitutes segregation literature. The first is the presence of racial cartographies, the infusion of race into literary landscapes. Here texts invent geographies "of

race to denote where certain bodies belong and the various sociological codes that attend such geographic inscriptions.”<sup>49</sup> Literatures of instruction that engage with segregation repeatedly represent how learning spaces are demarcated by race. Even when student bodies are not explicitly described as a means to physiologically narrate difference, the presence, or lack of, particular learning implements, and the description of instructional spaces, announce race. A second feature of segregation literature is the mobilization of fear as a means to enforce segregationist boundaries. Fear operates in multiple ways within works that engage with education as a theme. Internal fears and doubt may trouble the black student as she grapples with assumptions of her intellectual inferiority. In other contexts, the “uppity” black scholar and teacher faces external threats as his possession of knowledge threatens the logic of racial difference and segregation. In *Imperium in Imperio*, Belton’s educated air, juxtaposed against his dark skin, make him a target for both a lynching and scientific experimentation. In Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*, the inability to embrace a politics of respectability and obligation, embedded within the educational mission, threatens a character’s identity and relationship to various geographies and locations. The third generalization formulated by Kendrix-Williams and Norman is that of cross racial contact. Scenes of cross racial contact “underscore the effects and basic injustices” of segregated societies.<sup>50</sup>

Through an engagement with the thematic of education, I explore why education proved to be a central place for African American writers to explore the physical and social limits of segregationist logic. In addition, through my later examination of post-segregation literatures of African American education, I interrogate the literary legacy of the generalizations mapped by

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<sup>49</sup> Piper Kendrix Williams and Brian Norman in *Representing Segregation: Towards and an Aesthetics of Living Jim Crow, and Other Forms of Racial Division* 4.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid 6.

Kendrix-Williams and Norman, as well as the emergence of new modes of representation in post- civil rights era literature. Although, the following chapters are chronological in construction, moving from segregated to desegregated education spaces, my intention is not to identify a complete historical trajectory. My suggestion is not that the literature simply responds to events in the history of education; instead, I contemplate how educational history and memory are embedded within the literature.

The remainder of this study looks to selected narratives of education to explore what *difference* education makes in how African Americans represent the navigation, and imagining, of the relationships between community, the individual and the nation. What types of inclusion and exclusions are predicated on the control of, and access to, education? What role did/does the teacher play, as both a member of the extended circle of authoritative adults in the life of the African American child/ student, and as, sometimes, the only refuge from restrictive constructions of family and community? In chapter one, I explore Sutton Griggs and Frances E.W. Harper's post-bellum narratives of education as attempts to recuperate both Southern landscapes and kinship through the articulation of the black teacher as communal healer, and sacrificial leader. In chapter two, I identify black teachers, and intellectuals, in flight as a symptomatic response to the constraints and contradictions of early twentieth century racial uplift ideology, with a focus on Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*. The third chapter focuses on the literary production of narratives about school desegregation by exploring critically neglected civil rights fiction by Ntozake Shange and Thulani Davis. Shange's *Betsey Brown* and Davis's *1959* articulate the meaning of desegregation through an exploration of adolescent subjectivity and gender. My epilogue contemplates the meaning and construction of post- Civil Rights subjectivities and communities by looking at representations of educational spaces in the works of Lorene Cary, Sapphire and Andrea Lee.

Chapter One: Structures of Sacrifice: Post-Bellum Educational Missions in Sutton E. Griggs and  
France E.W. Harper

It seemed as if the sorrow of centuries was sobbing in her voice. Then the scene changed, and like a grand triumphal march she recounted the deliverance of the Negro, and the wondrous change which had come over his condition; the slave pen exchanged for the free school, the fetters on his wrist for the ballot in his right hand. Frances E. W. Harper, *Trial and Triumph*

African-Americans writing after the abolition of slavery joined national conversations about the meaning of American identity, culture and education. Like African American writers who preceded them, these writers continued to question the meaning of freedom in a land that enslaved, noted the slippery ambiguities of race in a society that sought to codify it through a binary of black and white, and debated the best means to claim citizenship within a hostile American landscape. Despite the promises of emancipation, the failures of Reconstruction helped to usher in narratives that engaged with the meaning and legacies of slavery. These narratives actively worked to construct cultural memory as a means to engage with the present moment.

The formation of a cultural memory of slavery and its aftermath would help in the deployment of voices that countered social stereotypes, legislation, and cultural stigmas that sought to deny African-Americans their full participation and citizenship. Yet, there was no monolithic rendering of the historical past. While one can argue that a significant number of post-bellum/pre Harlem<sup>51</sup> African-Americans wrote to critique the de facto and de jure

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<sup>51</sup> In *Post-Bellum, Pre Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919*, Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard locate the term post-bellum/pre-Harlem through an initial focus on Charles Chestnut's recognition of the "peculiar 'in-between' status of the years 1877-1919." They write that he christened this time "Post-

enforcement of anti-black ideology, the writings that were produced did not yield uniform interpretations of past or contemporary events. For example, differences in the choice of literary form among these writers give a just demonstration of the plurality of their voices. The choice to write a poem, a serialized novel or novella, or an essay speaks to not only the material realities that surrounded literary production, but also to an individual writer's sense of the political, artistic and cultural work of a literary form. Furthermore, like many of their contemporaries, African-Americans wrote across and between the limits of form. For example, it can be argued that in order to understand the didactic nature, and aesthetics, of a writer like Frances E.W. Harper one must read *across* her oeuvre, encountering the ways in which her representation and engagement with a subject matter shifts as she moves between forms.

Just as individual writers found distinct purposes for literary forms, they also utilized different sites and subjects to articulate and render their constructions of the past and descriptions of the present. African-American narratives of education allowed writers to comment on the form that American education should take and to envision a brighter future during an embattled time. In their exploration of how education could be used as a tool to transform the political and social climate, the language of education represented the potential to articulate a common purpose for a heterogeneous people. While all were forced to live under the ubiquitous shadow of white supremacist ideology, discourses of education, as well as racial uplift through education, exposed the separations between African-Americans. Personal histories of enslavement versus life as a freeman or freewoman; the geographical and cultural stratifications of state lines; variations in skin color; gender and age differences; and the status

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Bellum/Pre-Harlem" because it "looked back to antebellum years and forward to a future glimpsed but not yet codified by the term 'Harlem Renaissance.'" Attempting to revise the understanding of this period as simply the nadir of black history, marked by "discrimination" and "de-facto slavery", McCaskill and Gebhard argue for the reestablishment of this period as a "crucial stage in African American cultural and literary history and a period of high aesthetic experimentation and political dynamism" (1-2).

of being literate versus illiterate were all demarcations that complicated a shared understanding of education's past and future meanings.

Under the hostile anti-black environment of post Reconstruction, ideologies of racial uplift shifted. Kevin K. Gaines posits that African Americans, particularly, the elite and educated, began to call attention to "class distinctions among African-Americans "as a sign of evolutionary racial progress." Shaped by the "imperatives of Jim Crow terror and New South economic development," these ideologies of uplift "departed from the liberation theology of the emancipation era: generally amidst social changes wrought by industrialism, immigration, migration, and antiblack repression." Gaines explains:

In the antebellum period, uplift had often signified both the process of group struggle and its object, freedom. But, with the advent of Jim Crow regimes, the self-help component of uplift increasingly bore the stamp of evolutionary racial theories ... It signaled the move from anti-slavery appeals for inalienable human rights to more limited claims for black citizenship that required that the race demonstrate its preparedness to exercise those rights.<sup>52</sup>

Gaines concedes that this "transformation" of racial uplift ideology "was never absolute" as "dim echoes of Reconstruction era social democracy persisted within the new conservatism of uplift."<sup>53</sup> African-Americans who wrote post-emancipation educational narratives excavated the past in order to tell "untold stories"<sup>54</sup> of learning and instruction. At the same time that these were untold stories, they also revisited and revised tropes of learning that dated back to slave narratives. They sought to explore the pedagogical implications of representing, and simultaneously, constructing communal sites of instruction; they also worked to produce models that would enable the individual pursuit of knowledge that spoke to new ideologies of

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<sup>52</sup> Gaines 20-21.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Wald in *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* 1.

racial uplift. As much as these stories were contributions to national debates about education, they also worked to tell a collective cultural story. Novels such as Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) and Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) by simple definition exemplify the narrative mood of the *Erziehungsroman*, or novel of education and formal training, a generic subcategory of the *Bildungsroman*. Yet, the post-Reconstruction African-American author could not simply tell a story of an individual's movement through educational institutions and settings. Instead, these authors had to enter a matrix of debates and contradictions that comprised the complex meaning of black subjectivity, personhood, citizenship, as well as communal obligation and ownership at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

#### The Black Maternal, Racial Kinship and the Educational Quest

The educational quest in Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio: A Study of the Negro Race Problem* (1899) begins with a mother's pledge to her son: "Yer mammy is 'tarmined ter gib yer all de book larning dar is ter be had eben ef she has ter lib on bred an' herrin's an' die en de a'ms house." Described as coming from the "lips of a poor, ignorant negro woman," the opening lines of the novel offer a rich field of social and linguistic meanings (*I in I* 3). The mother is an archetype of black motherhood, a mammy figure speaking in dialect, willing to subsist on nothing and die in poverty in order to insure that her child is educated. The educational quest is grounded in sacrifice-in the loss of parental wealth and property in order to ensure "all de book larning" for the next generation. These initial moments bring into sharp relief the problem of intellectual inheritance between the "uneducated" generation and the generation expected to acquire the learning once forbidden.

Hannah Piedmont's language of abnegation is both an echo of the past and a new claiming of the black mother as the foundation of the educational quest. Gabriel Briggs understands the use of Hannah's voice as "an important rhetorical maneuver that resurrects the

Old Negro of the South from invisibility. By employing Hannah as representative of the Old Negro figure, Griggs signifies the importance of a slave past to turn of the century African Americans (New Negroes), preventing an often resented and much maligned figure from becoming "more myth than history."<sup>55</sup> The maternal is foregrounded, yet the kinlessness of slavery is not discontinued. Instead, it is, while altered, still ever present, even as attempts are made to recuperate parental authority and familial institutions. In "A Factor in Human Progress" Frances Ellen Watkins Harper similarly maps the educational mission in the language of family duty and sacrifice. In this essay, Harper articulates her vision of the moral and social purpose of the educated subject. Published in the *African Methodist Episcopal Church Review*, Harper warns of the potential of a "wicked man, intellectual and gifted," whose "influence for evil" can be tracked across the "unborn ages, and hurl with mortmain hand a legacy of maledictions to future generations; while on the other hand, from such bulrush ark and lowly manger or humble habitation, has come the teacher with the chrism of a new era upon his brow, and left upon the centuries the fragrance of his memory" ("A Factor" 275).<sup>56</sup> Harper vividly describes the catastrophic potential of a "bad" education at the hands of an instructor who lacks a moral compass. Alternatively, in ornate prose, she positions another type of teacher who, posthumously, continues to guide and teach future generations.

For Harper, the teacher is an anointed figure, who must speak to the needs of his/her time, yet, also transcend the sensual world. Harper's vision of the educator, and by extension, those who must be educated, is formed through a sense of the socio-historical, and political, necessity of education, as well as through a Christian theology that gives education a moral

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<sup>55</sup> Gabriel Briggs in "Imperium in Imperio: Sutton E. Griggs and the New Negro of the South" 154-155.

<sup>56</sup> All of the cited essays and speeches appear in *A Brighter Day Coming: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader* edited by Frances Smith Foster.

foundation and purpose. In order for African Americans to take their place among the other nations of a decidedly Western civilization education would prove paramount:

We are living in the midst of a people who have in their veins the blood of some of the strongest nations on earth-nations who have been pioneers of civilization, macadamizers of paths untrod, masters of achievement, and we have need of the best educational influences of the home, school and church to prepare us to fill our places nobly and grandly in the arena of life; for this we need more that training of the intellectual faculties. ..The education of the intellect and the training of the morals should go hand-in-hand. The devising brain and the feeling heart should never be divorced, and the question worth asking is not simply, What will education do for us? but, What will it help us do for others? ("A Factor" 276).

The relationship, and obligation, of the educated self to "others" is the foundational paradigm of Harper's literature of instruction. The final question of the cited passage centralizes the co-dependent model, between the educated and the community, at the heart of Harper's representation of the African-American educational quest. Harper is, like Griggs, invested in both the meaning and form of the individual pursuit of education. Yet, if Griggs will reveal the distance between the institutions of home, church, and school, and the, seemingly, perpetual estrangement of educated subjects from a communal home, much of Harper's writing is determined to build institutional bridges that (re)familiarize, and identify, a place that can be named home. For Harper, the teacher becomes the suture that will heal the wounds of the past and that will enable the reconstitution of home.

In "A Factor on Human Progress," Harper looks to George Eliot's poem "The Spanish Gypsy" as a literary blueprint of the challenge, and choice, ahead of those who must work on behalf of, and in the name of, a beleaguered community. Harper first offers a brief description of the background of the poem, explaining it as the story of a Gypsy chieftain who "discovers in the affianced bride of the Duke of Alva his long-lost daughter, who years before was stolen from him and reared by the duke's daughter." He urges her "to join the Zincala, and clasp with him their fortunes in her hand." The father, Zarca, laments: "I lost you as man may lose a

diamond/Wherein he has compressed his total wealth, /On the right hand whose cunning makes him great/I lost you by a trivial accident” (quoted in “A Factor” 276 ). He informs his daughter, Fedalma, that she is of a race “outcast and despised.” Fedalma’s reluctance, in claiming her newly discovered heritage, stems from the absence of common markers of civilization - religion, law, and homeland. She recognizes the Zincalas as wanderers “whom no God took knowledge of/ To give them laws, or fight for them, or blight/Another race to make them ample room; / A people with no home even in memory; / No dimmest lore of great ancestors/ To make a common hearth for piety” (quoted in “A Factor” 277). Zarca does not dispute the picture that his daughter paints; he recognizes that “abject are the men whose blood we share.” These men, “untutored, unbefriend, unendowed,” are not the “favorites of heaven.” He does not defend the Zincalas, but, instead, recognizes a personal mission in their plight: “Therefore I cling to them! Therefore no lure/ Shall draw me to disown them or forsake/ The meager, wandering herd that longs for help/And needs me for its guide, to seek my pasture/ Among the well-fed beeves that graze at will” (quoted in “A Factor” 277).

Bound to them through claims of ancestry and blood, Zarca’s mission represents a sentiment similar expressed by *Iola Leroy*’s Dr. Latimer. The phenotypically white Latimer proudly asserts that he claims the African American community by blood and choice, and in doing so gives up the privileges of white identity for something he conceives of as much greater: the almost sacred mission of guiding and caring for a people. Harper praises the “tenderness, strength and beauty” of the noble “sentiments” expressed in Eliot’s poem.

However low down a people may be in the scale of character and condition, absorbed in providing for their physical wants, or steeped in sensuous gratifications, the moment their admiration is awakened and their aspirations kindled by the recital, or the example of deeds of high and holy worth, and the spirit of self-sacrifice and self-surrender for some good cause is awakened and developed, there comes in that race a dividing line between the sensuous and material, and the spiritual and progressive. On this subject of self-surrender for

the sake of others, there has been a fine symphony of thought under different forms of religion and various phases of civilization. ("A Factor" 278)

Harper concludes that in "the world of thought and action, self-sacrifice and self-surrender have been the great factors of development, and as they pervade the life of a people, they lift them up. Nor has this spirit of self-devotion been only confined to the strongest races of the earth" (279).

Harper's engagement with, and subsequent commentary on, this narrative of family, identity and obligation offers her readers insight into the multidimensional nature of the educational mission of African Americans who wish to take their place beside the "pioneers of civilization." The story of Zarcia and his daughter, Fedalma, not only speaks to the macro levels of identity, the unification of an estranged member with her unknown tribe, but also narrates a more intimate encounter, the (re)establishment of the bond between parent and child. More directly, the stories of group and familial identity are told simultaneously, in the same language, for one cannot be established without the presence of the other. In order to tell the story of a race, one must also decide how one will articulate, and construct, a narrative of family. That Harper engages with a poem that depicts the call to service of a daughter of the tribe is telling. While in Harper's fictional oeuvre, men must also make the "choice" to serve, it is most centrally, black women who unite the educational and domestic spheres, resist the "material and sensuous" and offer models of sacrifice built to inspire and develop those who they will lead.

Griggs and Harper represent scenes of instruction that engage with education as a negotiation between generations and occur within intimate scenes of domesticity and on larger public stages. The instructional mission is represented as an attempt at the reconciliation of not only family, but it is also the site that contemplates the potential for communal belonging and a common purpose, despite the reality of difference in post-bellum black life. At times, the

demarcating lines between those who possess educational capital and those who do not produce new terrains of difference. The works of Griggs and Harper poignantly portray educated subjects who bear the weight of the individual struggle towards knowledge and the duty to articulate an ideology of black uplift. In both authors' works, the enormity of the educational project causes the various protagonists to make difficult decisions that undermine their efforts to transcend the inconsistencies, and contradictions, emerging from the historical echoes of slavery.

As the narratives of black instruction are told through a language of kinship, they concurrently prescribe gendered conceptions of racial uplift and self-improvement. The black women portrayed in Harper's essays, speeches and novels must endure trials and tests that qualify them to become leaders and teachers within the community. Through the renunciation of belonging, or passing, in the white community, as seen in the characters of Minnie and Iola, or through poetic and intellectual achievement, like Annette Harcourt, these women demonstrate a "spirit of self-sacrifice and self-surrender" that not only demarcates a 'dividing line between the sensuous and material, and the spiritual and progressive" but that continues to facilitate the reunion of family and the construction of black kinship ties. *Imperium in Imperio's* Belton and Bernard's families are ruptured by the absenteeism of their fathers and the mysteries shrouding the family patriarchs' non-appearance and ineptitude. The essential question of the novel is the degree to which the achievement of academic excellence can create new identities and structure alternative models of kin and community. The inheritance of the condition, and encumbrances, of the mother remains true for both the "dark-skinned" and "mulatto" child. The ability of these New Negroes to claim a courageous manhood is disrupted by the re-inscription of antebellum stereotypes of blackness. It is further impacted by the intrusion of white supremacist paternalism in spaces of learning, and the exhaustion borne from

the confrontation with realities that disrupt the formation of a racial collective proper, whether those realities are represented as emerging from sexuality or anti-black violence.

### Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio*

Griggs describes his novel, *Imperium in Imperio*, as a study of the Negro race problem implying that the reader will be offered a holistic picture of the causes of racial conflict and a solution to the dilemma. In this sense, the novel is a didactic text performing historical, social and instructional work. Griggs contended that African Americans study and read, not just *Imperium in Imperio*, but all of his fictional texts as a guide to understanding how the race was to be uplifted. The fact that *Imperium*, and most of his fiction, flopped, failing to gain a large African American readership, led Griggs not to doubt his own literary talents, but the ability of the African American community to understand the significance of his instruction.<sup>57</sup> In many ways, Griggs's chastisement of the community is that of the beleaguered teacher, admonishing his students to understand the essentiality of his lessons. For Griggs, the progress of an entire race was at stake.

Written when he was twenty-seven years old, *Imperium in Imperio* was Griggs's first novel. Like most of his fiction and non-fiction work, *Imperium in Imperio* was self-published. In the novel, a secret black nation, within the United States, is situated on the borderlands of

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<sup>57</sup> Finnie D. Coleman writes that although Griggs "was initially a popular figure" his novels did "meet with a strong reception from the Black community." Griggs sent *Imperium in Imperio* to over twenty reviewers, yet only five acknowledged receipt of the text. Griggs first believed that the nationalist bent of *Imperium in Imperio* caused low readership, but when his subsequent novels suffered a similar fate, in his autobiographical work *The Story of My Struggles* (1914), he would criticize the lack of support for artists within the African American community. Coleman writes that Griggs, throughout his career, "when countenancing failures in the Black community, Griggs look first at the actions or inactions of the community before looking to external factors to account for shortcomings" in *Sutton E. Griggs and the Struggle Against White Supremacy* ( 21-22).

Texas. Griggs, who was born in Texas in 1872, uses liminal geographies to offer insight into the complex negotiation of freedom, family and property that newly freed blacks faced. A glance over his own family history of enslavement and freedom demonstrates how geography, labor and the power relationship between slave and master complicated the social and economic transition from enslavement to freedom. Griggs's father, Allen R. Griggs, was sold as a young boy on the cusp of the Civil War. Allen Griggs was sold from a Georgia plantation eventually settling with his master, Green Griggs, in Chaterfield, Texas. Upon emancipation, Allen Griggs would continue to work with his master, who had come to substitute for the parents from whom he was separated. He attended school at night, by permission of his former master, and would eventually join a Baptist church founded by former slaves. Allen Griggs remained in Chaterfield, marrying Emma Hodge, the daughter of sharecroppers who farmed their former master's land.<sup>58</sup>

Griggs was born into a Texan environment, where many of the newly freed maintained economic and paternalistic ties to former masters, while simultaneously constructing institutions of their own. Many of Griggs's works reveal the tension between the continued indebtedness to masters, and more broadly white authorial institutions, and the simultaneous quest to build institutions that could define what it meant to be an ex-slave. He attended public school in Dallas, graduated from Bishop College in Marshall, Texas and Richmond Theological Seminary in Virginia. Following in his father's theological footsteps, Griggs became the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Berkeley, Virginia, and there married Emma J. Williams, a public school teacher. Although he spent a large amount of his career in Tennessee, in his later years, Griggs returned to Texas, and continued his work until his death in 1933. Over the course of his career he wrote numerous works of non-fiction, autobiographical essays, and five novels:

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<sup>58</sup> Coleman 6-10.

*Imperium in Imperio* (1899), *Overshadowed* (1901), *Unfettered* (1902), *The Hindered Hand* (1905) and *Point the Way* (1908).

Despite the breadth of Griggs's oeuvre, his first novel has garnered the most critical attention. According to Finnie D. Coleman, the lack of critical engagement with Griggs's later work has caused many critics to have read his first novel in a binary mode, labeling it as either a militant or as a conservative. Coleman, in *Sutton E. Griggs and the Struggle against White Supremacy*, argues that a scant amount of critical attention has been directed towards Griggs's other works of fiction and his extensive political commentary. Coleman contends that more complex engagement with Griggs's political writing offers fuller sense of Griggs's cultural pragmatism. This brand of pragmatism placed "a premium on crafting family traditions and establishing core family values, pursuing higher education, and preserving the organizing and community-building functions of the Black Church."<sup>59</sup> While Griggs's later works offer a clearer understanding of Griggs's complete political vision of collective uplift, the draw towards critically reading his first novel may be because of *Imperium in Imperio*'s political and social indeterminacy, because his later conservative cultural pragmatism is pressured under the weight of the novel's representations.

If Griggs's later cultural pragmatism calls for stable family traditions and values, the pursuit of higher education, and the centrality of Black Christianity as standards of Black progress, within his first novel they are indefinite signs, unable to yield the results that its main protagonists, the dark-skinned Belton Piedmont and the mulatto Bernard Belgrave, expect. In his first literature of instruction, Griggs's post-Reconstruction black political project for uplift and education is, if not incoherent, unable to distinguish a singular racial mission. In the novel,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid xi.

Griggs uses the term New Negro “more than a quarter century before Alain Locke takes it up in the *New Negro* (1925).”<sup>60</sup> After Belton is able to lead a successful student protest at his university the narrators tells us: “The cringing, fawning, sniffing, cowardly Negro which slavery left, had disappeared, and a new Negro, self-respecting, fearless, and determined in the assertion of his rights was at hand” (62). Yet, despite the grand nature of this declaration, the status and shape of this New Negro is not defined or stable.

Griggs's description of the New Negro might read, ostensibly, as an attempt to represent a clean break from a traumatic slave past, hinting at an emergent, distinctively, masculine racial identity. At the site of the student protest, Griggs's novel is a linear narrative of uncompromising political strength born through the merging of the individual pursuit of knowledge with a collective purpose. However, the novel undercuts this type of teleology. Sandra Gilman offers that the rejection of linearity is the effect of both genre and choices of how one could represent the legacy, and temporality, of Reconstruction. In her examination of Thomas Dixon and Griggs, who she terms as procrustean bedfellows, Gilman asserts that the “polarizing modes of melodrama dramatize instead the complexities of post-Reconstruction history.” Melodrama “generates many of the messy strains and stresses of that long national crisis, finally refusing to resolve or constrain them.”<sup>61</sup> In opposition to the linear models of “historical progress” that undergird “the texts of national reconciliation,” Griggs and Dixon write an “unstable history combining continuity and rupture, pairing the 1890s with Reconstruction through what is alternately characterized as a process of reversion and as one of repetition.” Gilman writes that historian Joel Williams describes this as “the echo Reconstruction,” a “chaotic chronology that extends the 1890s both backwards to Revolutionary times and

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid xxiii.

<sup>61</sup> Gilman in *Blood talk: American race melodrama and the culture of the occult* 82-83.

“revolutionary” moments of Reconstruction and forward through representations of ongoing conflict.”<sup>62</sup>

As an interpreter of “slavery’s aftermath”<sup>63</sup> Griggs’s text features generic and historical echoes of the antebellum period, textually delaying a triumphant view of post emancipation. Tropes and conventions of the slave narrative continue within his novel, not simply as a means to represent history, but as a means to disorient the reader and to represent the palimpsestic nature of the present moment. Gabriel Briggs notes that Belton Piedmont’s education is described as the endurance of twelve years of persecution. Depicting Belton’s educational quest as persecutory, allows Griggs to map his protagonist’s story onto the antecedent slave narrative genre, except, now, the classroom setting becomes the testing ground. The reader of the narrative of instruction becomes the witness to the process that allows Belton to throw off *the shackles* of his oppressive teacher. Similar to the slave narrative, Belton engages in a secret system of coming to knowledge despite his first teacher’s, Tiberius Gracchus Leonard, decision to undermine his pupil’s education.

The actual first voices of the novel, before we encounter Belton’s mother, Hannah, are those of the narrator and the traitor, Berl Trout, the Secretary of State of the Imperium, who has betrayed the Imperium’s code of secrecy. Trout’s act of treason enables the subsequent narrations of both the two protagonists’ lives and the creation of the Imperium. The narrator, and Griggs, in circulating this text are complicit in this treason. In his dying declaration, Berl Trout proclaims: “While I acknowledge that I am a traitor, I also pronounce myself a patriot. It is true that I have betrayed the immediate plans of the race to which I belong, but I have done

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<sup>62</sup> Gilman 85.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid 79.

this in the interest of the whole human family-of which my race is but a *part*" (2). In articulating himself as both traitor and patriot, Trout brings into focus one of the central dilemmas of the text. How can one remain a patriot of his nation even as it oppresses him? Berl Trout's names himself a patriot-centering a national identity-not solely defined by race. And while he has committed treason against the racial collectivity, it is for the betterment of a universal vision of the "whole human family." Within this universal vision, Griggs's novel becomes an object of national value- a cultural gift marking entry into a larger fabric of national stories. Where is the space for this traitor/patriot who is self-exorcised from the racial community and not "at home" in the larger nation which has yet to recognize him? The black educated subject, simultaneously traitor and patriot, has no space. Interestingly, while acknowledging the mother, in the beginning of the text, the narrative throughout represents a lack of communal space and familial safety. The reality of the text has been one of social isolation and the transitory nature of a collective response to racial oppression. For, even, by the end when the narrative has centered us within the black nation, the tensions between Belton and Bernard show a black nation at the edge of rupture, and the subject of the educational quest, Belton, left with only the choice to die as simultaneous traitor and patriot.

Even if Hannah's desire for Belton to obtain learning is to be viewed as noble, there is a hefty price to be paid for this education. The central problem of Belton's education is that he must be subjected to the whims of a maniacal white teacher who, when first encountering Hannah and Belton, laments having another "black nigger brat" to teach (9). Belton's education commences on the border, the northwestern corner of the State of Virginia, only three years after the end of the war. Tiberius Gracchus Leonard has replaced an earlier white teacher, who was sympathetic to his black students, but has died. The decision of who will replace the deceased teacher is left to a board of trustees comprised solely of white men. Griggs depicts the

classroom as the space where both racial and gender taboos are actualized. The board of trustees could not find a Negro “capable of teaching school” and potentially qualified white men “looked upon the work” with the “upmost contempt.” According to the logic of the trustees it is only a man who can teach the black students, for “[a]ny man who suggested the name of a white young lady of Southern birth as a teacher for the colored children was actually in danger of being shot by any member of the insulted family who could handle a pistol” (25-27). The colored children’s school is situated in a building deemed “inhabitable” by town authorities dominated by the white Baptist Church after they had “abandoned it.” To further accentuate the degradation of the learning institution, the education of the children is entrusted to a man, Leonard, who is believed to harbor “in his bosom a dark secret” (26). We will later come to find out that Leonard’s appointment to the school was orchestrated by Bernard Belgrave’s father, a wealthy white Senator, who in order to maintain his stature has hidden his relationship with Bernard’s mother. Griggs uses the tones and tenor of gothic melodrama to represent the location of instruction as a site haunted by the specters of racist white paternalism and sexual transgression.

In Griggs’s construction, all institutions, political and religious, are implicated in the maligning of black students. Tiberius Gracchus Leonard’s racism and distaste for his students is represented as buffoonish. Upon first encountering Belton and his mother, he jumps out of the way, causing himself to fall clumsily, in order to avoid coming into contact with their dark-skin. On the other hand, he fawns over Bernard and his beautiful mother. Angered over his self-inflicted fall and bolstered by his color prejudice, as well as the secret pact with Bernard’s father, he begins to seek vengeance against Belton.

As Hannah Piedmont witnesses Leonard’s hostility, and is aware that no “restraint was put upon the flogging of colored children by their white teachers,” she is briefly hesitant about

her decision to have Belton educated. This is described as a “conflict between her love and her ambition.” Abandoned by her husband and left with five children, Hanna seeks counsel with the black minister of her church. In a scene heavy on parody, Hanna seeks counsel with another patriarch of the community, the pastor. Humorously highlighting the ability for the ministerial class to be both pauper and glutton, Belton and his brother, watch with alarm as the minister nearly devours all of the chicken and biscuits. The pastor offers the following advice to Hannah Piedmont in order to quell her distrust of the hostile white educator:

De greatest t'ing in de wuld is edification. Ef our race ken git dat we ken get ebery t'ing else. Dat is de key. Get de key an' yer ken go in de house to go where you please. As fur his beatin' de brat, yer musn't kick agin dat. He'll beat de brat to make him larn, and won't dat be a blessed t'ing. See dis scar on side of my head? Old marse Sampson knocked me down wid a single-tree tryin' to make me stop larning, and God is so fixed it dat white folks is knockin es down ef we don't larn. Ef yer take Belton out of school yer'll be fighting 'genst de providence of God. (23)

The pastor's conflation of the corporal punishment of “marse Sampson” with the punishment that “de brat” will have to endure in order to get educated, allows for the quest for education to be situated on a longer history of struggle which stretches back into the antebellum period. The pastor, displaying the physical scars he received when he attempted to learn, boasts that although white folks continue to beat black children, the blessing is that, now, the beating is to implement learning. Linguistically marked by dialect, like Hannah, Griggs's narrative suggestion here is that the ambitious need of the older generation to have the key to everything previously denied them is a continued investment in brutal structures of racist domination and punishment.

In order for Belton to learn, he must, similar to antebellum scenes of instruction, do it through perseverance and behind the scenes instruction, becoming self-taught, as Mr. Leonard insists on humiliating Belton by preparing Bernard to excel him academically. Enduring twelve years of abuse at the hands of Mr. Leonard, does not dim Belton's intellect. Instead, he matches

Bernard in talent and ambition and exemplifies the Jeffersonian sense of the natural aristocrat, rising above his meager beginnings. The narrator describes “two studies in which the two rivals dug deep to see which could bring forth the richest treasures; and these gave coloring to the whole of their after lives. One, was the History of the United States, and the other, Rhetoric.” Foreshadowing their participation in the imperium the “portion” of American History that “charmed them most was the story of the rebellion against the English” (28). Maria Karafilis describes Belton and Bernard’s mastery of oratory as tied to the need to mark linguistically those who are fit for American citizenship. Karafilis cites Thomas Jefferson who “explicitly links speech and oratory with fitness for participation in the US nation.” Similar to the distinctions he makes between the ability of Native Americans to acculturate into a quintessentially American educational vision versus African Americans, Jefferson uses oratory as a similar marker of black inferiority. Jefferson writes that Native Americans forbid

all compulsion, they are to be led to duty and to enterprize [sic] by personal influence and persuasion. Hence eloquence in council, bravery and address in war, become the foundations of all consequence with them . . . (they) astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated. But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration ... his imagination is wild and extravagant, escapes incessantly from every restraint of reason and taste, and, in the course of its vagaries, leaves a tract of thought as incoherent and eccentric, as is the course of a meteor through the sky.<sup>64</sup>

Scenes of oratorical excellence occur throughout the novel, yet Griggs refuses to represent the speeches literally. Instead, Griggs either offers his readers a summation of the audience’s reaction to the speech or undercuts the seriousness of the speech with over-the-top comedic interludes.

Belton’s speech on the “The Contribution of the Anglo-Saxon to the Cause of Human Liberty,” delivered at his secondary school commencement and in competition with Bernard,

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<sup>64</sup> Thomas Jefferson quoted in Maria Karafilis. “Oratory, Embodiment, and US Citizenship in Sutton E. Griggs’s “Imperium in Imperio” 127, 131-132.

eventually becomes a classic that circulates in newspapers even reaching the President of the United States. Belton's secret and silent revenge against Mr. Leonard, an act that consists of Bernard digging a water-filled hole underneath the stage for Leonard to fall through, is centralized at the moment where the evidence of both Belton and Bernard's education should be represented through their mastery of rhetoric. Mr. Leonard's fall draws attention away from the surface presentation of the graduation ceremony to the literal subterranean effort that is Belton's climactic resistance to his racist instructor. As readers, we are privy to the challenges that Belton endured in order to deliver his oration in praise of Anglo-Saxon civilization, and we also bear witness to the break in this commemorative moment, as none of the novel's characters acknowledge the traumatic cost of Belton's educational triumph. These moments highlight the sense that black instruction occurs on multiple levels; the student performs mastery for the authorial figure of instructions, while surreptitiously engaging in numerous machinations that allow for the illusion of mastery.

The glorification of Anglo-Saxon history is absent from the text, undercut by acts of humor, passive aggression and outright violence.<sup>65</sup> A similar act occurs when Belton's jealous roommate substitutes a smelly sock for a pocket handkerchief, causing Belton to embarrass himself while giving an oration during his college commencement. Maria Karafilis observes that Griggs's characters "assume that through a disembodied space of language" they can "transcend race and racism, engaging with Anglo American citizens in a rarefied realm of speech and oratory, free from the bodily markers that marginalize them in a white, racist society." She concludes that what they ultimately discover is the "difficulty (if not impossibility) and the

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<sup>65</sup> Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* echoes this interruption of the oratory act. In Ellison's novel, the invisible man delivers a speech to a crowd of white men, after unexpectedly having to participate in a battle royal against other black young men. Ellison's protagonist's speech is punctuated by his continued need to swallow the blood that is fresh in his mouth.

pitfalls of such transcendence of embodiment as Griggs calls into question the viability of linguistic homogeneity as a foundation for a non-hierarchical, egalitarian society.”<sup>66</sup> In fact, the novel does not adjourn this discovery; from the novel’s earliest moments, the black body intrudes on moments that are meant to showcase mental acuity.

Each scene of transcendence expected to accompany education and refined language is cut by the encroachment of not only the body, but of perceptions, expectations and performances of black minstrelsy or debasement. The triumphant student rebellion that Belton leads, in order to insure that a faculty member gains access to a white faculty dining table, is situated in the same chapter where, in the pages preceding the protest, the teachers mistake Belton to be a visiting Negro hunting for chickens in the chicken coop. At the same time that the narrator assures us that a “patriot was mistaken for a chicken thief” and that this mischaracterization was a diversion from Belton’s eventual rise as student leader, the characters, Bernard included, exist in spaces where tropes of black degeneracy erode the ability for their educational stature, and abilities, to matter and be valued.

What Belton does gain, due to his oratorical skills, is a mentor in the character of the newspaper editor V.M. King. Described as a white Southerner with “ultra-liberal” views, he is born and reared in the South but culturally cosmopolitan. Educated at Northern University, and having lived several years in England, King is a man of “the broadest culture,” who champions black suffrage, vehemently opposes lynching, and recognizes Belton as a figure who can work against the forces, within both the black and white community, that he believes will lead to an “awful carnage.” King ruminates on a “South leading the young negro boy and girl to school” where they were taught about history and came to learn “real liberty.” He foresees “that the

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<sup>66</sup> Karafilis 125-126.

rising, educated negro would allow his eye to linger long on this bloody but glorious page until that most contagious of diseases, devotion to liberty, infected his soul.” King believes that the educated Negro must have a guided process towards *understanding* liberty, he must be “taught with all the eloquence and astuteness at command” (41-43).

In a nightmarish dream, King visualizes swine munching on acorns sent down from oak trees. Eventually the swine eat so many acorns that they “burst open, and from their rotting carcasses fresh oak sprang and grew with surprising rapidity.” The “old and new oakes” fought furiously” until there was a hurricane. Then God’s voice explains: “Know ye not that ye are parents and children? Parents, recognize your children. Children, be proud of the parents from whom you spring.” The swine act as metaphor for Negroes who feed from the foundation of Anglo ideologies of freedom and liberty. King interprets the dream as evidence that whites must “recognize their own doings. On the other hand, the negro should not be over boastful, and should recognize that the loft conception of the dignity of man and value and true character of liberty were taught him by the Anglo-Saxon.” Through his mentorship of Belton, he hopes to enable Belton to “recognize that there are two classes of whites” (45-47).

King also hopes to extinguish the flames of racial contestation through the administration of a benign system of educational paternalism. Whites are to acknowledge that they have reaped what they have sown. Through their own tradition of liberatory struggle, they have planted the seeds for the eventual revolt of their former slaves. Yet, as much as both groups share the revolutionary impulse, Negroes are to be perpetually aware of whites acting as the *primary* school teachers of revolution. This ideological indebtedness is, to some extent, representative of Griggs’s sense that slavery was by default a civilizing institution, a baptism through fire of the heathen African into the larger narrative of progressive enlightenment.

King expresses his model through the language of parental inheritance. White teachers are parents; black students are children who must be acknowledged. The messiness of antebellum inheritance codes, taboos against race mixture and the sexual violations of slavery are elided through a rhetorical pronouncement of instructional paternity. Even if King's dream-induced conclusions fit into Griggs's assessment of the "civilizing" tendencies of black enslavement, much like the narrative undercutting of moments of oratory moments of transcendence, conceptualizations of racial purity, genetic racial difference, and the destabilizing force of sexual desire continue to impact both the individual body and the collective, political body. More pointedly, both the symbolic and actual black sons of white fathers are called upon to bear the burden of correcting the past through their educational and political strivings. If King enacts this process with Bernard by simulating a parent-child relationship, Bernard Belgrave's history is exemplary of the inheritance of obligation passed from white father to mixed raced progeny. Mrs. Belgrave, Bernard's mother, is not only beautiful but a woman of "very superior education. The range of her reading was truly remarkable. She possessed the finest library ever seen in the northern section of Virginia, and all the best of the latest books were constantly arriving." Within Bernard, she cultivates "a yearning for literature of the highest and purest type" (84). Similar to Hannah Piedmont, it is the mother who lays the groundwork for future instruction. But unlike Hannah, Mrs. Belgrave, mysteriously, has the cultural tools to expose her son to a superior education.

The mystery of Bernard's parental lineage and his education under Leonard is revealed after his graduation from a fictionalized Harvard College. His father is a Senator who tells Bernard: "I am your mother's lawful husband, and you are my legitimate child" (87). The Senator's rhetorical pronouncement attempts to make the previously illicit, licit. Similar to the compassionate, cultured white men of Harper's fiction, Bernard's father educated the future

Mrs. Belgrave, who is revealed to be the offspring of an affair between the Senator's brother-in-law and a servant of the household. Upon his first wife's death, the Senator became the sole guardian of his charge, falling in love with her eventually and venturing to Canada to have their union legitimated through marriage. Although Mrs. Belgrave initially asserts that she can maintain the secrecy of their union upon their return to the South, the brand of "harlot" proves too much for the "pure-hearted, noble-minded wife" and she flees to Europe. The Senator must deal with his son being "stigmatized as a bastard, because it would be suicide for me to let the world know that you both are mine, though you both are the direct descendants of a governor, and a long line of heroes whose names are ornaments to our nation's history" (90). The Senator had orchestrated Leonard's tutelage of Bernard, in order to begin Bernard's quest, the quest of dismantling the "prejudice" that had disallowed the familial claims of husband and wife, father and son. A nationalistic genealogy is highlighted, and mythologized, in the Senator's narration; consequently, the slave past is a victim of historical erasure.

Named by the narrator as Senator \_\_\_\_\_ from the state of \_\_\_\_\_, he orders Bernard to "go forth; labor hard and climb hard. Scale the high wall of prejudice. Make it possible, dear boy, for me to own you ere I pass out of life" (93). The possibility of an official induction, of a proper inheritance of the familial line, is predicated on the ability of Bernard to make himself worthy, through hard labor, of his father's ownership. Griggs's maintenance of the cloak of anonymity for the Senator gestures towards both the slave narratives use of anonymity as a necessity for safety, as well as William Wells Brown's method, in *Clotel*, of using the blank space as a way to claim his fiction as a documentation of real occurrences. The Senator's anonymous identity also works to accentuate the means by which he remains protected, absent, and un-implicated in both past events and the future struggles of the child that he still cannot own. Bernard "handsome, brilliant, eloquent, the grandson of a governor, the son of a senator, a

man of wealth” must step out to battle for the freedom of his race” with a new, encumbered knowledge of the past (93).

Despite the possibility of redemption, Bernard’s quest is ill-fated, and not because he is unable to become a champion of his race. Bernard navigates, still with Mr. Leonard’s assistance, into the Congress. He moves, with ease, between the criminal elements and the middle class of the black community. His attempt at a relationship with the “highly educated” elocutionist Viola Martin drives him to join the imperium and centralize the burdened lot of black women in Griggs’s novel. If Hannah Piedmont and Mrs. Belgrave are archetypes of the black mother and mixed-raced beauty, Viola Martin and Belton’s wife, Antoinette, are exemplary of the problem of representing black women within a masculinist narrative of New Negro instruction. While Hannah Piedmont and the love interests of Belton and Bernard, Viola and Antoinette, are no longer maligned symbols of black womanhood, the extent to which they are made *visible*, within the novel, is questionable.

The taboos against interracial union are now dramatized through Viola’s vow to reject white supremacy through her refusal to wed the mulatto Bernard. After reading a book titled “White Supremacy and Negro Subordination” which asserts that the “intermingling of the races in sexual relationship was sapping the vitality of the Negro race, and in fact, was slowly but surely exterminating the race,” Viola, in an elaborate ceremony, commits suicide in a room described as “the beauty spot of the whole house” (*I in I* 173-174). In a room “alive with the scent of pretty flowers and beautiful roses” Viola vows to God to never marry a mulatto man and, in her letter to Belton, writes that she had to choose between him and her race. Only through her death can Viola become Bernard’s wife and take his name: she signs “your loving wife, Viola Belgrave” (175). Subsequently, Bernard is able to become a legitimate son, as she instructs her parents to treat him as their son.

The social death that Bernard's mother suffered through being branded a "harlot," becomes an actual death through Viola's suicide. Nancy Bentley expounds that the "survival and transmission of black life is figured not through the generation time of marriage but through the catastrophic time of war and liberty through death." In *Imperium in Imperio* "the negativity of kinlessness has become a force for creative syncopation; to be married and yet not married."<sup>67</sup> This was the status of the two mothers that began the novel, and it continues to be the status of those, who under the banner of uplift, are left to fight on behalf of the race.

The instability of establishing future kinship through marriage also afflicts Belton. Belton's wife, the school teacher Antoinette Nermal, is described as having "the intellectuality of a beautiful woman, who was still every inch a woman despite her intellectuality" (113). Antoinette acts as a means to understand marriage as a both a social and economic affliction. "Precluded" from "earning a livelihood for her," Belton studies the labor situation and the race question together in order to finally conclude that a surplus of black teachers had become the central economic and social dilemma. With "all other doors" barred and colleges "rushing class after class forth with just his kind of education" the final effect was the production of an entire class of "educated malcontents" (130-131).

Instead of joining this class of disaffected black men, Belton decides to go undercover as a black woman by applying for a nurse position. In the act of cross-dressing, Belton comes to understand that whites do not understand the passion and discontent of the no longer submissive, now educated Negro. It is during this episode that Belton must fight off the advances of young white men who "have a poor opinion of the virtue of colored women." After repeated attempts to seduce him, his persistent refusal leads the men to "doubt his sex" and to

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<sup>67</sup> Bentley 291.

insist on satisfying themselves despite “all hazards” (134). This episode of cross dressing, and the later failed lynching and medical experimentation on Belton’s body represent curious moments, and commentary, within the novel. The suspicion that Belton may be a man instead of a woman, are not deterrents for the potential accosters. The possible discovery of a hidden manhood appears to make the prospects of sexual assault against him more provocatively intense, an act of transgression that is repeatedly suggested in the novel with simultaneous candor and silence.

While Griggs is able to represent this type of violence with vivid description, he does not carry out the logic of white male sexual violence against black men, as it would compromise the investment black masculinity as the key to the progress of the race. *For what type of New Negro manhood could be fully desecrated by the probing hands, and desires, of white men?* Despite the reality that it is Belton’s body that has been the most compromised throughout the novel, his wife Antoinette’s body is substituted for his; it is her body that is represented as the site of instability and potential transgression. She produces a baby that at first looks white causing Belton to flee his home. Despite the narrative’s assurance of her intellectual capabilities, her body is centered and, ultimately, marked as dangerous, as a symbol of the instability of racial definitiveness and reproduction. This disqualifies her from participation in the life of the imperium. Viola’s room acts as a grave and Antoinette is physically banished to the confines of her home. Instead of acting as “political agents or potential members of the republican speech community, as their male counterparts” Antoinette and Viola “compromise the black male protagonists' right to the pursuit of happiness.” The removal of the romance plots “facilitates the

development of Belton and Bernard as political agents and reinforces the notion of black resistance as a primarily male enterprise.”<sup>68</sup>

Belton and Bernard’s political and intellectual agency is enacted on the borderlands of the nation.<sup>69</sup> The imperium is enclosed by “a high stone wall enclosure” and “in the middle of the enclosed place, upon a slight elevation, stood a building four stories high and about two hundred feet long” where carved “in large letters on the top of the stone steps were these words: “Thomas Jefferson College” (179). It is here that the Belton and Bernard’s oratory skills, which have previously only been alluded to, are now able to finally be textually represented. The two men, isolated from the external threat of white violence, and the internal threat of indeterminate racial identity and sexual transgressions represented through taboo family histories and marriage, must demonstrate the effectiveness of the totality of their instruction. A revision of their earlier oratory competition, that signified the completion of one stage of their education, is apparent in these final moments; at stake is the complete fate of the black nation, and through symbiotic attachment, the entire American nation.

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<sup>68</sup> Karafilis 134.

<sup>69</sup> Susan Gilman writes that Griggs see “the international dimensions” of the American racial conflict. According to Gilman the American Revolution, Reconstruction, and the Spanish-American War, within *Imperium in Imperio* are represented “as tropes for revolutionary overturning-for better or worse-of the established order.” The Spanish-American War is interpreted as an “apotheosis of national healing and unity” (*Blood Talk*, 77 -80). Caroline Levander in “Sutton Griggs and the Borderlands Of History” offers a provocative reading of Griggs’s use of Texas as the site of the black imperium. She suggests that we see Griggs’s use of Texas “not as metonym or metaphor for the US South but rather as a distinct, interconnected critical region, a sort of world apart as well as in relation, replete with specific local cultures whose critical interactions with global as well as national forces form the starting point for the novel’s answer to a long US history of racial injustice.” Levander asserts that “framing the question of African-American rights as a choice between assimilation within the nation or emigration from it overlooks the complex logics and opportunities inhering in the nation’s blurry edges. Adjacent to and embedded within the US, the region featured in *Imperium* offers Griggs a new territorial coordinate from which to rethink US racism during the age of empire” in “Sutton Griggs and the Borderlands of History”( 60- 62, 78-79)

Bernard, as president of the nation, advocates that the black nation declare war on the United States, by reciting the indignities that “the Negro has suffered in the United States” (209). In his discussion of education, he speaks to the contradiction of the investment of “public funds to educate the negro and then exert every possible influence to keep the negro from earning a livelihood by means of that education” and “the attempt to muzzle the mouths of negro teachers, and he who proclaims too loudly the doctrine of equality as taught by Thomas Jefferson” (212-214). In his counterpoint, Belton accepts the truth of these indignities but offers that what the Negro received “from the Anglo-Saxons which far outweighs in value all the gold coin on earth. He received instruction in the arts of civilization, a knowledge of the English language, and a conception of the one true God and Christ.” Through enslavement the Negro came “into possession of the great English language” (231-232) Belton proclaims that they complete the mission entrusted to him by his benefactor King and that they work to “change the conception which the Anglo-Saxon has formed of our character.” In an inversion of King, and a re-inscription of the didactic work began in his first act of oration, Belton insists that it is the former students who must “teach the Anglo Saxon” (245).

As we will see, Belton’s final prescription is similar to Frances E.W. Harper’s sense that writing should act as the quintessential site of instruction. Whereas she locates the book as a means to instruct her people in the manner in which they can achieve uplift through self-help, Belton’s proposition is more emphatic so that the pen is not a tool of uplift, but a mighty “weapon” that can “force an acknowledgment” of the Negro’s equality (246-247). The audience, for this final rhetorical battle between Belton and Bernard represent a community bond together through the cohesion of loss. The women, present within the Imperium, are not the current wives of any of the members, but the many widows of fallen soldiers of the collective. Sentenced to death for resigning from the Imperium, Belton experiences a brief reconciliation with his

wife, his baby having darkened. Yet, Belton's final lesson, before his death, is not the redemption of his falsely accused wife but that "duty to country" must be "put above everything else" (*I in I* 259). This nationalistic sentiment is juxtaposed against Bernard's eternal revenge in the name of his "pure" mother who was once branded a harlot and against the Anglo-Saxon who would dare to laugh at "Viola in the grave of a self-murderer" (263). The instructive text, in the case of *Imperium in Imperio*, does not move forward through a future vision predicated on the potentiality of educating future generations; instead it is suspended and haunted by the lingering past.

#### Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's Educational Models of Return

Between 1867 and 1871, Frances E.W. Harper travelled throughout the Southern United States and in writing about her experience depicted scenes of instruction that allowed her to act as the teacher of blacks and whites. In her essay "I am in the Sunny South," written in May of 1867, she describes herself as "traveling, conversing, addressing day and Sunday-schools (picking up scraps of information, takes up a large portion of my time)." The train cars that Harper travelled on become mobile sites of contact and education. "On the cars, some find out that I am a lecturer, and then, again, I am drawn into conversation...Last week I had a small congregation of listeners in the cars, where I sat. I got in conversation with a former slave dealer, and we had rather an exciting time. I was traveling alone, but it is not worth while (sic) to show any signs of fear" ("Sunny South" 123).

Although Harper is reticent in giving specific details about the "exciting time" that marked her exchange with the former slave dealer, within her fiction we find similar moments where black characters educate a white character who, while earnest, lacks the experiential and social knowledge necessary to understand the complexities of the post bellum racial moment.

Harper's real life experience with cross racial dialogue as a form of instruction is rarely represented in the stories of her black woman characters. While Iola engages with the white Dr. Gresham, her refusal of marriage is expressed through the language of racial obligation and emerges from a taboo about interracial marriage, rather than an impetus of cross-racial knowing.

If these interracial encounters were at times precarious for Harper, her intraracial encounters also involved acts of translation, resistance and effort to comprehend a Southern heritage, that she might have claimed, but that did not come easily. There are moments within her travel essays that reveal the extent to which the idealistic artistic quest is repressed in lieu of her felt obligation to represent and address the state of the people. In "A Room to Myself is a Luxury" she writes that having a room "is a luxury that I do not always enjoy. Still I live through it, and find life rather interesting. The people have much to learn" (134). A suggestion of a private self, of private space, is quickly elided by her discussion of the educational needs of the people. She continues this passage by focusing specifically on the freedwomen's condition and then more generally on the state of education:

The condition of the women is not very enviable in some cases. They have had some of them a terribly hard time in Slavery, and their subjection has not ceased in freedom...One man said of some women, that man must leave or whip them...Let me introduce you to another scene: here is a gathering; a large fire is burning out of doors, and here are one or two boys with hats on. Here is a little girl with her bonnet on, and there a little boy moves off and commences to climb a tree. Do you know what the gathering means? It is a school, and the teacher, I believe is paid from the school fund. He says he is from New Hampshire. That may be. But to look at him and to hear him teach, you would perhaps think him not very lately from the North, at least I do not think he is a model teacher. (134)

The essay detours in order to provide a socio-historical account of slavery, and more specifically its meaning for the treatment of black women. Yet, the passage shifts abruptly to a tone of regional elitism. From Harper's perspective, the teacher's ineptitude makes his claims of Northern identity dubious. As Frances Smith Foster notes, both Harper and Charlotte Forten

were free born women with middle-class backgrounds and urban experience. The two educators “often discovered suspicion and cultural difference between themselves and their black sisters and brothers.”<sup>70</sup> Harper’s biography reveals that these cultural differences were not only active when Harper travelled Southern landscapes, but were also a recurring factor in her encounters in the North.

Harper was born Frances Watkins in 1825, in the slave state of Maryland. After her mother died before Harper had turned three years old, she fell into the guardianship of an aunt, and then an uncle, Reverend William Watkins. Of her mother’s death, Harper wrote: “Have I yearned for a mother’s love? The grave was my robber. Before three years had scattered their blight around my path, death had won my mother from me. Would the strong arm of a brother have been welcome? I was my mother’s only child.”<sup>71</sup> Harper’s uncle was the founder of The William Watkins Academy, a school where slaveholder’s often enrolled their “favored children.”<sup>72</sup> By the age of 13, Harper completed her former schooling at The Academy, and she was employed by a family in order to earn a living for herself. In addition to learning domestic duties like sewing, and acting as a nanny to the family’s children, she cultivated a love of books and began composing poetry, eventually publishing a collection of poems titled “Forest Leaves.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Foster 121.

<sup>71</sup> William Still in *The Underground Railroad* 538. The full title of the text is *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, etc., Narrating the Hardships, Hair-breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of Slaves in their Efforts for Freedom, As Related By Themselves and Others, or Witnessed by the Author; Together with Sketches of the Largest Stockholders, and Most Liberal Alders and Advisors of the Road* and was originally published in Philadelphia in 1872.

<sup>72</sup> Foster 8.

<sup>73</sup> Still 539.

Life as a member of the free black community was indeed challenging, but became much more precarious with the enactment of the Compromise of 1850. The Compromise of 1850 abolished the slave trade in the District of Columbia and admitted California as a free state. It also decreed that “popular sovereignty,” or the vote of the citizens of each new territory, would determine whether New Mexico, Utah, and subsequent areas would enter as free or slave states. The Fugitive Slave Act was a part of the Compromise. This act made the lines between freedom and enslavement even more indistinguishable, and during this time Reverend Watkins was forced to sell his house. While Harper’s uncle relocated to Canada, Harper, alone, eventually left for Ohio in 1851, where she taught sewing at the Union Seminary. She soon left Ohio and began to teach in York, Pennsylvania. William Still writes that it was in Pennsylvania that Harper become more distressed about the neither free/neither slave implications of The Compromise of 1850 and the conflict between her will to teach, and the classroom realities of teaching. Of the slave fugitive she wrote: “These poor fugitives are a property that can walk. Just to think that from the rainbow-crowned Niagara to the swollen waters of the Mexican Gulf, from the restless murmur of the Atlantic to the ceaseless roar of the Pacific, the poor, half-starved, flying fugitive has no resting place for the sole of his foot!”<sup>74</sup>

Harper’s desire to join the teaching profession was driven by her sense of the vulnerability of African Americans. Yet, her real life teaching experiences produced feelings of ambivalence and anxiety. Harper sought advice from a friend about her failings at the profession of teaching. She questioned whether she should return to her trade of dress making instead of teaching, torn between her assertion that “the condition of our people, the wants of our children, and the welfare of our race demand the aid of every helping hand” and her sense that it was “a work of time, a labor of patience to become an effective school teacher; and it should be the work

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid 540.

of love in which they who engage should not abate heart or hope until it is done.” Harper viewed teaching as “one of woman’s most sacred rights to have the privilege of forming the symmetry and rightly adjusting the mental balance of an immortal mind.” In *The Underground Railroad*, William Still suggests that the “fifty-three untrained little urchins,” that were Harper’s students in York, “overtaxed her naturally delicate physical powers.”<sup>75</sup> In Still’s conceptualization, the physicality of teaching, a labor that is increasingly positioned as the specific domain of, and definitive space for, black women, within uplift ideology, is paradoxically too strenuous for the woman who wishes to be feminine and delicate; the projection and protection of femininity, domesticity and delicacy was imperative to the need to claim a respectable black womanhood that both countered stereotypes and acted as a balm over the sexual traumas of the past.

In her concluding remarks, Harper explains that she “had written a lecture on education” and was in the process “of writing a small book.”<sup>76</sup> Her work as a lecturer within the Anti-Slavery Society, would call for strength and courage in potentially hostile environments, so it would be more accurate to see Harper’s failings at teaching, not as a lack of fortitude, but as a “conflict between her philosophical resolve and her inability to carry it out with any pleasure.”<sup>77</sup> Harper’s greater pleasure seemed to emerge from the creative processes of writing and rhetoric, rather than from the specific space of the classroom; her instructional writing becomes a substitute for the labor of teaching. An 1853 law would make a return to a life of dressmaking impossible for Harper. During that year, Maryland passed a law that refused free blacks from the North admittance into the state. Harper would eventually move to Philadelphia in 1854,

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Foster 10.

where she began to write for *The Christian Recorder*.<sup>78</sup> Through the Maine Anti-Slavery Society, she lectured and published *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* in Boston and Philadelphia.

In November of 1860, she married Fenton Harper, a widower from Cincinnati, and with her savings helped her husband to purchase a farm near Columbus, Ohio. When Fenton Harper died in 1864, Harper lost the farm and was left with three step-children, and her own daughter Mary. While it is unclear where her step children settled, Harper and Mary settled in New England. From the stage of the 11th National Women's Right's Convention, in 1866, Harper uses the death of her husband and loss of her property as a springboard to discuss the larger significance of her experience as a free black woman. In this speech Harper explains that her husband died in debt, and that "the administrator" swept "the very milk crocks and wash tubs from my hands . . . Had I died instead of my husband, how different would have been the result! By this time he would have had another wife, it is likely; and no administrator would have gone into his house, broken up his home, and sold his bed, and taken away his means of support." Harper was declared a non-resident and all of her property was put "in the custody of the law." She continues: "You white women speak here of rights. I speak of wrongs. I, as a colored woman, have had in this country an education which has made me feel as if I were in the situation of Ishmael, my hand against every man, and every man's hand against me" ("We are All Bound Up Together" 217).

For Harper, the train is another site where the lessons of inequality are administered to the colored woman. She explains that she is "puzzled" about "where to make" a "home," wishing to live among friends and relations in Philadelphia, yet shamed by her treatment when

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

attempting to travel. Punctuated by cries of shame from the audience, as she reveals details about the indignities she has suffered, Harper dramatically narrates being put in the smoking car as she travelled from Washington to Baltimore. Michael Stancliff offers that Harper's work joins Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lydia Maria Child whose "topoi is that of an immoral national jurisdiction of law that disrupts the home, scattering children, and leaving women destitute." Black women are continually "forced into a realization of their status as property."<sup>79</sup> Despite being free, codes of ownership and gender, repeatedly assert that those who can be property cannot *own* property. Thus it became incumbent upon the colored woman to make arguments that would free her from the continued perception that she is walking property.

Harper's declaration that black women's treatment on the streets, and more specifically on circuits of transportation, compromises the establishment of a home is intriguing. It allows her, first, to lay claims to another type of ownership; the ownership of self through a discourse of ladyhood. One becomes worthy of respect because she is able to conduct herself with restraint, thus differentiating herself from a woman who fails to meet these standards. More interestingly, Harper, counter intuitively, points away from the domestic sphere as the sole space where ladyhood should be constructed and legitimated. Within her novels, the journeys of Harper's female protagonists culminate in marriage, but marriage is not given a generative power.

Harper's Minnie, Annette and Iola do not have children, or perform concrete tasks of domesticity within their homes. As Claudia Tate observes, Harper's "vision of female self-authority" relies on "an effusion of sentimental rhetoric to mask the heroines' desire for and achievement of revised sexual attitudes, values, and roles that transcend the female sphere."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Michael Stancliff in *Frances Ellen Watkins Harper: African American reform rhetoric and the rise of a modern nation state* 54.

<sup>80</sup> Claudia Tate in *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* 66.

The politics and rhetoric of education allows for the creation of a special domain for the talented black woman. By conflating a language of motherhood with the sacred mission of instructing the race, black women assert their capacity to lead despite their exclusion from the emergent black leadership class.<sup>81</sup> Jaime Osterman Alves writes that “the intersection of “public” and “private” life is made exquisitely clear in the context of female schooling: the intimate and private familial roles of daughter, wife and mother, for example, take on a particularly public, artificial, and constructed aspect when they are not only performed by individuals within the space of the home but “taught” and explicitly modeled in school settings by strangers unrelated to students.”<sup>82</sup> In the case of Harper’s writings on the post-bellum relationship between race, gender and education, the rhetoric of education purposely constructs *a notion* of the private for black women. In other words, education as a black communal project acknowledges that the domestic is also for public consumption. Through a dedication to the mission of instruction, a black woman reveals the degree to which she is both capable of maintaining an acceptable public persona, and it also reveals, more intimately, the internalization of a benign, self-denying, character.

In the “Coloured Women of America” Harper asserts that men may “talk about” education “especially about election time, if they want an office for self or their candidate, but the women work most for it.” Women’s labor both supports and allows the children to attend school. These women “make great sacrifices to spare their own children during school hours. I know of girls from sixteen to twenty-two who iron till midnight that they may come to school in the day. Some of our scholars, aged about nineteen, living about thirty miles off, rented land, ploughed, planted, and then sold their cotton, in order to come to us.” For her “industrial lore”

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<sup>81</sup> For example the 1897 founding of the Negro American Academy excluded black women.

<sup>82</sup> Jaime Osterman Alves in *Fictions of Female Education in the Nineteenth Century* 5.

despite her “limited advantages, that there among the poorer classes a more helpful woman than the coloured woman as a labourer” (“Coloured Women of America” 271- 272). Yet, within the fictional worlds of Harper’s female teachers, the labor that makes instruction possible must remain hidden, and appear effortless and natural despite having to be taught. Harper’s literature of instruction marks, what historian Deborah Grey White names the “turning inward”<sup>83</sup> of the Black community in response to anti-black sentiment. If Belton and Bernard’s narratives evade the difficult work of navigating the terrain of post-bellum family, of repairing the rift between the public and private, with the final scenes within the imperium signaling the rupture of family life, Harper’s “ideal practical literature” asks its female protagonist to bring family, and kin, together by any means necessary.<sup>84</sup>

Serialized in *The Christian Recorder* in 1869, Harper’s *Minnie’s Sacrifice* is, arguably, the place where the ideology of sacrifice and surrender, discussed in her lectures and essay, finds its first fictional representation. *Minnie’s Sacrifice* tells the story of Minnie and Louis, two mixed-race characters, who are unaware of their black ancestry and live as white Southerners. Louis comes underneath the guardianship of Bernard La Croix, a man “passionately fond of literature, aesthetic in his tastes, he devoted himself to poetry and the ancient classics; filled his home with the finest paintings and the most beautiful statuary, and had his gardens laid out in the most exquisite manner”(MS 9). Prompted by his daughter, Camilla, to raise Louis, La Croix

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<sup>83</sup> In *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves: 1894-1994* (1999), Deborah Gray White points to anti-black legislative, judicial, and social actions as the catalysts for the turning inward of the Black Community. She explains that the 2,018 separate incidents of lynching between 1880-1930; race riots in Wilmington, NC (1898), Atlanta, Georgia (1906), Springfield Illinois (1908), East St. Louis, Missouri (1919); and the declaration of the Civil Rights Act (1875) as unconstitutional in 1893 were some of the factors that motivated African-Americans to deal with this assault by strengthening black institutions, such as the church, businesses, schools and social organizations, like women’s clubs (25-26).

<sup>84</sup> Foster 34.

takes no interest in the work of slavery, leaving that labor to his overseer. Louis is educated in the North, yet proud of his Southern heritage, and apt to defend its institution of slavery.

The titular character, Minnie, is the offspring of the master LeGrange and the slave Ellen. Although Mistress LeGrange insists that Minnie be sold, her father has her secretly educated in the North. In Harper's work, sympathetic whites, cultured through their love of literature and embrace of European sensibilities, educate fair-skinned blacks, in the North, in order to seclude them from the realities of slavery and the revelation of their "true" racial identity. Ellen gives Minnie an image of her, so that Minnie will one day be able to recognize Ellen as her mother. Of course, the recognition of her mother will also make Minnie aware of her black "blood." After enjoying the care of a Quaker family, and after debates and dialogues about race with her classmates Minnie admits that she would "hate to know that she was coloured" (*MS* 48). The revelation is inevitable, as Ellen encounters Minnie in the street and tells her that she is indeed her mother. This reunion occurs in front of Minnie's classmates who mark the revelation of Minnie's black mother by debating her place in the class room. The educational setting, and connections formed within this setting, allows for the concealment of the white-skinned protagonist's racial inheritance and it must also be the same place where race is (re)inscribed and revealed.

For Louis, his grandmother and foster-sister force him to knowledge of his black heritage in order to discourage him from fighting with Rebel forces. Louis is now confronted with a "choice" between continuing the life he has known or becoming a part of a despised people. His escape from Southern territory in order to evade the Confederate army, and the aid of black people, in a lesson-instilling revision of the Underground Railroad, ultimately will help Louis to see the humanity of the people he will choose to claim. Through his friendship with the son of the Quaker family that has raised Minnie, he will eventually meet and marry Minnie. Because of

missing installments of the short novel, the reader is unable to see important elements of the courtship between Minnie and Louis, their sojourn in France, and even the direct cause of Minnie's eventual death, once the couple has settled in the South. What we are made aware of is Louis and Minnie's commitment to connect to the south on new terms, to open a school, and Louis's intention to enter "into some plan to facilitate the freedmen in obtain homes of their own" (*MS* 73). The properties of education and land are always connected here; to lay claim to education is also to attempt to lay claim to the physical land. Minnie's privilege is to be the "pioneer of a new civilization" for a "race newly anointed with freedom" (67).

Louis advises the freedmen in the following manner: "Defend your firesides if they are invaded, live as peaceably as you can, spare no pains to educate your children, be saving and industrious, try to get land under your feet and homes over your head." Despite this instruction, he cannot save his wife, even with the "strange and sad forebodings" (86) of Minnie's death. The preceding moments, foreshadow the increasing anti-black violence encroaching on the ambitions of the newly freed people. The last scene of the novel depicts the funeral procession, as the "stricken children of sorrow" come to honor their teacher. The procession is headed "by the eldest of Minnie's scholars" and each child bears "a bunch of the fairest and brightest flowers to spread around the couch of their beloved teacher." Louis remains "in the South, for Minnie's grave had made the South to him a sacred place, a place in which to labor" (89). Similar to Griggs's Bernard, the grave of a lost love acts as a catalyst for the future work for the race. Yet, while Bernard pledges eternal revenge against those who would mock Viola, because of Minnie's death Louis is able to claim a new South, where he can openly struggle for the race. And while neither marriage results in biological children, Minnie's procession of children replaces the bleak definitiveness given death in *Imperium in Imperio* with a fecund educational mission.

Directly addressing her readers in the conclusion, Harper asks that the lesson of Minnie “have its place among the educational ideals for the advancement of our race?” Harper calls upon “live men, and earnest, lovely women” whose lives shall not be a “stagnant mass, but a living force” (91). In opposition to “authors of the present day” who “have been weaving their stories about white men marrying beautiful quadroon girls,” Harper writes that she “conceived of one of that same class to whom I gave a higher, holier destiny; a life of lofty self-sacrifice and beautiful self-consecration, finished at the post of duty, and round off with the fiery crown of martyrdom, a circlet which ever changes into a diadem of glory” (MS 91)

With the publication of *Iola Leroy: Or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Harper continued to write about that class of quadroon girls brave enough “to suffer with one’s own branch of the human race” rather than be among those who would lose “self-respect, and a true manhood, and a truly dignified womanhood” (MS 91) by refusing to struggle for, and with, the newly freed people. The novel opens within a slave community during the Civil War in the midst of exchanging secret information about the possibility of Union victory and eventual freedom. Harper represents the pursuit of education and models of instruction as foundational features of slave life that predate Reconstruction. Within the slave community she describes, we find inspirational stories about those who sought education in defiance of circumstance.<sup>85</sup> Yet, early on a distinction emerges between those who are thirsty for education and those meant to

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<sup>85</sup> Tom Anderson epitomizes the ambitions of the slave who wishes to be educated. Responsible for Iola’s release from the chains of slavery, and eventually sacrificing his life during the war, Anderson is characterized as a humble and noble slave. Harper offers overlapping narratives of education in the antebellum sections of the novel. She writes of Tom Anderson: “He don’t know nothing about his mother or father. He was sold from them before he could remember. He can read a little. He used to take lessons from a white gardener in Virginia. He would go between the hours of 9 P.M. and 4 A.M. He got a book of his own, tore it up, greased the pages, and hid them in his hat.” Another narrative describes a nineteen year old who “heard one of the colored girls going over the ABCs. Here was the key to the forbidden knowledge. ... He got the sound of the letters by heart, then cut off the bark of a tree, carved the letters on the smooth inside, and learned them. He wanted to learn how to write. He had charge of a warehouse where had a chance to see the size and form of letters. He made the beach of the river his copybook, and thus he learned to write” (44-45).

instruct gallantly. For example, Robert Johnson is distinguished for being “a good reader” and works to decode and interpret for the rest of the slave community.

The initial mystery of the novel is how the white-skinned Iola Leroy came to be enslaved. The truth of her past is revealed after she has been emancipated and begins working as a nurse in a hospital for Union soldiers. Similar to the plot of *Minnie's Sacrifice*, the central narrative of *Iola Leroy* is the story of the progeny of Eugene Leroy and his wife Marie, “a woman with Negro blood from the plantation” who he has educated and manumitted ( 65). Through the benevolent nursing of Marie after an illness, the orphaned Eugene came to tame his “young, vivacious, impulsive, and undisciplined” nature (61). The couple has three children, Iola and her siblings Harry and Grace. Eugene and Marie decide to shroud their children from the truth of their black blood, educating the oldest children Iola and Harry in the North. Upon Leroy's death, the malevolent machinations of Eugene Leroy's cousin, Alfred Lorraine, act as the means by which Iola learns the truth of her parent's marriage and along with her mother is sold into slavery. The younger sister, Grace, does not live to enter the debasement of slavery.

Iola is described as being “young in years, but old in sorrow; one whom a sad destiny had changed from a light-hearted girl to a heroic woman” (59). She laments that she is “homeless and alone” (60). Immediately upon the revelation of their racial identity, Iola and her brother's struggle is the choice between what is described as “two paths.” One path is that of white racial belonging, where there “was strength, courage, enterprise, power of achievement, and memories of a wonderful past. On the other side was weakness, ignorance, poverty, and the proud world's social scorn” (125). Iola chooses the latter rejecting the proposal of the white Doctor Gresham. In Dr. Gresham Iola sees “the ideal of her soul exemplified” (110). Yet because of her “background of terrible sorrow and deep abasement, she had never for a moment thought of giving or receiving love from one of that race who had been so lately associated in her mind with

horror, aversion, and disgust” (110-111). Where earlier Iola had defended slavery, not out of a deep love for the institution, but more so because of an attachment to a romanticized notion of both the South and slavery, the experience of enslavement shifts her imaginary perceptions of chivalry, masculinity and race. The horrors that Iola has been subjected to remain in the shadows; they are alluded to, but never directly voiced. She explains that “Thoughts and purposes have come to me in the shadow I should never have learned in the sunshine. I am constantly rousing myself up to suffer and be strong. I intend, when this conflict is over, to cast my lot with the freed people as a helper, teacher, and friend” (117). In order to force Dr. Gresham to come to terms with the impossibility of their union she asks him how he would feel if he had dark children. His face “flushed as if the question had suddenly perplexed him. Iola saw the irresolution on his face, and framed her answer accordingly” (117).

Yet, the prospect of having dark children does not dissuade Dr. Gresham. He returns later, proposing that they make a home in the North and expressing his love for Iola. In her final refusal, Iola’s reasoning shifts. She explains that “public opinion” assigns her a “place with the colored people” and that this “opinion is stronger than we are, and we cannot run counter to it without suffering its penalties” (231). Iola’s drawing of the color line for Dr. Gresham is an individual action prompted by a call to racial-kinship and familial duties. Iola refuses to “live under a shadow of concealment” not only because her “life-work is planned” among “the colored people of the South” but also because her family has made this choice. She expounds: “Nor am I wholly unselfish in ally myself with the colored people. All the rest of my family has done so. My dear grandmother is one of the excellent of the earth, and we all love her too much to ignore our relationship with her. I did not choose my lot in life, and the simplest thing I can do is to accept the situation and do the best I can” (234-235). By this point, Iola has not only discovered that

Robert Johnson is her uncle, but she has also been reunited with her assumedly darker-skinned grandmother.

Understanding Iola's resolve, Dr. Gresham eventually praises her: "And yet, not only the freedmen, but the whole country, need such helpful, self-sacrificing teachers as you will prove" (235). In sacrificing the privileges of her white appearance, Iola not only cast her lot with "the colored people," she also becomes a model for the healing of the nation. Iola marries an acquaintance of Dr. Gresham, Dr. Latimer who belongs to the negro race "by both blood and choice." Dr. Latimer's "father's mother made overtures to receive him as her grandson and heir, but he has nobly refused to forsake his mother's people and has cast his lot with them" (238). The rejection of white patriarchal lines and the affirmation of black motherhood act as a means of return to the South, and as a reinvention of black family life as an act of choice and blood. Harper's interpretation of these actions as being based on choice and blood does not seek to explore how this is fundamentally a conundrum, a problematic where the compulsiveness of a blood logic of race is inscribed in the language of choice and politically mobilized. Here, also, the historical shadows of sexual trauma and debasement are transcended through the evocation of a sanctified instructional black femininity.

The conquest of individual desire and passion, and the construction of a feminine instructional space, neither public nor private, facilitate the narration of an idealized black woman teacher. The brown-skinned fiancée, and eventual wife of Harry Leroy, Iola Leroy's brother, Miss Delany explains that there "is a field of Christian endeavor which lies between the school-house and the pulpit, which needs the hand of a woman more in private than in public" (IL 254). The context and history of Miss Delany's life is missing from the pages of *Iola Leroy*. Yet, between the stories of the quadroons Minnie and Iola, in *Trial and Triumph*, serialized in *The Christian Recorder* between 1888 and 1889, Harper writes the coming of age story of the

another young girl of illicit birth, the brown-skinned Annette Harcourt,. Unlike Minnie or Iola, Annette Harcourt is not beautiful and cannot pass for white. *Trial and Triumph* is set in the city of A.P, a fictionalized Philadelphia, and in contrast to the other novels, attentively concerns itself with a black adolescent girl's education within the insular world of a non-elite black urban environment. Annette Harcourt is described as having an antenatal history, as the "deserted child of a selfish and unprincipled man and a young mother whose giddiness and lack of self-control had caused her to trail the robes of her womanhood in the dust" (*T&T* 184). The story of Annette's mother's fall and eventual death is a "lesson and warning" for those who would fall in love and become "a mother, but not a wife" (259).

Never knowing her mother, Annette is raised by her grandmother, Mrs. Harcourt. Mrs. Harcourt is a Southern woman "by birth" who "belonged to that class of colored people whose freedom "consisted chiefly in not being the chattels of the dominant race" (*T & T* 188). A free person of color, after her husband died, Mrs. Harcourt became "a stranger and widow in a strange land with six children dependent on her for bed and shelter" (189). Under the restrictions of "Southern life, she became restive under the privations and indignities which were heaped upon free persons of color" (189). Closely mirroring Harper's own experiences, Mrs. Harcourt flees Southern life and settles in A.P. on Tennis Court. Tennis Court "was not a desirable place to live but on account of her color, eligible houses could not always be obtained" (197). In the "midst of her unfavorable environment Mrs. Harcourt kept her home neat and tidy; sent Annette to school constantly and tried to keep her out of mischief, but there was moral contagion in the social atmosphere of Tennis Court and Annette too often succumbed to its influences" (197). An antecedent to Ann Petry's mid-twentieth century novel *The Street*, Harper's text preoccupies itself with the conflict between efforts towards racial propriety and the sense that the urban streets, and the characters associated with that environment, are

corrupting. For these reasons Mrs. Harcourt concludes that “the house is the place to train the innocent and impressionable for useful citizenship on earth” (T&T 197).

The central assertions is that this training for citizenship cannot remain *solely* in the house and redeeming the orphaned child of an illicit union will take more adults than a restrictive grandmother. In this novel, as Osterman Alves notes, the “simultaneously public and private aspects of these female roles are magnified via adolescent schoolgirl characters whose self-emergence is recorded as prolonged negotiation between themselves and the various individuals responsible for their education.”<sup>86</sup> Instruction from adults located outside of the family comes via the presence of the two school teachers, Mr. Thomas and Mrs. Lasette. Both have lost a place to instruct because of the racial integration of schools, which signals the loss of a location to teach for black teachers. Mr. Thomas “had spent several years in the acquisition of knowledge and was proving himself an acceptable and conscientious teacher, when the change came which deprived him of his school, by blending his pupils in the different ward schools of the city. Public opinion which moves slowly, had advanced far enough to admit the colored children into the different schools, irrespective of color, but it was not prepared, except in a few places to admit the colored teachers as instructors in the school” (186).

Neither Mr. Thomas nor Mrs. Lasette mourns the loss of a school house to instruct. The integration of schools means that blacks will seek occupations beyond that of teaching and become industrious in more independent ways, most importantly by purchasing land and building their own institutions. An important sub-plot in the novel is Mr. Thomas’s quest for respectable self-employment and avoidance of the traps of immoral work, such as in the saloon; he eventually begins his own carpentry business. The absence of black teachers in the newly

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<sup>86</sup> Osterman Alves 5.

integrated classroom also ushers in an affirmative space for Mr. Thomas's declaration: "I think our race need educated mothers for the home more than we do trained teachers for the school room." Mr. Thomas opines that "the education of the race should be placed in the hands of the school teacher or the mothers and there was no other alternative, I should, by all means, decide for the education of the race through its motherhood rather than through its teachers" (183). Beginning at the moment that "the crown of motherhood fell upon her," Mrs. Lasette "had poured a new interest into the welfare of her race" (186). Mrs. Lasette finds a new teaching mission as an instructor of the mothers of Tennis court who are "ostracized by the whites and socially isolated from the more cultivated of their race" (197-198). Mrs. Lasette, having been one of the sole members of the community to comfort Annette's fallen mother and shun Annette's father, the "libertine" (262) Frank Miller, is an agent of morality and uplift. Her status as a mother, made lawful through marriage, and in upholding propriety as an ideal for both the men and women of A.P., signals that Mrs. Lasette is an appropriate teacher for Annette, for she can offer lessons on both academics and character.

Through the presence of her two teachers, Annette who lacks "dress and style," but possesses "brain and character" (231) is able to have her natural gifts cultivated. Mrs. Lasette is aware "young girls who are lonely and neglected in large cities and are in danger of being ensnared by pretend sympathies and false friendship" (231) and immediately defends Annette against the indiscretions of "false friendships" and against those who judge Annette for her strange scholastic aptitude, as well as her antenatal past. Annette "early on" develops "a love for literature and poetry and would sometimes try to make rhymes and string verses together" (185). Thus while it "seemed perfectly absurd with the surroundings of Tennis Courts to expect anything grand or beautiful [to] develop in its midst, but with Annette, poetry was a passion born in her soul, and it was natural for her to speak in tropes and figures as it was for others to

talk in plain, common prose.” Mr. Thomas describes her as “our inveterate poet,” but the “literary” aspirates took scarcely any interest in the girl whom they left to struggle” (228). Annette’s intellectual and poetic sensibilities make her a stranger in Tennis Court and within her own family. When Annette allows her aunt Eliza to read her poetry verses and points to one as one of her “best pieces,” Eliza carelessly replies “Can you cook a beefsteak?” (228). The orphaned girl’s domestic utility is questioned, as is the merit of poetry in the culturally and financially impoverished environment.

It is at the gathering of Gala Day in Tennis Court that the true meaning of Annette’s special gifts is realized. The people of Tennis Court gather to hear Annette’s speech in celebration of her passing her exams and graduating from normal school. The narrator explains that the people of Tennis Court “were, generally speaking, too unaspiring to feel envious toward any one of their race who excelled them intellectually, and so there was little or no jealousy of Annette” (239). Annette receives more encouragement from the “courts class of honest-hearted but well-meaning people” even if they “did not see what good her education was going to do her” than the “most cultured and intelligent people of A.P.” (239, 240). The black elite class of A.P. read literature “mostly from the hands of the white men who would paint them in any colors which suited their prejudices or predilections.” Some of the “more cultured of A.P. thought it absurd to look for anything remarkable to come out of the black Nazareth of Tennis court” (240). The elite class, although “of African descent” were “Americans whose thoughts were too Americanized” (239). Yet, it will be established that Annette, a child of Tennis Court, is most capable of articulating a hybrid vision of African and American identity.

Annette’s speech is entitled “The Mission of the Negro” and is “a remarkable production for a girl of her age” (241). The speech begins in Africa with a family “seated beneath their bamboo huts and spreading palms” and then moves to the raids of “the merchants of flesh and

blood.” She traces the middle passage and “the sad story of the ages of bondage.” As she speaks of this past it “seemed as if the sorrow of centuries was sobbing in her voice.” As “the scene” changes and she describes how “the slave pen” is “exchanged for the free school, the fetters on his wrist for the ballot in his right hand” Annette’s voice “grew musical” (241). Annette concludes that the “mission of the Negro is “grandly constructive.” Whereas some races had been “architects of destruction,” the Negro race’s “mission was to build over the ruins of the dead past, the most valuable thing that a man or woman could possess on earth, and that is good character” (241). This speech act is the climactic moment of Annette’s education and the novel. The purpose of Annette’s education and the promise of her instruction is articulated here as the achievement of a narrative of black cultural memory. No longer recounting grand narratives of Anglo civilization, as Belton and Bernard do in their competitive quest for intellectual achievement, Annette’s speech act is both a mourning of the irrecoverable “dead past” and a celebratory possession of the present.

Because of the determinism of gender and genre, the novel cannot maintain Annette at this level of intellectual and poetic distance from a communal home. It is because of Annette’s ability to narrate a collective story of the race that she remains estranged. The introduction of a love interest, in the character of Clarence Luzerne, allows for both the familiarity of a romance plot and the possibility of Annette’s communal belonging. Clarence Luzerne can love Annette for what she possesses in “intellect and character” (273) and they become engaged. Their marriage is delayed by an excessive narrative detour, as Luzerne’s first wife emerges. Marie Luzerne, a beautiful woman of Spanish and French Creole ancestry, was thought dead, but now returns. Although there is an overly dramatic tenor to this section of the novel, it allows Annette to exhibit the internalization of self-restraint and sacrifice that characterizes Harper’s educational model. Annette insists that Luzerne return to his lawful wife and Mrs. Lasette guides Annette to

accept the loss of Luzerne “with the spirit of submission and full surrender” and secures Annette a position as a teacher in “a distant Southern town” (282). Like Harper’s other narratives of return, Annette is able to make a home described as “a beautiful place of fragrance and flowers. Groups of young people were gathered around their teacher listening eagerly to a beautiful story she was telling them. Elderly women were scattered in little companies listening to or relating some story of Annette’s kindness to them and their children” (284). Positioned on the veranda, not completely inside or outside, Annette is finally given a community that can understand and benefit from her education. Like Brontë’s Edward Rochester, Mr. Luzerne – “purified through suffering” – after Marie Luzerne has died, joins Annette in “uplifting and helping.” Wishing to “stay under the guise of fiction” Harper concludes that she had “essayed to weave a story which I hope will serve a deeper purpose than the mere amusement of the hour, that it will quicken and invigorate human hearts and not fail to impart a lesson of usefulness and value” (285).

The post-bellum texts explored in this chapter tell stories of freedom and communal transformations sought through education and also offer themselves as potential manuals of instruction. They reveal the extent to which an individual desire for autonomy is realized through the quest for education yet, also, simultaneously contained by the shifting meanings of family, gender, as well as communal and racial belonging. These narratives of instruction demonstrate the extent to which education comes to bear, under its name, the weight of the hope and possibility of emancipation, even as the black educated subject is bound by structures of obligation.

## Chapter Two: 'Intimacy with ones not Chosen': Immigration, Education and the Estrangement of the Black Educator in Nella Larsen and Claude McKay

The steps that should be taken to preserve or increase our present intellectual capacity must of course be dictated by science and not by political expediency. Immigration should not only be restrictive but highly selective. And the revision of the immigration and naturalization laws will only afford a slight relief from our present difficulty. The really important steps are those looking forward toward the prevention of the continued propagation of defective strains in the present population.

–C.C. Brigham, *A Study of American Intelligence*

Harlem is the queen of black belts, drawing Afroamericans together into a vast humming hive. They have swarmed in from the different states, from the islands of the Caribbean and from Africa. And they are still coming in spite of the grim misery that lurks behind the inviting facades...Like a flock of luxuriant, large-lipped orchids spreading over the side of a towering rock, the color of African life has boldly splashed itself upon the north end of Manhattan.

–Claude McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*

### The New Student Radical

In the October 1924 edition of *The Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote a criticism of Fisk University, explaining that he had long “faced a most unpleasant dilemma” as he had “sensed in certain leading Negro colleges a spirit of treachery to the great and necessary ideals of the American Negro.”<sup>87</sup> Du Bois lay a significant portion of this treachery at the feet of Fisk University’s white president, Fayette Avery McKenzie, who in 1924, began a campaign to raise a million dollars for a money-strapped Fisk. McKenzie courted white Northern philanthropists, who were willing to make a financial bequest to the University with the expectation that Mackenzie would repress militancy on Fisk’s campus, and, in place of Fisk’s traditional emphasis on a broad liberal arts education, begin to implement an industrial education curriculum. Historian of education, James D. Anderson, explains that during the first two decades of the twentieth century a

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<sup>87</sup> W.E.B. DuBois. “Fisk.” in *Selections from the Crisis*. Ed. Herbert Aptheker 251-252.

“convergence of circumstances –the lack of federal and state support for the development of black higher education, the opposition of industrial philanthropy, and the impoverishment of missionary and black religious philanthropy-combined to retard the development of black higher education.”<sup>88</sup>

In its efforts to alter the mission and the curriculum of the university, the administration, under McKenzie, placed significant restrictions on the social and extra-curricular activities of the student body. Early in his fundraising activities for the University, McKenzie realized that Du Bois’s views on education and social integration would compromise his relationship with Northern philanthropists. McKenzie acquiesced to industrial philanthropists’ sense that in responses to “growing radicalism” it was a necessity to “develop the ‘right type’ of Negro leaders and teachers.”<sup>89</sup> McKenzie limited the influence of Fisk alumni on the university’s curriculum and racial politics, particularly the influence of Du Bois, going so far as to censor *The Crisis* on the campus. Du Bois described the situation at Fisk as an “alliance of Northern Philanthropy and Southern white domination.” Du Bois, eventually, addressed his concerns on campus soil, when he travelled in May of 1924 to the commencement ceremony of his daughter. On June 2<sup>nd</sup>, in front of Fisk administration, alumni, students and university trustees, Du Bois delivered a speech entitled *Diuturni Silenci*. David Levering Lewis expounds that the Latin title was borrowed from Cicero’s address to the Roman Senate in which Cicero had said for years he had been silent, but he would remain silent no longer. Du Bois asserted to the audience: “I have never known an institution whose alumni are more bitter and disgusted

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<sup>88</sup> James D. Anderson in *The Education of Blacks in the South 1860-1935* 248.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid 263.

with the present situation in this university. In Fisk today, discipline is choking freedom, threats are replacing inspiration; iron clad rules, suspicion, tale bearing are almost universal." <sup>90</sup>

Included in Du Bois's opinion piece was a catalogue of principles for the education of the colored youth. He opined that students should be given a "broad vision of truth, encouraged in self-expression and incited to ambition according to their best ability" and that intra-racial contact not "sacrifice the self-respect of young men and women and their legitimate expression." Du Bois, also, outlined the relationship that should exist between teachers and their students, offering that the teachers of "colored youth must believe in them. They must have faith in them and their race. They must trust them and encourage them and defend them." Based upon observations made during his May visit to the campus, and upon correspondence with invested parties, Du Bois determined that Fisk was failing its student through the curtailment of their "vision," and the discouragement of their "ambition," and through humiliation and insult "in order to attract the sympathy of Southern whites." Du Bois's accusation that McKenzie and his administration were treating the students with "suspicion and governing them by fear" proved to be true, as protests by students escalated through the fall and winter of 1924. The student protests were met with administrative resistance and disciplinary retaliation against the protestors.

In November of 1924, when university trustees met at Fisk to celebrate the attainment of a million dollar endowment, students demanded a hearing. The hearing was granted and students laid out their desire for greater input from alumni, the removal of a restrictive dress code for women students, a student government, and other self-directed campus organizations. Trustees agreed, all except McKenzie, who slightly modified the restrictive dress code for young

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<sup>90</sup> David Levering Lewis quoted in *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*.

women, allowing them to purchase their own hats—only black with no color— and to go without cotton hose. These changes to the dress code aside, McKenzie ignored the complaints made at the November Board meeting; he further entrenched past policies, arranged for a police raid on the boys' dormitory by local police, and expelled numerous students. Other students willingly left the campus, with half of the student body abandoning the campus. In an April of 1925 editorial, Du Bois continued the call for protest asking: "Do the benefactors of Negro education want their money used to humiliate and degrade us or to make us men? If they give to our uplift we accept and show our deep appreciation by manhood and accomplishment and not by sycophancy."<sup>91</sup> In the spring of 1925, McKenzie resigned.

College administration's support for, and defense of, "New South" Jim Crowism, and the acquiescence of Northern philanthropists to social inequality, underlines the extent to which policies impacting black students crystallized larger debates that had been circulating since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century about education and the purpose of the university more specifically. At the end of the nineteenth century, institutions of higher learning were expected to service "the needs of the corporate state," a departure from an early 19<sup>th</sup> century model which idealized the liberal arts.<sup>92</sup> African Americans students and intellectuals confronted education administrations that were often in bed with corporate interests which wished to maintain, and further entrench the racial status quo by extending their reach into locations of instruction by offering a curriculum and pedagogy of social inequality. Du Bois, establishing himself as a member within the ranks of a dissenting professorate, identified the fight as Fisk as an essential one. In the protests of African American university and college students, Du Bois saw an emergent radical politic. He wrote: "I am uplifted by the student martyrs at Fisk. At last we have real radicalism of the

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<sup>91</sup> W.E.B. DuBois. "Fisk." *Selections from the Crisis*, 424.

<sup>92</sup> Joel Spring in. *The American School: From the Puritans to No Child Left Behind* 7<sup>th</sup> edition, 316.

young—radicalism that costs, that is not mere words and foam. We struck and jibed at our own brothers and felt brave.” Dismissing Garveyism and the young Socialists who “started out ten years ago to attack capitalism and ended by attacking every Negro whose head appeared above the mired mass,” Du Bois instead named the student protester as the “real radical,” as “the man who hits power in high places, white power, power backed by unlimited wealth; hits and hits it openly and between the eyes; talks face to face and not down “at the big gate.”<sup>93</sup> Du Bois was indeed correct in seeing the power of the student protests and resistance to institutionalized methods of education to ignite new expressions.

For writers Nella Larsen and Claude McKay, the question of education, and the representation of locations of black instruction, would prove to be rich material. Both writers had, themselves, been students at historically black institutions. As students, and in Larsen’s case later as a staff member, within institutions of higher learning, both authors would reject the strict tenets of black educational uplift. McKay biographer, Wayne F. Cooper, writes that Tuskegee University was a “disappointment” to McKay. McKay “noted in 1918 that he had been repelled by the “semi-military, machinelike existence there,” but McKay “had never elaborated upon his dissatisfaction in any subsequent writings.” Cooper notes, that despite his dissatisfaction with the educational structure of Tuskegee, McKay celebrated the achievements of Booker T. Washington, memorializing Washington after his death in 1915 in the poem “In Memoriam: Booker T. Washington.” Soon after his arrival at Tuskegee, McKay transferred to Kansas State College. Although staying on for two years, McKay longed for the “companionship of members of his own race,” which he seemingly found when he made the move from Kansas to New York City. <sup>94</sup> Harlem Renaissance scholar George Hutchinson spends a considerable

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<sup>93</sup> DuBois “Fisk.” In *Selections from the Crisis*, 424.

<sup>94</sup> Wayne J. Cooper in *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* 65-67

amount of time mapping Larsen's experiences at Fisk University. Larsen joined a discontented student body whose members were tired of Fisk's restrictive social policies and the ideologies of racial segregation and black inferiority that buttressed these policies. Hutchinson contends that students "interpreted the strictures on their social & sexual lives as not only outmoded but racially motivated. Segments of the student body believed that the largely white faculty, acted on stereotypical notions of Negro 'immorality.'" The administration and faculty responded to the student body's dissent by compiling a list of students who were not to return in the fall; Larsen was included on the list <sup>95</sup>

*Quicksand* and *Home to Harlem* were both published in 1928 and the critical response to both reveals the gender politics at play in assessments of the novels. Larsen and McKay competed for The William E. Harmon Foundation Awards for Distinguished Achievement, an award established "to focus public attention on notable accomplishments of the Negro race in the U.S." and, through the establishment of a wider audience, "assist in the development of a greater economic security for the race." Larsen's decision to enter the competition did take into account the popularity of McKay's novel— it became a bestseller— yet, she was aware that the blatant treatment of sexuality and violence in the novel could be a potential disadvantage to McKay. As Thadius M. Davis recounts, Larsen understood how uplift politics would impact McKay's potential to win the award. Larsen wrote to Carl Van Vechten, who she asked for a recommendation for the reward, the following: "Looking back on the year's output of Negro literature, I don't see why I shouldn't have a book in. There's only Claude McKay besides...and the Harmon Foundation is in some way tied up with the same uplift so maybe 'Home to Harlem' won't get a very warm welcome." Davis argues that the reception of *Quicksand* and the ultimate bestowal of the award to McKay were influenced by both racial and gender politics, contending

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<sup>95</sup> George Hutchinson in *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* 62.

that the Harlem male elite, including Wallace Thurman and Harold Jackson, were anxious about Larsen's emergence as a black female author, and the white presses' favorable reviews of her work. Davis also asserts that Larsen's novel was intensely scrutinized by the panel, much more than *Home to Harlem*. Davis concludes that the critics' decision in favor of McKay was due to their interest in McKay's poetry and related preconceived expectations of literature by African Americans-expectations that Larsen's *Quicksand* failed to meet.

Despite the politics of the Harmon Award, Larsen and McKay's representations of black students and education, in their novels, were not necessarily the metaphorical pugilism against white corporate and institutional power suggested by Du Bois in his editorials. *Quicksand's* earliest passages offer a solemn account, an elegy, for the educational order which Du Bois critiques in his support of the Fisk student protests. *Quicksand* revels in the interiority of educational space; it is not an embrace of the grand student radicalism that concludes Du Bois's 1925 editorial. *Quicksand* is, instead, a terse exploration of the inner recesses of a marginalized mixed-raced woman, the daughter of immigrants, who viciously critiques the status quo of the conservative black uplift educational mission, yet also critically explores the narrow space given to black women within presumed spaces of dissent and freedom. *Home to Harlem* contemplates what type of space is needed to construct a pedagogical praxis that lives and breathes through language indigenous to Harlem, but which also transcends urban space, by narratively moving into the linguistic space of the poetic and the imaginative. Like *Quicksand*, McKay centers immigration and movement in his first novel *Home to Harlem*, by chronicling the lives of the rugged veteran Jake, and the expatriate Haitian intellectual, Ray, whose experiences at Howard University remain peripheral in a narrative move that highlights alternate sites of instruction.

Both novels take an internationalist bent; they rely on the experiences of the black immigrant during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, using the circumscribed space of black institutionalized

instruction, not only to launch a polemic against race segregation, but also to trouble the very parameters of racial identity and belonging. They counter American racist discourse proliferated from with Progressive educational ideology, and from within narratives of black respectability and uplift. By prioritizing internal migrations, and immigration, McKay and Larsen call into question the geographical, and ideological borders of narratives of educational uplift. Larsen and McKay's thematic engagement with migration and immigration gestures to the impact that the migration of southern African Americans to northern Cities, black Caribbean immigration to the United States and social contact between white immigrants and black immigrants had on narratives of instruction and educational philosophy. More specifically, it speaks to how the presence of those considered foreign, presented both new opportunities and compounding complexities to those who wished to define the shape and purpose of an *American* educational project within all levels of instructions. In questions about citizenship, and in educational theory and philosophy, the problem of immigration was imagined as not simply an issue of nation and assimilation, but as a threat to the nation's racial order.

#### Progressive Educational Thought, Immigration and the Paradoxes of Race

The history of educational progressives' engagement with race matters, in both theory and praxis, is complex and often contradictory. Although marked by incidences of institutional exclusion, and theoretical silence, it is also defined and inspired by the idea that African Americans were an integral aspect of the American educational project. The modernization of schools was concurrent with episodes of racial segregation, white flight and educational inequality. At the same time, it was understood that education was a mitigating factor in the cultural perception of African Americans. For instance, in a 1909 address to the National Negro Conference, the "father" of Progressive educational theory, John Dewey used education as a

means to debunk myths of biological inferiority.<sup>96</sup> Dewey scholar, Thomas Fallace, describes Dewey's brief essay as delivering an "uplifting message" to the audience, as it denounced neo-Lamarckianism,, a theory which was considered to argue for the inheritability of traits between generations; a theory that was used against African Americans to pronounce the reproduction of alleged degenerative characteristics within the African American community. What is noteworthy about this address is the extent to which Dewey contemplated intra-racial difference and championed the idea that cultural difference *within* a given group mattered more than perceived difference *between* racial groups. Dewey would further develop these ideas in his 1916 work, *Democracy in Education*.<sup>97</sup> In this context, education emerges as the qualifier, as what mediates and produces intra-racial difference. In 1915's *Schools of Tomorrow*, co-authored with his daughter, Evelyn, Dewey would highlight immigrant and African American schools in his articulation of progressive school models. Notably, the chapters on the immigrant school and the colored school overtly focus on the school as a location of community work. The school is described as a place "where the connection of instruction with the life of community shall be directly recognized both by children and parents" (207). The child/student is conceived of as

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<sup>96</sup> Dewey understood race and immigration to be worthy of mention in *Schools of Tomorrow*, yet, as Thomas D. Fallace contends, race was never a topic of rigorous inquiry in Dewey's educational writings. Within his later philosophical writings on democracy and pragmatism, race was also not a central point of analysis. Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. asserts that Dewey's "political choices reflected a desire to end racism." According to Glaude, while Dewey participated in the formation of the NAACP and wrote, in 1922, the essay "Racial Prejudice and Friction," Dewey "was never truly attentive in his philosophical work to the problem of race in America; in none of his major books on democracy did he grapple the challenge that race presents to his ideas" (18). Nevertheless, Glaude argues that Dewey's sense of pragmatism, and more specifically Dewey's notion of contingency, which Glaude identifies as reflecting a tragic sensibility, can be utilized to speak to the "tragedy of race in the United States" ( *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* 19). For more on the relationship between Dewey's pragmatism and race also see *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race* and *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, both by Cornel West.

<sup>97</sup> Fallace 111-113.

the vehicle to progress and Americanization, an instructor to older members of her family and community.

While John and Evelyn Dewey, in 1915, imagined a black and immigrant school as embodying a progressive educational agenda, theorists like Carl Brigham compounded anxieties about the internal “race problem” and the influx of immigrants into the country. In his 1923 work, *A Study of American Intelligence*, Brigham mapped intellectual ability on a racial hierarchy which emphasized Nordic superiority and Negro inferiority. Although he would later disavow his conclusions, Brigham concluded: “According to all evidence available, then, American intelligence is declining, and [this decline] will proceed with an accelerating rate as the racial admixture becomes more and more extensive.” Anxieties about “race-mixing,” and the immigration of those deemed ethnically inferior, pronounced itself through legislation like the 1924 Immigration Act, which legally restricted immigration by imposing quotas based upon nationality. For CC Brigham, whose epigraph opens this chapter, there was a correlation between the increasing numbers of mulattoes and intellectual decline. The intellectual danger of mixed race identity was weaved into conversations about the need to cap immigration.

It is within the context of anxiety about racial mixture that “Americanization” became a central goal as the school became a “bastion of Anglo-American culture and antiradicalism.”<sup>98</sup> In this climate, of patriotic and political conservatism, the school came to take more interest in the interconnectedness of the family unit to the reproduction of not only education, but also to antiradical values. Immigrant families were particularly vulnerable as they were considered to be threatening “to the traditional American way of life.” Often immigrant “families and communities were considered to be deviant and in need of change.”<sup>99</sup> In addition to the fear of

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<sup>98</sup> Spring 233.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid 234.

anti-capitalist politics, immigrant families, potentially, represented a break with the racial order of the day, a fear that Larsen explores within *Quicksand*. As evidenced by Brigham's assertions, primary evidence of immigrant deviance was the potential to normalize interracial unions.

African Americans were perceived as having the ability to, both, threaten the modern educational project and reflect, and model, the very process and promise of this project. Progressive education centered loftier ideals of individual subjectivity and communal progress, and often reified notions that immigrants and African Americans could, because of their *unique* histories and social position, *teach* the nation. Chip Rhodes, in *Structures of the Jazz Age: Mass Culture, Progressive Education, and Racial Discourse in American Modernism*, strongly identifies Progressive education as influencing the manner in which educational theorists and writers imagined the educative potential of both immigrants and African Americans. Rhodes cites, *The Child Centered School*, an influential book of the 1920s, written by Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker, as a book that cited the purpose of the "new education," being the "liberation of an essential subjectivity." He maps the faith of Progressives in education and white "primitivist fascination with black Americans" along the same axis, with both positions attributing "to a politically and economically disempowered group an ahistorical set of capacities and drives that society has traditionally repressed." The emphasis of educational progressives on the "lessons of authentic experience" was "informed by a long-standing racial fiction that encoded organic communities and their inhabitants as "black." Rhodes proposes that this "new educational practice was founded on a romantic conception of human identity that was increasingly being seen as the privilege of black Americans, just as romanticism as an aesthetic movement was in decline."<sup>100</sup> Yet, immigration, migration, ethnicity and linguistic differences worked to trouble a defining of what constituted a black American. Narratives of black contact, difference and

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<sup>100</sup> Rhodes 171.

conflict, of intellectual and existential crisis, disrupted a simplistic pedagogy of romanticized black subjects.

Writers of the progressive era who queered notions of blackness, and gestured towards non-reproductive notions of black sexuality and family threatened and exposed what underpinned the conservatism of their contemporaries. In the face of projections of racial degeneracy, scientific theories of racial inferiority, and “Darwinian notions of racial extinction,” Kevin K. Gaines notes that “black writers, usually male, elevated ‘race conservation’ to a principle, indeed, a point of race pride, and a vehicle for the assertion of powerful manliness.” Race conservation, according to Gaines asserted a “black cultural nationalism in prevailing patriarchal terms.” Discourses of race conservation rebuked scientific racism, specifically, the neo-Lamarckianism of social scientists of the Progressive Era, through a politic of racial purity which emerged as a “crucial signifier of respectability.”<sup>101</sup> As Gaines interprets it, in “light of the wrenching issues raised for race advancement” this type of respectability politic “offered a loftier standard for bourgeois status, seeking to renegotiate and transcend the significance of color, “amalgamation,” and the legacy of slavery in determining class structure among blacks.” Emphasis on black sexuality, and more pointedly, black procreation, was evidence of an “anxious concern to stabilize racial identity through paternity.”<sup>102</sup> Educational ascent was often wedded to an investment in black sexual morality manifested through a patriarchal, and heteronormative, imagining of black family. Larsen and McKay’s novels demonstrate the correlative relationship between instruction and the portrayal of black sexuality.

Larsen and McKay also call into question romanticized projections of African Americans as instructors and models to the nation of the child/primitive within by constructing *complex*

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<sup>101</sup> Gaines 121-122.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid 126.

narratives of black educated subjects. These black narratives of education revealed the fictitious, and damning, nature of conservative ideologies and racial romanticism. While offering scathing commentary on both impulses, Larsen and McKay, do flirt with the idea of an essential primitive subjectivity. Yet, I believe that there is another interpretative possibility in the portrayals of racial primitivism. While there is a tendency within both novels to offer, for consumption, portraits of black exoticism and intrinsic racial difference, I also read their engagement with primitivism as an effect produced by their exploration of the conjunctive identity of the black immigrant, an identity often erased in constructions of immigrant subjectivities and experiences. Larsen and McKay posit the space of literary primitivism as allowing for ontological and pedagogical possibilities outside of the assimilative and xenophobic tendencies of contemporaneous educational projects and ideologies.<sup>103</sup>

Both writers engage black instruction through exploration of intra-group conflict and difference, particularly as these effects are produced from the processes of migration and immigration. As Heather Hathaway explains, utilizing the work of Werner Sollors, it is useful to envision a “conceptual difference between ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity,’” because it allows for a discernment of ethnic variety within, alleged, homogeneous racial groups. In *Caribbean Waves: Relocating Claude McKay and Paule Marshall*, Hathaway asserts that “forces of migration, racial and national affiliation, and “Americanization” can merge to produce uniquely hybridized, at times profoundly homeless, black American immigrant identities.”<sup>104</sup> Irma Watkins-Owens, in her study of Caribbean immigration and Harlem, describes the arrival of Southern migrant blacks and Caribbean immigrants to Harlem as being, in part, the result of

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<sup>103</sup> Educational projects and ideologies are thought, here, to include not only formal movements and institutions. For example, uplift ideology represents a composite of approaches and suppositions that assign black elites the duty and obligation to socially and intellectually instruct, and model, for both the nation and the “black community.”

<sup>104</sup> 5.

labor displacements. According to Watkins-Owens, the first wave of Caribbean immigration was sparked by the deterioration of working conditions in the Caribbean and in Central America during World War I. While earlier migrations between Caribbean islands, and from Caribbean islands to Panama to provide labor for the Panama Canal, demonstrates the already established mobility of Caribbean immigrants, Harlem acted as a location that allowed for not only contact, but also conflict, which often disrupted notions of race and citizenship.

As Aristide R. Zolberg outlines, after World War I, the United States “loudly proclaimed to the world its determination to cease being a nation of immigrants. In one of the most spectacular displays of legislative power in American history, with two waves of its magic wand, Congress sought to make immigration disappear.”<sup>105</sup> Already in December of 1915, the Senate had attempted to exclude members of the “black or African race” by amending an immigration bill. Watkins-Owens contends that, at this time, the eventually defeated amendment, was met by criticism and opposition from the NAACP. Booker T. Washington, who had previously boasted a restrictionist position on immigration, opposed the amendment before his death.<sup>106</sup> But, the 1924 Immigration Act, which also imposed quotas on black immigration into the United States, met with much less opposition by black organizations and leaders than the amendment of 1915. The lack of protests was, perhaps, a result of changed perceptions of the place of Caribbean immigrants. Watkins-Owens points to an editorial by Fred R. Moore in the journal *The Age*, where he compared the attitudes of newer Caribbean immigrants to those of the “earlier days.” According to Moore, this earlier generation of Caribbean immigrants “took their place as valuable assets in building up of local race community.” In contrast, the newer generation of

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<sup>105</sup> 243.

<sup>106</sup> Irma Watkins-Owens describes Washington as advocating for the restriction of European immigration to the United States because of his views that they would prove to be “competitors of black American laborers” In *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930*, 27.

Caribbean immigrants was apt to “flaunt their British allegiance and engage in disloyal utterances.” Notably, disloyalty is imagined, here, as both a rejection of allegiance to America, and a rejection of the political and social agenda of non-immigrant black Americans.<sup>107</sup> Moore’s editorial is not cited, here, to argue that relationships between black immigrants and non-immigrant blacks were typified by attitudes of distrust. Watkins-Owens points to moments of collaboration and exchange between both groups; yet, she also outlines the ways in which networks of kinship, housing and the formation of benevolent associations, as well as attitudes towards racial difference and Jim Crowism, were demarcated and influenced, by the experience of immigration. This chapter concerns itself with the ways in which the experience of immigration and of being “foreign” within assumed sites of racial homogeneity, shifts, and critiques, accepted narratives of American educational ascent.

*Illicit Desire and the Limits of Black Educational Uplift*

In *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen is able to construct a narrative that contemplates the place of a second generation immigrant character through engagement with familiar tropes of miscegenation and mixed raced identity. The epigraph of *Quicksand* is Langston Hughes’s “Cross.” The poem describes the quintessential narrative of miscegenation; a wealthy white man abandons the destitute black mother of his child. The speaker of Hughes’s poem laments: “My old man died in a fine big house/My ma died in a shack/I wonder where I’m gonna die, /Being neither white nor black?” Deserted by father and in the absence of the black mother, the

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<sup>107</sup> Amidst this type of rhetoric about the place, and attitudes of Caribbean immigrants, in November of 1926, *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* published a special Caribbean issue. Heather Hathaway describes the special issue as an attempt to address “the growing hostility between African Caribbean immigrants and native-born African Americans in Harlem” (12). Writers like W.A. Domingo also sought to give representation to the experience of black immigrants. In “Gift of the Black Tropics” he addresses prejudice towards black immigrants; Domingo attempts to give context to the experience of black Caribbean immigrants writing: “Divided by tradition, culture, historical background and group perspective, these diverse peoples are gradually hammered into a loose unit by the impersonal force of congested residential segregation” in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* Ed. Alain Locke 341-342.

speaker questions the manner by which he will die. The site of death is understood as a racial dilemma. The offspring that is “neither white nor black,” in this between and betwixt position, is unsure of where he will die. In the full poem, “Cross’s” speaker laments having every cursed his black mother-perhaps now understanding the cross she also bore. Nella Larsen’s choice to begin her novel with these lines from Hughes is ostensibly a reasonable choice, for “Quicksand” is the story of the interracial protagonist Helga Crane. Yet, much of “Quicksand” is an inversion of the prototypical story of the offspring of an illicit racial union. Helga Crane is not the daughter of a wealthy white man and black mother. She is the daughter of a Scandinavian immigrant mother and black father, and it is *he* who has abandoned his child. Throughout the entirety of the novel both parents, particularly the black father, remain shadowy figures, whose story remains untold. Their relationship, manifested through the material presence of their daughter, haunts the text evoking shame in Helga, and silence in the black and white characters whose racial proprieties call for the erasure of interracial desire, and black intra-racial sexual desire, as well. In addition, the question of parental culpability and vulnerability oscillates depending on Helga’s construction of familial history– at times, the immigrant mother is victim and in later moments the father is viewed with empathy.

Larsen’s novel troubles the narratives of racial recuperation and return, exhibited in Frances Watkins Harper’s romantic narratives, where Northern or Northern educated black women return to the South in order to both find a *home* within the black community and fulfill their duty to uplift the race through their *mission* of teaching.<sup>108</sup> *Quicksand* takes up the questions of death, education, citizenship that figure into Sutton Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio*,

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<sup>108</sup> Although she does not possess a lived experience of recent immigration, I read Helga Crane as negotiating the meaning of both blackness and immigration as she is also compelled to reconcile her relationships to two “homelands.” Going further, migrant black subjects like *Home to Harlem*’s Jake also demonstrate that internal black migrations replicate motifs, and dilemmas of identity and place, in a manner similar to immigrant narratives.

yet presses against the conservatism that plagues it and many other post Reconstruction black uplift novels. Through Helga Crane, Larsen questions the extent to which the teacher can know, *and* represent, her black students, by exploring how triumphant narratives of educational ascent not only suppress individual desire, but also rely on the homogenization of ethnic difference.

Numerous scholars of *Quicksand* have noted the autobiographical nature of Larsen's first novel. Like Helga Crane, Larsen was the daughter of a Scandinavian white mother and black father. The autobiographical details of the author's life, similar to Helga's, offer a sketch of a young girl whose life was shaped by familial silences and estrangement emerging from her status as an interracial subject. Nella Larsen's mother immigrated to the United States as a teenager in 1886 to serve as a female servant. In the United States, she married Peter Walker, a black immigrant from the Danish West Isles.<sup>109</sup> After her father's early departure, Larsen's mother married another white immigrant. Nella's presence affected the family's status, as well as their geographical freedom within Chicago. The Larsen family found themselves, as both a mixed-race and working class family, in over-crowded border locations of the city. In the context of schooling, race and geography worked together to determine the limits of the family's dreams of class ascension, and her own educational experiences. A teenage Larsen attended Wendell Phillips High School, the most integrated of the Chicago secondary schools, although African Americans only made up one-eighth of the student body.<sup>110</sup> At Wendell Phillips, Larsen encountered two motifs that would factor into her depiction of education. First, the high school, curriculum was influenced by progressive educational ideals which centered creativity, self-

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<sup>109</sup> At the time, it was "illegal in the Danish West Indies to designate a person's race on official forms such as census and church records. In the informal realm of everyday life, the "Negro" designation applied only to lower-class and so-called "full-blooded Negroes." Even those whom Americans would consider dark-complexioned black men could be designated "white" on the basis of social position and reputation. Records do not indicate that Larsen's parents were officially married but they did receive a license to marry on July 1, 1880 (Hutchinson 18-20). Perhaps the couple were naïve about the taboos they were breaking by attempting to legitimate their union.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid 42-43.

expression, and the sense that knowledge comes from within the student.<sup>111</sup> Secondly, Larsen was made aware of how educational institutions reinforce social and geographical codes of race and gender, and how social interactions between black students were marked by lineage and class.

Wendell Phillips exposed Larsen to the intra-communal fractures among the African American student population. George Hutchinson explains that life at the high school was “marked by secret fraternities and sororities, and –since there was a fairly large black student body-various cliques among the black students.” Those African American students who were able to continue on to high school were often social elites who “looked down on working-class immigrants.” Hutchinson notes, although some of Larsen’s high school classmates would also move to Harlem during Larsen’s time in New York City, she did not interact with them; in New York, Larsen never participated in the activities of the “Chicago Club,” who organized entertainment and events for Chicagoans visiting New York City.<sup>112</sup> Larsen’s educational path altered, in August of 1907, when her family bought a new house in a white neighborhood hostile to blacks. The family’s new home was only a few blocks away from the Chicago Normal School, yet Larsen would continue her education at Fisk University. In many ways, Larsen’s family, despite their immigrant status, was able to escape racial marginality by purging Nella from the home.<sup>113</sup>

Larsen begins *Quicksand* by lifting the veil from the public *performance* of the black educator, and by allowing the reader to act as witness to a disenchanted Helga Crane’s train of

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<sup>111</sup> The High school used methods developed by the pragmatist education reformers which aimed to build upon a child’s inherent creativity (Hutchinson, 48).

<sup>112</sup> Ibid 49.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid 51.

thought. With theatrical detail, we enter the dark “eerily quiet” bedroom of Helga, where Helga is illuminated by spotlight; she sits in a “small oasis in a desert of darkness.” Helga retreats to this private enclave after a “taxing day’s work, after the hard classes, in which she gave willingly and unsparingly of herself with no apparent return.” In the privacy of her room, Helga escapes into a world of tranquility where she is unleashed from following “the strenuous rigidity of conduct required in this huge educational community which she was an insignificant part.” The narrative juxtaposes the constriction of the “rigid” educational institution against the sensual contours of Helga’s body, and material sophistication of her “attractive room with her own books” (36). Larsen moves our gaze over Helga’s body. She is described as a “slight girl of twenty-two years, with narrow, sloping shoulders and delicate but well-turned arms and legs, she had, none the less, an air of radiant, careless health.” Outfitted in “vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules, deep sunk in the high-backed chair, against whose dark tapestry her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin, was distinctly outlined, she was –to use a hackneyed word, attractive” (36-37). Helga is blatantly sensual, reclining in a negligee; she exudes a sexuality that is only expressible in private, thus, she never opens her door to the other teachers who wish to intrude on her solitude. Chip Rhodes posits that in these opening passages Helga is a “determinate absence,” as Helga is constructed through the commodities that adorn her body and that ornament her room. Helga’s “consumer desire” contradicts the “productive self-denial and communal loyalty that the school promulgates.” Helga is a “consumer, but she is also a worker in a subordinate position, an object with exchange value.”<sup>114</sup>

Emerging from this position of consumer/object duality, a position inextricably bound by constructions of black women, Helga critiques how the black educational project has failed both the students and teachers of Naxos. She recounts how a “holy white man of God” had come

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<sup>114</sup> Rhodes 191-193.

to speak to the black folk “sitting so respectfully before him” (37). Speaking admirably of the progress the Negro race had made, he instructs them to know “when and where to stop” (37). The speech leaves Helga full of “anger and seething resentment” and in the next pages she unravels a web of hatred towards the South, Naxos and the foundational pillars of Negro education. In *Quicksand*, and in the autobiographical details of Larsen’s life, we see a troubling of the reification of education as a transcendent sphere. Larsen asserts that this vision of racial uplift through education is enacted through the disciplining and restricting of the body.

While post Reconstruction fictions of education imagined the black educator as a figure who could heal broken lines of kinship through the teacher-student relationship, Helga Crane embraces her *difference*, and also describes the educational institution as erecting barriers between the educator and her mass of students. In the classroom “a few of the ideas which she tried to put into the minds behind those baffling ebony, bronze, and gold faces reached their destination” while “others were left scattered about” (38-39). Helga ascribes her inability to reach her students as being the fault of “the method, the general idea behind the system.” Helga began her teaching career with “keen joy and zest,” a “zest” that eventually “blotted out, giving place to a deep hatred for the trivial hypocrisies and careless cruelties which were, unintentionally, a part of the Naxos policy of uplift” (39-40). In the language of sentimentality, Helga describes her students as “happy singing children, whose charm and distinctiveness the school was so surely ready to destroy,” and asserts that it is Naxos that has distorted the relationship between “teacher and student, between condescending authority and smoldering resentment.” Now “the gulf was too great, and too few had tried to cross it. It couldn’t be spanned by one sympathetic teacher.” For the teacher’s “likable and charming personality” had also been “smudged out” by the institution and with the realization that she “was utterly unfitted for teaching, even for mere existence, in Naxos” and ultimately a “failure” we are informed that

Helga is now prepared to immediately depart from the constraints of Naxos (39-40). Helga's description of her students', as well as her own, *natural* charms and distinctiveness correspond with Progressive educational theories that sought to draw out the innate qualities of a student as essential to the learning process. Concurrently, Helga's characterizations also draw upon popular cultural sentiments that positioned African Americans as uniquely closer to the natural world and relatedly allowed them to act and embrace the primary desires that mainstream white society repressed.

Helga confesses that what drew her to the institution was to serve its great leader, yet the price of this devotion is to give up her love of beautiful things and objects, and never fully access the raw energy that she projects exists behind the silent, "baffling" faces of her students. Yet, we are also aware that Helga's ill-fit within Naxos, is not simply a pedagogical or ideological problem; on the level of identity, and lineage, because of the immigrant status and illicit union of her parents, Helga is ill-equipped. Her decision to depart from Naxos also offers her an opportunity to break off her engagement to James Vayle. The family of James Vayle had disapproved of the engagement citing Helga's lack of family. For Helga her lack of family is the "crux of the whole matter." It accounts "for everything, her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville." Her inability to prove her "ancestry and connections" means that she will be tolerated but never fully "belong" (43). The impenetrable barrier put between students and teachers at Naxos means that Helga cannot access other modes of communal belonging; her students cannot become proxies for a family proper, although their very presence acts as a sign of her repressed need and desire for connection. Helga describes her students as "massed phalanxes" who "increased in size and number, blotting out pavements, bare earth, and grass. And about it all was a depressing silence, a sullenness almost, until with a horrible abruptness the waiting black blared into "The Star-Spangled Banner" (46). The militaristic, rank and file,

uplift ideology of Naxos consumes the Southern landscape, thus forfeiting any signs of scenic beauty, which formally buttressed romanticized notions of post bellum Southern return. The anthemic interruption of the song interrogates the post Reconstruction emphasis on black education and moral obligation as a means towards national belonging and citizenship.

These opening moments decenter the pursuit of citizenship through a politic of educational sacrifice, respectability and communal obligation, and assert that the most pressing question is how the “knowing” individual can pursue a conception of happiness that has “no tangibility” (45). According to Helga, the establishment of an edifice of learning devoted to moral righteousness cannot function as a tangible proof of progress and happiness; it is a failed project, and those who do participate in it are represented as relics of an old order. The matron of the women’s dorm is Miss MacGooden, the niece of a Reconstruction congressman, whose most championed quality is “ladyiness” (46). Similarly, the dean is a woman from one of the first families and a “race” woman. Helga questions how even she “a despised mulatto” can intuitively understand the “unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colors were fitting and that dark-complexioned people should wear yellow, green and red”(51). Race men and women could yap “loudly of race consciousness” yet suppress “its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve, spontaneous laughter” (51). Race men and women were essentially marking the race “for destruction” by suppressing “harmony, radiance, and simplicity, all the essentials of spiritual beauty.” (51) In place of uplift pamphlets, Helga calls for the writing of “A Plea for Color.”

When she is unable to satirize through the mimicry of ubiquitous racial narratives, Helga expresses herself in staccato sentences full of rage. Before Helga leaves Naxos, the presence of a bridled anger calls into question any simplistic way of thinking about who Helga Crane is and what drives her. In her final moments at Naxos, Helga meets with the administrator, Dr.

Anderson, in order to submit her resignation. Her attraction to Dr. Anderson is exposed, as she feels uncomfortable underneath his gaze; she finds it “queer” that “some brown people have gray eyes. Gives them a strange, unexpected appearance. A little frightening” (53). As Dr. Anderson attempts to convince Helga to stay by asserting the immensity, and loftiness, of Naxos’s mission, Helga feels “a mystifying yearning which sang and throbbed in her. She felt again that urge for service, not now for her people, but for this man who was talking so earnestly of his work, his plans, his hopes.” Helga’s desire is not predicated on the urge towards racial collectivity, and obligation, but is mapped according to her yearnings for Dr. Anderson.

Helga is “won” by Dr. Anderson’s assertion that Naxos needs someone like Helga, a person with “a sense of values, and proportion, an appreciation of the rarer things of life.” (54) Yet, when he goes further to explain that it is because Helga is a “lady,” who possesses dignity and breeding, Helga angrily corrects Dr. Anderson, asserting that she was born in a Chicago slum. Unreceptive to his attempts at clarity, Helga words fall “like drops of hail,” as she repudates his projections of respectability by declaring: “The joke is on you, Dr. Anderson. My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married. As I said at first, I don’t belong here. I shall be leaving at once” (55). Helga pronounces the illegitimacy of her background by emphasizing the criminality of her gambling father, and his familial abandonment, and the alien-status of her mother, who may have never been a wife, who is not only white, but an immigrant.

Remembering the episode later, as she travels north on a train to Chicago, Helga questions what made her fly into a “rage so fierce, so illogical, so disastrous” (55). In her search to understand, the logic of her rage, she explores her past; her thoughts linger on her long dead mother. Helga describes her mother as a “fair Scandinavian girl in love with life” who had made a “cruel sacrifice” in her surrender to the “gay suave scoundrel,” Helga’s father. Her inability to

truly know the content and realities of her parents' relationship gives way to Helga creating a hazy depiction of her parents that she continually revises. In these early descriptions, Helga's mother is a "girl gently bred, fresh from an older, more polished civilization," who is made pathetic and hard because of her abandonment. Her mother's second marriage to a "man of her own race, but not of her own kind" is deeply resented by Helga, who endured the "savage unkindness of her stepbrothers and –sisters, and the jealous, malicious hatred of her mother's husband" (56). Helga is swift to mark degrees of culture, by upholding older European civilization as superior. Sent to live with her Uncle Peter, after her mother's death, Helga entered a Negro school where she "discovered that because one was dark one was not necessarily loathsome." Thinking of herself "without repulsion" for the first time, she spent six years in the school, where she experienced a semblance of happiness, for there "had been always a feeling of strangeness, of outsideness." As Helga grows older, she becomes gradually aware of "a difference between herself and the girls about her. They had mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters of whom they spoke frequently, and who sometimes visited them. They went home for the vacations which Helga spent in the city where the school was located." At this school, a "discontent" with no remedy "crept upon" Helga (57).

In early educational experiences and at Naxos, the sense of belonging that Helga initially experiences is replaced by feelings of alienation derived by her failure to escape her lack of kin. This reality forces Helga into the position of a wanderer, a fraught position for a single woman.

<sup>115</sup> It also asks her to make meaning outside of institutional definition, outside of the legitimizing

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<sup>115</sup> In "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," Hazel Carby describes the mobility of black women, during the 1920s, as generating a "series of moral panics," such that the "behavior of black female migrants was characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous." She writes: By using the phrase "moral panic" I am attempting to describe and to connect a series of responses, from institutions and from individuals, that identified the behavior of these migrating women as a social and political problem, a problem that had to be rectified in order to restore a moral social order" (in *Critical Inquiry*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, 739-740).

functions of the family or the school. Returning to Chicago after Naxos, turned away by her Uncle Peter's wife's insistence that Peter is not Helga's uncle, there is another frame that Helga can potentially be placed in- that of prostitute by both white men and black men.<sup>116</sup> Traversing "acres of streets ...it seemed that in that whole energetic place nobody wanted her services. At least not the kind that she offered. A few men, both white and black, offered her money, but the price of the money was too dear. Helga Crane did not feel inclined to pay it" (66). Helga had a "faint hint of offishness which hung about her and repelled advances, an arrogance that stirred in people a peculiar irritation. They noticed her, admired her clothes, but that was all, for the self-sufficient uninterested manner adopted instinctively as a protective measure for her acute sensitiveness, in her child days, still clung to her" (66). Read by outsiders as both arrogant and sexually available, Helga eventually finds work with Mrs. Hayes-Rore, a "lemon-colored" woman with "bad clothes and dirty fingernails." Hayes-Rore is a race woman who travels in order to give speeches, which are, actually, little more than regurgitated ideologies of the great leaders of the race.

The speeches proved to be merely patchworks of others' speeches and opinions. Helga had heard other lecturers say the same things in Devon and again in Naxos. Ideas, phrases and even whole sentences and paragraphs were lifted bodily from previous orations and published works of Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and other doctors of the race's ills. For variety Mrs. Hayes-Rore had seasoned hers with a peppery dash of Du Bois and a few vinegary statements of her own. Aside from these it was, Helga reflected, the same old thing. (70)

Helga's desire is to avoid "the same old thing," which is frequently represented in the novel as recurrent taboos grounded in notions of racial propriety and uplift. In this depiction of Hayes-Rore, the quintessential New Negro uplift persona lacks creativity and originality. Like the

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<sup>116</sup> For more on the issue of prostitution and clothing, in both McKay and Larsen, see Kimberly Roberts "The Clothes Make the Woman: The Symbolics of Prostitution in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*" (*Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 16.1 Spring, 1997), 107-130.

matronly, repressive dean mothers that people Naxos, Hayes-Rore belongs to an irrelevant, older order.

During a train ride, Helga tells Hayes-Rore the truth about her background. In both Larsen and McKay, trains and ships act as interrogative sites; they come to represent transient spaces of social and intellectual meditation. While the masculine space of McKay's railroad allows for a nakedness of thought and desire, Helga's past, her sexual desires and educational musings, are veiled. While *Home to Harlem's* Ray proudly proclaims the cultural necessity of his aesthetic and intellectual strivings, to those who encounter Helga, and quite often to Helga, also, her ontological and existential quandaries are individualized; they represent the personal traumas of an abandoned daughter, rather than national and communal paradoxes which demand interrogation. After Helga's revelation, "the faces of the two women, which had been bare, seemed to harden. It was almost as if they had slipped on masks." Larsen writes: Helga "wished to hide her turbulent feelings and to appear indifferent to Mrs. Hayes-Rore's opinion of her story. The woman felt that the story, dealing as it did with race intermingling and possibly adultery, was beyond definite discussion. For among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned- and therefore they do not exist" (72). These brief moments allow for vulnerability, yet, they are quickly replaced by a masking of emotions, and the erasure of Helga's complex identity. Upon arriving in New York City, Helga acquiesces to continue to don a new mask, a mask that obscures the illicit details of her childhood, as she comes to board with Hayes-Rore's niece Anne Grey.

Despite the manipulation of her identity, Helga's initially experiences Harlem as a space where the innate qualities of the race are no longer repressed. In this sense, "teeming black Harlem" represents a new space of instruction, where Helga finds an "intellectual home" (75). Merging with the densely populated Harlem streets, and connecting with a crowd that hates

Naxos, Helga believes that she has found herself as she is “released from the feeling of smallness” (78). Helga’s brief contentment within Harlem is directly related to her rejection of “white New York” and her embrace of the geographically constrained space of Harlem. In this sense, Harlem, unlike Naxos and her previous black educational spaces, is a segregated space that is culturally and intellectually vibrant; Harlem’s vitality is contrasted against the “the sober mad rush of white New York” which “failed entirely to stir her” (77). Yet, like the feelings that prompted her flight from Naxos, Helga’s contentment with Harlem is brief. She is first distressed by Anne Grey’s obsession with “the race problem.” While Anne hated white people, “she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race.” (80) Anne’s inclinations annoy Helga because of their similarities Naxos’s conservative ideology. Yet, in later passages, it becomes apparent that there is also something about the containment, and spirit of Harlem that causes Helga’s wandering discontentment to resurface. While previously, the faces of the Naxos students evoked hidden worlds of knowledge and culture, the faces of the Harlem residents come to represent, to Helga, a new interpretation of the world created within Harlem.

The residents of Harlem take on an oppressive quality as the “mere sight of the serene tan and brown faces about her” sting her “like a personal insult.” The “carefree quality of their laughter roused in her the desires to scream at them: “Fools, fools! Stupid fools!” (84). Helga is both distressed by the contentment of the Harlemites that surround her, and angered by the fact that she is psychically, and physically, yoked with them. Living in Harlem, life “became for her only a hateful place where one lived in intimacy with people one would not have chosen had one been given a choice.” Helga’s disenchantment with Harlem, offers commentary, and critique, on the segregated nature of Harlem life. For Helga, there can be no contentment within the

claustrophobic, racially bound space. These passages of discontentment also highlight Helga's rejection of an expected duty towards "the race." Helga's compact trains of thought evoke the perceived happy, ignorance, of the black folk that people Harlem. This characterization of the happy black masses depicts them as opaque and unknowable. This not only allows for Helga's musings and thoughts to appear as even more singular and estranging; it also satirizes the fallacies within both racial uplift through instruction and scenes of happy primitivism that occur within the novel. Both ideologies are facilitated by structures of segregation and social repression. More specifically, Helga's descriptions of these masses iterate the extent to which these descriptions are, most often, the result of Helga's projections. Estrangement from the black masses produces different effects within *Quicksand* and *Home to Harlem*. This difference is readily mapped along the lines of gender, as gender works to determine the ability to create and inhabit alternative spaces of instruction. McKay's Ray is able to give intellectual voice to these issues, to the nature of forced intimacies, and he is able to construct a teacher/student space on the mobile-site of the train. Ray is able to theorize the limits, but also the transformative intellectual and aesthetic, possibilities, of instruction despite ethnic, cultural and linguistic difference. Helga, and, as I will explore later, Ray's girl, Agatha, do not have that option. Racial kinship for both Helga and Agatha ultimately inscribes them into entrenched and distorted models of black womanhood. Yet, Helga's ability to act on her desire for mobility gives voice to the story that Agatha will be unable to narrate. The dichotomy of respectability versus prostitution plays out in narratives of education as the discourse of respectability exalts the educated black women only as she is a necessary progenitor of an elite Negro class.

Helga attempts to avoid this proposition through the articulation of sexual desire for Dr. Anderson outside of the discourse of uplift and reproduction, in her appreciation of the white-skinned Audrey Denny who frequents the night clubs and hangs in a racially mixed company,

and in her voyage to live with an aunt and uncle in Copenhagen. In place of black women's respectability only achieved through circumscribed marriage Helga early on centers the sensual.

While still perplexed by her desires for Dr. Anderson, she travels to Denmark and immerses herself, in the social circle of her Aunt Katrina and Herr Dahl. It is here that the narrowly constructed space of leisure and ornament that Helga built in her room at Naxos is realized. Helga understands that she had never desired simply money "but the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings. Things. Things. Things." Yet, she is disturbed to find her own body implicated in her new world of commodities and leisure. Aunt Katrina and her husband are eager to utilize the exotic 'otherness' of Helga to advance their own "social fortunes" in the society of Copenhagen (97-98). Paraded by her aunt and uncle, in dangling jewelry, and revealing clothing that exposes her brown skin, Helga feels like "some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited." Although outwardly composed, Helga is both "nervous and terrified" as no 'other woman in the stately pale blue room was so greatly exposed. To the other women Helga was "attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way but she wasn't one of them. She didn't count at all" (100). As in Naxos, and within the middle class circles of black Harlem, Helga is aware of the politics of exclusion and inclusion that rests on notions of female propriety, lineage, and appearance. Helga's first 'coming out' exposes the Dahl's familial overtures as a polite artifice, designed to obfuscate their use of Helga as primitive accessory. When the flamboyant artist, Herr Axel Olson arrives to the gathering, he assesses Helga's appearance in whispering utterances directed to Fru Dahl, while never directly addressing Helga. Helga surrenders to the extravagant and bold costuming expected of her. She "was incited to make an impression, a voluptuous impression. She was incited to inflame attention and admiration. She was dressed for it, subtly schooled for it. And after a while she gave herself up wholly to fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired" (103-104).

Helga's ability to convey sensuality obscures her fear of the sexual, and more specifically, the numerous ways in which she is already sexualized, with, and without, her participation.

While struggling to comprehend what it means to be Negro and female in her new European context, she also muses upon the meaning of race in her homeland. In Copenhagen, she vows to never return to America, asserting that if one "had Negro blood, one mustn't expect money, education, or, sometimes, even work whereby one might earn bread" (112). Helga's proclivity for hyperbole is on display here as her early occupation as a teacher, residency at Naxos, and ability to get work exposes the fiction of her thoughts. Still, Helga issues a critique which suggests that money and education are not the complete anecdote to systemic racism and bias. Helga's critique of class ascension and procreation centers the brutality of race-based terror and its impact on black mothers and their children. Larsen writes: "She saw, suddenly, the giving birth to little, helpless, unprotesting Negro children as a sin, an unforgivable outrage. More black folks to suffer indignities. More dark bodies for mobs to lynch. No, Helga Crane didn't think often of America. It was too humiliating, too disturbing" (104). Helga, repeatedly, conveys an image of racial collective despair, using faceless and helpless Negro children subjected to racial terror as a crude juxtaposition to her own sense, on first voyaging to Europe, of being a "released bird" who belonged "to herself alone and not to a race" (94). The actual experience of her time in Copenhagen does not reflect these early projections of freedom. Helga's discomfort is produced by both the narrative of exoticism within the European context and the traces of memory that reveal American racism as a haunting trauma.

Helga's discontentment returns by her second year of Denmark, first upon hearing the news that Anne Gray will marry Robert Anderson, and, later, while visiting the Great Circus with Axel Olson and other acquaintances. There, the group stumbles upon a vaudeville show featuring two black men: "American Negroes undoubtedly, for as they danced and cavorted they

sang in the English of America an old ragtime song that Helga remembered hearing as a child.” The pair performed more “songs, all of them old, but new and strange to that audience. And how the singers danced, pounding their thighs, slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long arms, throwing their bodies about with a loose ease! And how the enchanted spectators clapped and howled and shouted for more!” (112). Helga initially entertained the curiosity of the Europeans she encounters, the maid who looks, chalking it up to her never having seen a “Negro outside the pictured pages of her geography book.” This initial encounter at the Circus represents a confrontation with the meaning of European racial progressivism explored through the very notion of time and cross-Atlantic cultural transmission.

For Helga, the songs are aural memories from childhood— an “old ragtime song”— yet to her enthused companions they are “strange and new.” In hoping to construct an identity that evades her early life, and in witnessing the cultural consumption of artifacts of her American Negro past, Helga finds herself again immersed in a racial narrative which she disdains. Consumed with a “fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage,” Helga intimates that what disturbs her is the degree to which this performance, like her own performance of exoticism, invites the “pale pink and white people among whom she lived” to “to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget.” The uncanny encounter leads Helga to conclude that the Europeans had all along “divined its presence, had known that in her was something, some characteristic, different from any that they themselves possessed. She, Helga Crane, didn’t admire it. She suspected that no Negroes, no Americans, did” (112-113). Helga, disoriented by the mobility of this cavorting Negro image, accepts that there is, indeed, an essential difference, or characteristic, within her. Although within the constrained space of Naxos, Helga called for the claiming of this difference, within her new European context, she is troubled by this type of racial distinction.

Helga attributes her dislike of these traits as a specifically American problem. Yet, ultimately the culmination of her sojourn in Europe exposes the extent to which the problem of race is not discomfort with an essential attribute, but that it is, instead, the problem of the black image and its consumption. Moreover, the imagistic presentation, through clothing, speech, skin, music, and art, is given the power to reinforce or debunk racial myths of black difference, and/or degeneracy. More specifically, from the opening moments of *Quicksand*, and the lingering description of Helga, the narrator has centered the image and articulated its prominence in Helga's identity formation. Helga is expected to fit into whatever mold is handed to her, whether that be uplifting race woman or exotic primitive, with both having their requisite codes of sexual access and expected performance.<sup>117</sup> The power of the visual, and correlated codes of behavior, is highlighted in her final exchange with Axel Olsen. In refusing his proposal, and speaking openly of race, Helga disrupts the decorum of her European setting in its silences and denials of race. Olsen expresses shock that his marriage proposal is met with "some strange talk of race and shame" (119). He quips to Helga, in an "assured, despotic" manner: "You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I. And I am" (117). In his comparison of Helga to the impulsive women of Africa, he obscures her American identity and attachment to Europe, through her immigrant mother. Yet, in the subsequent clauses, through his suggestions that Helga possesses the "soul of a prostitute" and is up for sale, he inadvertently highlights the degree to which Helga emerges from a definitively "New World" context where the black female's body and sexuality is commoditized. Helga's declaration that she is "not for sale" to "any white man" centers the discourse of sexual exchange

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<sup>117</sup> Kimberly Roberts, in her exploration of clothing and prostitution in Larsen and McKay, summarizes this as a central exploration of feminist theorists who contend that "because all women are trapped in a patriarchal system in which their role is always already defined, they are all on some level like the prostitute who, in assuming whatever guise her client desires, is absolutely a projection of male fantasy" (110).

that has haunted her from Naxos, to Chicago and New York, and, finally, within Copenhagen. Her rejection of Olsen is further pronounced through her denunciation of the portrait as that of some “disgusting sensual creature with her features” (119). There is a degree to which Helga’s disdain for the sensuality represented within the portrait can be ascribed to the profundity of her sexual repression; at the same time, my contention is that Helga’s experience in Copenhagen is transformative in that it allows her to claim her sensuality, and critical intellect, in a way that she was previously incapable.

Helga’s “old unhappy questioning mood” is a critical refuge from the identities expected of her. Despite her initial displeasure at encountering the performance of the two American Negroes, she “returned again and again to the Circus, always alone, gazing intently and solemnly at the gesticulating black figures, an ironical and silently speculative spectator. For she knew that into her plan for her life had thrust itself a suspensive conflict in which were fused doubts, rebellion, expediency, and urgent longings” (113). Helga is able to claim the space of the observer, of a questioning subject who studies the repetitive performance, as a means to both confront and construct her past. Having never known her father, Helga develops, during her time in Copenhagen, a “sympathy” for him in place of “contempt and hatred.” She offers that she “understood, now, his rejection, his repudiation, of the formal calm her mother had represented” (122). This sentiment gestures towards a troubling reading of the mother, but within the context of her experiences in Europe, it also reflects a return to her sense of longing “not for America, but for Negroes.” This (re)contextualization of her father infuses the landscape of Copenhagen:

“And as she attended parties, the theater, the opera, and mingled with people on the streets, meeting only pale serious faces when she longed for brown laughing ones, she was able to forgive him. Also, it was as if in this understanding and forgiving she had come upon knowledge

of almost sacred importance” (122). This is strikingly similar to her narration of the streets of Harlem, yet, also, hidden within this familiar rhetoric of racial joviality is Helga’s insistence that in knowing her father, even as mere conjecture, she has stumbled upon a deeper truth. Essential here is that in place of a former shame about her heritage and family, Helga feels armed with a sacred truth that allows her to flee what is American, to ultimately define *a blind embracing of a nationalistic identity* as a negating form of subjection.

In her return to Harlem, having “tactfully removed herself from Anne’s house on 139<sup>th</sup> street to a hotel,” Helga again uses the contact space of the anonymous streets to muse on issues of citizenship, race and identity (123). Surrounded by “hundreds, thousands, of dark-eyed brown folk” she claims them as “her people.” Despite these claims, and the existence of “ties which bound her forever to these mysterious, these terrible, these fascinating, these lovable, dark hordes,” Helga cannot remain in Harlem. Her residence in a hotel, ostensibly prompted by her inability to countenance Anne and Anderson’s marriage, rightly situates Helga, as she comes to embrace her return to Harlem as a provisional state. The narrator expounds:

Not that she intended to remain. No. Helga Crane couldn’t, she told herself and others, live in America. In spite of its glamour, existence in America, even in Harlem, was for Negroes too cramped, too uncertain, too cruel; something not to be endured for a lifetime if one could escape; something demanding a courage greater than was in her. No. She couldn’t stay. Nor, she saw now, could she remain away. Leaving, she would have to come back. (125)

The tension of the last line of this passage, the cyclical suggestion of “leaving” in order to return, is admittedly, for Helga, impossible. She recognizes that it calls for “courage” that she does not possess; in residing in the transient space of the hotel, a location, subtly, suggesting illicit sexual exchange, Helga recognizes that embracing “outrageous clothes” and her “deliberate lure” in Harlem is “a bit more dangerous” (127). Yet, Helga appears to ready herself to do so, suggesting, to an acquaintance at a Harlem party, that she now wishes to know the sensual Audrey Denney.

At the same party, she encounters her former fiancée, from Naxos, James Vayle. Vayle emerges in the space of Harlem as an anachronism, a reminder of the archaic nature of Naxos. In comparison to Helga's embrace of the crowded Harlem streets as a dialectical space for, both, individual intellectual musing and collective belonging, Vayle confesses to disliking "the rush, the lack of home life, the crowds, the noisy meaninglessness of it all (131). Vayle returns to remind Helga of the sexual contract undergirding his particular brand of educational uplift. Informing Vayle that she does not wish to marry, that she finds it "sinful" to produce Negro children "doomed to endure such wounds" to the flesh and the spirit, Vayle expresses astonishment at Helga's sentiment. He comments:

But, Helga! Good heavens! Don't you see that if we—I mean people like us—don't have children, the others will still have? That's one of the things that's the matter with us. The race is sterile at the top. Few, very few Negroes of the better class have children, and each generation has to wrestle again with the obstacles of the preceding ones: lack of money, education, and background. I feel very strongly about this. We're the ones who must have the children, if the race is to get anywhere. (132)

Vayle's proposition, which outlines procreation as a tenant of collective uplift, obscures the extent to which his ideology is more a reproduction of intra-racial class *difference* rather than a blue print for collective cultural change. Helga laughs off Vayle's clumsy attempt at a marriage proposal and immediately goes "tripping off with a handsome coffee-colored youth whom she had beckoned from across the room with a little smile" (132-33). Later, as Helga collects her coat, she shares a kiss with Dr. Anderson; although he will later blame the illicit contact on the party's cocktails.

The juxtaposition of Vayle's loaded proposal against the passionate kiss accents, for Helga, the potential for an escape from the nullifying dictates of educational uplift ideology; Helga felt "a long-hidden, half understood desire" well up "with the suddenness of a dream." The dream continues as during that "night riotous and colorful dreams" invade her "prim hotel bed" (133). The episode infuses the language of the novel with an acute representation of the

depth of Helga's sexual need, and desire. Robert Anderson's ultimate rejection of Helga is foreshadowed by Anne Grey's earlier confession that her marriage was prompted by Anderson's "inexorable conscience," by his "ascetic protest against the sensuous, the physical," represented by his feelings for Helga. Underneath a "well-managed" natural attraction, Anne Grey's sensed in her husband "a more lawless place where she herself never hoped or desired to enter, was another" form of attraction, "a vagrant primitive groping toward something shocking and frightening to the cold asceticism of his reason." In protecting Anderson from his "vagrant" and "primitive" subconscious, Grey carries "out what she considered her obligation to him, keep him undisturbed, unhumiliated" (124). Grey's commitment to the preservation of uplift "asceticism," her pledge not to fail her husband, indicates the insurmountable obstacles Helga faces in carving out not just an individual niche, but a community in Harlem.

Larsen portrays Harlem not as a freedom-centered oasis, but as location where institutional codes of conduct are now replicated in elite social circles. If we take seriously Kevin Gaines's sense that "uplift ideology" operated within a discourse of religious fervor, it is appropriate that Helga's inability to perform her obligation, in the same manner as Anne Grey, is narratively represented as a religious fall from grace, a sin against the collective interests of the race. The whirlwind events of the final portions of *Quicksand*, rapidly voice Helga's descent into a Southern, rural religious community where she will carry out her duties to the race, minus the aesthetic and intellectual "decadence" of which she was so enamored. Sometime after Dr. Anderson's rejection, Helga stumbles upon a church where she finds herself particularly "interested in the writhings and weepings of the feminine portion, which seemed to predominate" (141). Although horrified by what she witnesses, she felt "an echo of the weird orgy resound in her own heart; she felt herself possessed by the same madness; she too felt a brutal desire to shout and to sling herself about." The space of the church acts as a location,

albeit impermanent, where Helga and the other writhing woman can experience release without fear or restriction. Within the ecstatic pull of this religious rapture, “time seemed to sink back into the mysterious grandeur and holiness of far-off simpler centuries” (142); this temporal regression is a drastic change from Helga’s previous disdain for the historical traces of race that stall movement into the new. Helga describes her ill-fated conversion as a “chance at stability, at permanent happiness,” and “in the confusion of seductive repentance” Helga marries the church’s leader, Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, who is easily disarmed and seduced by Helga. Like the race woman, Hayes-Rore, Reverend Pleasant Green is marked by dirty nails, signifying on the characterization of both as retrograde and unrefined.

Helga moves with her new husband to a small town in Alabama and joins him in his pastoral duties. For some time, she considers herself to have returned to the teaching mission which she had rejected at the novel’s inception. As her “young joy and zest for the uplifting of her fellow men” comes back to her, she envisions her role not as intellectual, but as a teacher of refinement, as she looks to “subdue the cleanly scrubbed ugliness of her own surroundings to soft inoffensive beauty, and to help the other women to do likewise.” Tellingly, Helga comes to have “in her heart” a “feeling of obligation, of humble gratitude” (146). Outwardly, the community women appear to acquiesce with “smiling agreement and good-natured promises” to Helga’s instruction that they improve “their homes according to her ideas of beauty.” Yet she was “unaware that afterward they would shake their heads sullenly over their washtubs and ironing boards. And that among themselves they talked with amusement, or with anger, of “dat uppity, meddlin’ No’the’nah,” and “pore Reve’end,” who in their opinion “would ‘a done bettah to ‘a ma’ied Clementine Richards” (146-147). There is a more profound gap between teacher and student here, than in the institutional setting of Naxos, for in this setting no one has appointed Helga as an instructor, and as the presence of the tools of domestic labor signifies, these women

are not Helga's students, but are, instead, very much engaged with the quotidian aspects of their existence. Clementine Richards is described as "a strapping black beauty of magnificent Amazon proportions and bold shining eyes of jet like hardness. A person of awesome appearance. All chains, strings of beads, jingling bracelets, flying ribbons, feathery neckpieces, and flowery hats." The grandiosity of Clementine's presence, and the attention to the accessories that adorn her, transfer aesthetic interest onto her body, diminishing Helga's ability to capture and lure the gaze. It is apparent that Clementine's physical presentation is, satirically, evidence of the color and boldness that Helga had so romanticized.

While Helga has escaped the limitations of Anderson and Vayle's brand of educational uplift, her new religious community represents an equally disturbing setting where the women of the community surround and fawn over the comically inadequate patriarch, Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green. Clementine is open in her "admiration" and, more generally, "open adoration was the prerogative, the almost religious duty, of the female portion of the flock" (147). The finality of Helga's change is pronounced through the perpetuity of her child bearing, as within the "short space of twenty months" she bears three children. Consistently fatigued, Helga finds "there was no time for the pursuit of beauty, or for the uplifting of other harassed and teeming women, or for the instruction of their neglected children" (150). Helga is unable to communicate with the other women about the burden of having children as they only beckon her to trust in the lord. By being reduced completely to her body, the haunting threat, which lingered on the edges of her narrative throughout the entirety of the novel, is realized. Helga's experience of childbirth, within the confines of this rigidly dogmatic, rural community mocks the glorification of childbirth espoused within uplift rhetoric voiced by others in the novel. Simultaneously, her realization that she is, indeed, repulsed, by both her husband, who barely maintains his hygiene, and the dictates of religion reveals the extent to which Helga has deluded herself into a false

submission. She retreats into the literary, reading Anatole France's "The Procurator of Judea," which holds little meaning for those who surround Helga, who see her declining state as a form of madness. With no sign of communal connection, *Quicksand's* ending supports Hazel Carby's sentiment that "the quicksand of history can only be escaped through the introduction of alternative, collective ideologies, not through the actions of isolated humanist subjects."<sup>118</sup> At the same time, *Quicksand* alerts readers to the degree to which collective ideologies are vulnerable to a politics of exclusivity.

Helga's, by now default, inclination to escape is compromised by her sense of maternal obligation, and lack of social connectivity. And although, in direct contrast to her experience of racial isolation, her children "can be black together" she projects that she "would be haunted by their cries of Mummy, mummy, mummy." Ultimately, "hardly had she left her bed" before the reality of a fifth pregnancy, bars Helga from activating any plans to start again, elsewhere (161). The abruptness of the ending, the absurdity of the position which Helga Crane finds herself by the end of the novel, has for many readers of *Quicksand* reflected a melodramatic turn of events. There is a degree of narrative implausibility that the sophisticated Helga Crane would be so wholly consumed by transient religious fervor and locked into a recurrent nightmare of reproduction; from this perspective, the ending reads as unevenly brutal and punitive. Deborah McDowell has argued that the uneasy resolution of *Quicksand* is born from Larsen's attempt to hold "two virtually contradictory impulses in the same novel," the desire to explore black female sexuality and the obligation to be "respectable in black middle-class terms."<sup>119</sup>

Despite the doom of Helga's end, she ends the novel literally and metaphorically, off of the map of black middle class respectability. As McDowell explains, this is a critique and "refusal

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<sup>118</sup> Carby quoted in Rhodes 191.

<sup>119</sup> Deborah E. McDowell in "*The Changing Same*": *Black Women's Literature, Criticism and Theory* 80.

to underwrite the available cultural conventions of the racial uplift novel,” a stinging commentary “on the closure of *Iola Leroy*.”<sup>120</sup> Ultimately, Larsen offers a brutal critique of the systemic demoralization of Helga Crane due to extremes of individual and institutional ideologies that work to entrench, and codify, the historically produced distance between teacher and student, men and women, and between pedagogy and embodiment.

*Masculinity, Mobility and Educational Communion*

Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* explores the social rifts traversed in *Quicksand*, and, similarly centers black sexuality, and sensuality, as a profound concern in the narration of black instruction. The novel insistently claims that ethnically, and intellectually, disparate black subjects can, indeed, bond through the act of instruction— complicating the meaning, and geographical scope, of representations of the estranged black educated subject. Notably the presentation of instruction within *Home to Harlem* is, unlike *Quicksand*, not an instruction of erasure, repression or negation, nor does it offer simplistic, facile, generalizations about black racial kinship across geography. The narrative, instead, privileges the laborious anxieties and tensions that arise from cross-cultural contact between ethnically and linguistically diverse black subjects.

While *Quicksand* begins on the note of emotional and physical flight, *Home to Harlem* opens with its central character, very definitively, seeking *to return*, as he travels back to Harlem after two years abroad. The ship is conceived of as a space of trans-national contact, but also a contentious location where its inhabitants are stratified by class, race and culture— everyone, including Jake, voices their disgust at the “despised” Arabs. Despite this shared disdain, Jake is not influenced by a white sailor’s attempt at flattery when he tells Jake that he “ain’t like them

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid 96.

dirty jabbering coolies.” Aware of the manner in which race determines labor position aboard the vessel, Jake, in response to the white sailors assertions, “smiled and shook his head in a non-committal way. He knew that if he was just like the white sailors, he might have signed on as deckhand and not as a stoker” (3). It was, in fact, the injection of racial discord into his European sojourn that prompted Jake’s discontentment with his life abroad. After the end of World War I, other black soldiers joined Jake in residing in the East End of London. With the arrival of black soldiers, and their pensions, the “price of sex went up in the East End, and the dignity of it also” (7). Subsequently, Jake witnessed “a big battle staged between the colored and white men of London’s East End,” as for three days his English lover shielded him from the “fisticuffs, razor and knife and gun play.”

The event of the race riot impacts Jake’s ability to stay with his English lover. After it is over, Jake is “seized with the awful fever of lonesomeness. He felt all alone in the world. He wanted to run away from the kind-heartedness of his lady of the East End.” Jake questions ever enlisting, “of mixing mahself up in a white folks’ war.” Despite his lover’s attempts to “get down into his thoughts and share them with him,” Jake broods “day and night” and his lady of the East End becomes “now only a creature of another race—of another world” (7-8). Jake’s homecoming reflects not simply a return to his adopted Northern home, but a seductive beckoning, as “the chocolate-brown and walnut brown girls were calling him.” These brown girls are waiting for the soldiers, “for the brown boys that done show their mettle over there” (9). In lyrical prose Jake’s desires are proclaimed: “Brown girls rouged and painted like dark pansies. Brown flesh draped in soft colorful clothes. Brown lips full and pouted for kissing. Brown breasts throbbing with love” (8). The beckoning enforces Hazel Carby’s assertion that McKay in *Home to Harlem* and Van Vechten in *Nigger Heaven* (1926) use “female characters as the

terrain on *which* to map a relation between the sexual and class politics of urban black life.”<sup>121</sup> The repetitive insistence on the “brownness” of these women and the bright boldness of their sartorial preferences are juxtaposed against Jake who arrives in Harlem wearing, and who continues to sport throughout much of the novel, a “steel-gray English suit” which “fitted him loosely and well, perfectly suited his presence” (11). His suit signifies his mobility and wayward “spirit,” while the brown bodies of Harlem’s women remain a static representation of *primal* Harlem. This suit is what first attracts *his Baltimore brown*—Baltimore denotes the club where he first meets her. She notes Jake’s suit and we are presented with a commentary about her outfit—“orange scarf over a green frock, which was way above her knees, giving an adequate view of legs lovely in fine champagne-colored stockings . . .” (11). Like *Quicksand*’s attention to consumer desire, aesthetic presentation is emphasized and presented through attention to the objects that determine characters’ sense of fashion.

The recurrent motif of the episodic narrative structure of the novel is Jake’s pursuit of this woman who, on his first night back in Harlem, he has a sexual tryst with only to have her disappear shortly. Their initial flirtation is staged as one of sexual exchange for profit; she exclaims that she wants a fifty dollar note, to which he easily acquiesces. The morning after, he discovers she has returned the money with a note: “Just a little gift from a baby girl to a honey boy!” (16). Up until the culmination of the novel, she will remain elusive, a standard with which Jake judges subsequent women. He next meets Congo Rose, a “mulattress,” who he comes to live with, but who does not pique his interest to the same degree as his brown. Rose’s

spirit lacked the charm and verve, the infectious joy, of his little lost brown. He sometimes felt that she had no spirit at all—that strange, elusive something that he felt in himself, sometimes here, sometimes there, roaming away from him, going back to London, to Brest, Le Havre, wandering to some unknown new port, caught a moment by

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<sup>121</sup> Hazel Carby in “Policing the Black Woman’s Body in an Urban Context” 738.

some romantic rhythm, color, face, passing through cabarets, saloons, speakeasies, and returning to him . . . That little brown had something of that in her, too. That night he had felt a reaching out and marriage of spirits. (41-42)

Hazel Carby describes Rose as a “bisexual character, as embodying a “sexual ambiguity” that positions her “as a threat to the very existence of black masculinity.” According to Carby, Jake’s refusal to beat Rose acts as a “triumph of wholesome masculinity over the degenerate female element and allows Jake to proceed on his journey to become a man.”<sup>122</sup> Extending Carby’s argument, about Rose, to the construction of a site of instruction, within the novel, it can be posited that a woman like Rose, is readily marginalized within the text, rendered abject in Jake’s ordering of woman, in order to clear space for Jake’s tutelage under Ray.

Now stationary in Harlem, living with Rose, Jake explores the central impulse that answers his earlier self-interrogation of why he had left home, had enlisted in the military. His pursuit of the transient is not a simplistic call to travel but it is more concretely a call to capture moments, to experience the rhythms and colors of life beyond borders – an early, subtle summation of the design and mode of *Home to Harlem*, itself, which will be more actualized through the character Ray’s subsequent musings.

What becomes more pronounced, after this episode, is the extent to which Harlem, as suggested in Larsen’s *Quicksand*, is a bound space. First, Jake’s observations of his own, as well as his friends’ relationships, with women proves that the boundless allure and availability of the brown-bodied women that he anticipated, while abroad, is ultimately a negation of their migrant black masculinity. The cabarets also lose their evocative allure, as The Baltimore is shut down and a private gathering at Madame Suarez’s is infiltrated by the police. The undercover white officers who infiltrate Madame Suarez’s soiree fit easily into the environment through their performance of Harlem style recklessness. One of them “sat down to the piano and jazzed

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<sup>122</sup> Carby 749-750.

out popular songs. The trio radiated friendliness all around them. Danced with the colored beauties and made lively conversation with the men. They were gay and recklessly spendthrift... (106-107). The narrator continues: "They had wooed and lured and solicited for their trade. They had posed as good fellows, regular guys, looking for a good time only in the Black Belt. They were wearied of the pleasures of the big white world, wanted something new—the primitive joy of Harlem" (109). By placing themselves within this context, by being able to adeptly, and inconspicuously, perform as Harlem revelers, they completely disarm the establishment's regulars and Madame Suarez's girls. Moreover, the episode also challenges discourses of the primitive, where the white world can access Harlem for momentary lessons in "primitive joy," often at the expense of the indigenous population. Harlem is not simply a place of unbridled freedom; it is also a space of surveillance and consistent policing. As the realities of Harlem life impact Jake, he is once again called to move; this time he takes a job on the railroad to "break the hold that Harlem had upon him" (125).

If the first part of the novel reflects McKay's display of the language and color of primitive life, the space of the train, where we encounter the Haitian intellectual Ray, sets the stages for a definitive shift in language, and the introduction of a different instructional and narrative mode. In contrast to the quick-witted banter and abrupt scenes of color, conflict, and sex that permeate the scenes within Harlem, the setting of the train lends itself to contemplative scenes of instruction between Jake and Ray. The train itself is described as not simply a machine, but as a living breathing animal: "Over the heart of the vast gray Pennsylvania country the huge black animal snorted and roared, with sounding rods and couplings, pulling a long chain of dull-brown boxes packed with people and things, trailing on the blue-cold air its white masses of breath" (123). Jake first meets Ray when the latter is reading *Sapho* by Alphonse Daudet, and Jake, already foreshadowing the eager student he will come to be, ventures to ask

Ray about what he is reading. This initial lesson in the exploration of this specific text, and its historic allusions, underscores the primacy of the literary, and related cultural history, in the subsequent exchanges between the two men. Jake, indicating his acknowledgement of different categories of the aesthetic, is just as intrigued by the materiality of the book as he is by its content and subject matter, as he “charmingly, like a child that does not know its letters” turns the pages of Ray’s novel (129).

The French language of the novel offers a means to introduce Ray’s ethnic difference in comparison to the other working black men on the train. While Jake is not hesitant to express his own rudimentary knowledge of the language from his time abroad, Ray proclaims of French: “‘C’est ma langue maternelle,” and when questioned by Jake on how this impacts his status as being “one of us” Ray explains that he is Negro, but was born in Haiti (130-131). This identification of his homeland prompts a discussion of Haitian history, and Jake is described as plying “his instructor with questions” (132). In summation of his lesson on *L’Ouverture*, Ray recites from memory, in order to “honor both Toussaint and the poet,” the “wonderful, passionate lines” from Wordsworth’s sonnet (133). After hearing the sonnet Jake “felt like one passing through a dream, vivid in rich, varied colors.” To Jake it was a “revelation beautiful in his mind. That brief account of an island of savage black people, who fought for collective liberty and was struggling to create a culture of their own. A romance of his race, just down there by Panama. How strange!” (134). Jake lays claim to Haitian history as not specifically Ray’s story, but also his; it is a “romance of his race.” As explored by Hathaway and Watkins-Owens, perceptions of Caribbean immigrants by indigenous African-Americans could be based upon stereotypes and mistrust. In fact, in the first part of the novel, McKay gestures at these prejudicial sentiments, through descriptions of Jake and others disdain for, and mockery of, West Indians. Jake was indeed nationalist, “very American in spirit” and “shared a little of that

comfortable Yankee contempt for poor foreigners.” More specifically, “as an American Negro he looked askew at foreign niggers. Africa was jungle, and Africans bush niggers, cannibals. And West Indians were monkey-chasers.” Yet, in a distinctive turn, after listening to Ray, Jake now “felt like a boy who stands with the map of the world in colors before him, and feels the wonder of the world” (134). Notably it is the sonnet, the romantic Wordsworth’s imagining of the legacy of Toussaint’s legacy, which mediates Jake’s “map of the world in colors.”

The instructive potential of literature, represented initially through Daudet and Wordsworth, acts to ground, and produce, Ray’s repetitive yearnings to produce his own romance of the race. Ray explains to Jake: “Next to the romance of Hayti, because it is my native country, I should love to write the romance of Abyssinia . . . Ethiopia” (137). Ray’s presence on the train is a consequence of the US invasion of Haiti, with his father imprisoned for speaking out against the invasion, and his brother killed, Ray had no money to continue his education at Howard University. While Jake laments that the train “ain’t no place foh no student,” Ray describes how he balances the necessity of work with continued devotion to his studies: “Every free day I have in New York I spend at the library downtown. I read there and I write” (138). Jake’s contact with Ray does more than challenge his prejudices towards “foreigners;” it also alters his perception of the educated class. Jake’s “life had never before touched any of the educated of the ten dark millions. He had, however, a vague idea of who they were. He knew that the “big niggers” that were gossiped about in the saloons and the types he had met at Madame Adelina Suarez’s were not *the* educated ones” (164). Other secondary characters, acquaintances of Jake’s outside of the environment of the train, express distrust for the educated. Jake’s contact with Ray constitutes a unique type of relationship where the educated are no longer viewed as unknowable, instead Ray is characterized as a radically transformative force within Jake’s life. Most likely with a degree of condescension and ostracization, the “other cooks and

waiters called Ray “Professor.” Jake had never “called him that. Nor did he call him “buddy,” as he did Zeddy and his longshore-men friends. He called him “chappie” in a genial, semi-paternal way” (163). Jake utilizes the British term, chappie, to define kinship with Ray.

Ray, similarly, contemplates his relationship with Jake, but he goes further in questioning how his difference, born from both his intellect and immigrant status, impacts his ability to feel connected to the other black men aboard the train. Visiting a whorehouse with Jake, and feeling a “violent dislike” at the general atmosphere and presence of the Madame’s young son, Rays feels “alone and a little sorry for himself.” Jake easily finds comfort in the arms of one of the women, while an envious Ray acknowledges that he wishes just for “this night” he could be Jake (194). Ray admits, early on, that “he could not pick up love easily on the street as Jake.” Yet, he wishes that “love” could perhaps “appease this unwavering angel of wakefulness,” as he attempts to sleep in the crowded, bed-bug ridden sleeping quarters. Instead of being able to sleep, Ray hopes that by inhabiting the space of memory he can cure his insomnia. From his sleeping cot Ray “flung himself, across void and water, back home. Home thoughts, if you can make them soft and sweet and misty-beautiful enough, can sometimes snare sleep.” Ray imagines the “front of the house he had lived in,” “all of the flowering things he loved,” and “slender, tall, fur-frouned ferns, majestic cotton trees, stately bamboos creating a green grandeur in the heart of space...”(152-153). Despite his imaginative efforts, sleep “remained cold and distant” as he is again confronted with the crowded reality of the sleeping quarters. The highly unpopular, and curmudgeonly, chef acts as a catalyst for Ray to explore his discomfort with being grouped with these men. Ray “fixed his eyes on the offensive bug-bitten bulk of the chef. These men claimed kinship with him. They were black like him. Man and nature had put them in the same race. ..They were all chain-ganged together and he was counted as one link. Yet he loathed every soul in that great barrack-room, except Jake. Race...Why should he have

and love a race?" (154). Ray's attempts to answer his own question will proceed from his own deconstruction of what it means to claim, and be a citizen of, a nation.

In these passages, Ray expresses that he is "conscious of being black and impotent" (154). The sexual implications of this description mask the extent to which this feeling of impotence is not a physiological condition, but one born from Ray's conscious considerations of the meaning of imperialism and exile, and, more specifically, the loss of Haiti's independence. Even when Haiti was "floundering uncontrolled," Ray felt "proud to be the son of a free nation" (155). Despite his sense that races "and nations were things like skunks, whose smells poisoned the air of life," Ray was once proud "to be the son of a free nation. He used to feel condescendingly sorry for those poor African natives; superior to ten millions of suppressed Yankee "coons." Now he was just one of them and he hated them for being one of them...." (153-155). The caveat to this new racial reality is Ray's assertions that he can still lay claim to another language, literature, and, also, imagine that Haiti will, one day, be free of imperialism:

But he was not entirely one of them, he reflected. He possessed another language and literature that they knew not of. And some day Uncle Sam might let go of his island and he would escape from the clutches of that magnificent monster of civilization and retire behind the natural defenses of his island, where the steam-roller of progress could not reach him. Escape he would. He had faith. He had hope. But, oh, what would become of that great mass of black swine, hunted and cornered by slaving white canaille! Sleep! oh, sleep! Down Thought! (155)

Ray's repulsion at his circumstances does not dissuade a new impulse; it does not counter the sense of obligation born from the very contact that he abhors. The sting of imperialism, the dissociative effects it has on Ray as exile, also produces a new concern for the "great mass of black swine, hunted and cornered by slaving white canaille." The language, of this passage, suggests that Ray's sense of responsibility is accompanied by a contingent perception of the inherent inferiority, and passivity, of the black masses. Even further, the "magnificent monster of civilization" and the "steam-roller of progress" have already produced their effects, and Ray

seems to understand that the island, which he so often escapes to in moments of revelry, will not offer him a location to retire; it will not be a place to escape history, just as the rural South is unable to do the same for Helga Crane. Moreover, his consciousness has been impacted to the extent that thought “was not a beautiful and reassuring angel, a thing of soothing music and light laughter and winged images glowing with the rare colors of life. No. It was suffering, horribly real” (155).

The infatuation with “great races” and “big nations” is persuasive for Ray, as he attests that there “must be something mighty inspiriting in being the citizen of a great strong nation.” Yet, for Ray, this is predicated on being a “white citizen of a nation” who can, from this racial subject position, “say bold, challenging things like a strong man. Something very different from the keen ecstatic joy a man feels in the romance of being black. Something the black man could never feel nor quite understand” (154). In this passage, race produces different paths to citizenship, manhood, and, even, speech. In Ray’s musing, despite never being able to “feel nor quite understand” citizenship as a white citizen, there is still a “keen ecstatic joy a man feels in the romance of being black,” an articulation that remains to be heard. Ray’s sense of the profundity of ethnic and linguistic difference shifts significantly, here, as he prioritizes, within his new environment, black and white difference over his Haitian identity. The realities of race-defined class difference underscore this black/white binary. After being disturbed by the half-naked chef snoring, Ray is brought back “to the filthy fact of the quarters that the richest railroad in the world had provided for its black servitors.” Ray then “looked up at Jake, stretched at full length on his side, his cheek in his right hand, sleeping peacefully, like a tired boy after hard playing, so happy and sweet and handsome.” Jake’s sleeping body, his innocence, and the undercurrent of attraction between the two men, mediates Ray’s disturbed conscious. Ray, also, projects that Jake has an ability to transcend the existential dilemmas produced by

race and class. Ray in imitation of his friend takes all of his Jake's drugs and begins to sleep, then dream, and, ultimately, hallucinate another reality.

Immediately he was back home again. His father's house was a vast forest full of blooming hibiscus and mimosas and giant evergreen trees. And he was a gay humming-bird, fluttering and darting his long needle beak into the heart of a bell-flower. Suddenly he changed into an owl flying by day...Howard University was a prison with white warders . . . Now he was a young shining chief in a marble palace; slim, naked negresses dancing for his pleasure; courtiers reclining on cushions soft like passionate kisses; gleaming-skinned black boys bearing goblets of wine and obedient eunuchs waiting in the offing . . . (157-158).

Ray imagines himself as “a blue bird in flight and a blue lizard in love. And life was all blue happiness. Taboos and terrors and penalties were transformed into new pagan delights, orgies of Orient-blue carnival...” (158). The drug-induced escapist fantasy moves Ray from his homeland to the rigidity of higher education to Orientalist fantasies, a kaleidoscope of imagery gesturing towards the hopes, and desires of Ray, and the type of romance of race that he hopes to write.

The train, as a contained homo-social space and site of contingent labor, cannot be sustained. Ray, also, cannot bear to maintain a life in Harlem. His discontentment with Harlem is prompted by his sense that he feels, acutely, the general emotions of his race; like Helga Crane, Ray perceives, and empathetically internalizes, the extremes of racial experience that he observes:

Maybe his own being was something of a touchstone of the general emotions of his race. Any upset—at terror-breathing, Negro-baiting headline in a metropolitan newspaper or the news of a human bonfire in Dixie—could make him miserable and despairingly despondent like an injured child.” At the same “any flash of beauty or wonder might lift him happier than a god. It was the simple, lovely touch of life that charmed and stirred him most ... (265-266).

Ray vacillates between feelings of hatred towards Harlem with its “brutality, gang rowdyism, promiscuous thickness. Its hot desires,” but he also revels in the “rich bloodred color of it! The warm accent of its composite voice, the fruitiness of its laughter, the trailing rhythm of its

“blues” and the improvised surprises of its jazz” (267). While enticed by the aural and aesthetic qualities of Harlem life, Ray concludes that if he is to ever write, he must leave Harlem. And like Helga Crane, this sentiment, is expressed through a desire to avoid the entrapments of normative family life. It is manifested through Ray’s desire to escape a future life with his girl Agatha.

Agatha enters *Home to Harlem* in substitution for Ray, as a caretaker to Jake, who has been rendered ill as a consequence of his *excesses*. Agatha is described as a “rich brown girl, with soft amorous eyes,” and she brings with her a bag of oranges and a “charming little bouquet of violets,” when she checks on the incapacitated Jake (208-209). Upon first encountering Agatha, Jake notes Agatha’s *difference*, a culturally and educationally mitigated refinement which stands in sharp contrast to the other women who people the novel. The presence of Agatha allows for the first glimpse into Jake’s family background, as Agatha’s “simple self-assurance and charm” triggers Jake to remember his “little sister down home in Petersburg.” Jake muses that his sister “might have turned out something like this ef she’d ‘a’ had a chance to talk English like in books and wear class-top clothes. Nine years sence I quite home. She must be quite a li’l woman now herself” (210). Due to his absence, Jake cannot be sure how his sister has “turned out,” but the rigid dichotomy of respectable black womanhood versus prostitute, presupposes that Jake’s sister would fall into one of these categories. Notably, Jake who has throughout the novel, bragged about his English made coat, constructs a relationship between book knowledge, and desirable self-presentation through proper speech and wardrobe.

While Jake wishes for his sister to belong to the same category of black womanhood as Agatha, Agatha longs for the life of Jake and Ray, expressing to Jake her desire to travel. She explains:

But there's something marvelous about meeting people for a little while and serving them and never seeing them again. It's romantic. You don't have that awful personal everyday contact that domestic workers have to get along with. If I was a man and had to be in service. I wouldn't want better than the railroad. (209-211)

Agatha desires contingent service, without the roots that bind black women to the “awful” quotidian aspects of the labor that they most often do. Her certitude that these migrations between people and places are romantic mimics Ray's language, which seeks to expose through art the inherent romance that he believes lies at the center of black life and culture. In direct contrast, Ray describes Agatha as “acting wistfully.” In language, notably similar to Helga Crane's pronouncements, Ray fears the “inevitable outcome of meeting that subtle wistful yearning halfway. Soon he would become one of the contented hogs in the pigpen of Harlem, getting ready to litter little black piggies.” Ray longs to be like Jake, “to hitch up for a short while and be irresponsible. But he and Agatha were slaves of the civilized tradition...” (263). Ray is bound by conservatism, as a slave “of the civilized tradition,” he cannot express his desire for Agatha freely, but he is also motivated to rebel against “respectable” strictures that would prevent him from leaving Harlem and fulfilling his call to write the romance of black life.

He was afraid that someday the urge of the flesh and the mind's hankering after the pattern of respectable comfort might chase his high dreams out of him and deflate him to the contented animal that was a Harlem nigger strutting his stuff. “No happy-nigger strut for me,” he would mutter, when the feeling for Agatha worked like a fever in his flesh. He saw destiny working in her large, dream-sad eyes, filling them with the passive softness of resignation to life, and seeking to encompass and yoke him down as just one of the thousand niggers of Harlem. And he hated Agatha, and for escape, wrapped himself darkly in self-love. (264)

Ray cannot understand that Agatha's yearnings go beyond domesticity. In comparison to what the earlier passages tell us about Agatha's own thoughts, Ray, and Jake as well, misread Agatha. Ray describes Agatha's desire for him as an anchor, as a means to tie him to a banal life of respectability within the confines of Harlem life. Despite Ray and Jay's inability to understand her desires, Agatha's appearance with the novel offers a fleeting glimpse into the consciousness

of a woman within the text, who undoubtedly yearns for mobility and meaning in a manner similar to the central protagonists of the novel.

Jake's brief encounter with Agatha signifies another shift in narrative tone, similar to the episodes on the train; it inspires Jake to seek the same "type" of woman. Re-asserting the difference between Agatha and other black women, he comes to understand "why Ray is so scornful of them easy ones." Agatha's departure infuses the passage with a heightened-language of romanticized yearning, a language previously used in the sections depicting Ray's conscious. After Agatha's departure, Jake "gazed at the gray door. It seemed a shining panel of gold through which a radiant vision had passed." Jake pines for a lover like Agatha and has another moment of familial remembrance. "I s'pose it's killing sweet to have some'n loving you up thataway. Some'n real fond o'you for you own self lak—jest lak how mah mammy useter love pa and do everything foh him before he done took and died off without giving no notice..." (212). Despite Agatha's expression of unease with her life in Harlem, which emerges from her feeling of stasis, Jake's fantasies still center on domestic scenes of male dependence on female service. As in the initial pages of the novel, the brown woman's bodies acts as a resting place, a location where one could escape the pretenses of outside life, a place where one could lay his "curly head between her brown breasts and be fondled and be the spoiled child that every man loves sometimes to be when he is all alone with a woman" (212). He admits the small "cocky pleasure" he experiences when he brags "of his conquests to the fellows around the bar." But after encountering Agatha, he admits that "it would be a thousand times nicer to have a little brown woman of his own to whom he could go home and be his simple self with." (212). It is because of the lack of taboo, and institutionalization, within his life that Jake can, imagine, unlike Ray, a space for sensuality without domestic entrapment.

The second part of the novel concludes with Ray's decision to leave Harlem, to work as a mess boy aboard a freighter despite Jake's warning that the "sea is hell and when you hits shore it's same life all ovah." Ray agrees with Jake's assessment of life at sea by explaining that Goethe expressed a similar sentiment in *Werther*. Provoked by his inability to recognize the literary reference, Jake expresses a longing to be educated, only to be met with Ray's displeasure at the prospect. Jake envisions that through education he could connect his biological family—his sister to Ray— and through this union create another reality for his real and constructed kin.

Ef I was edjucated, I could understand things better and be proper-speaking like you is. ...And I mighta helped mah li'l sister to get edjucated, too (she must be a li'l' woman, now,) and she would be nice-speaking like you' sweet brown, good enough foh you to hitch up with. Then we could all settle down and make money like edjucated people do, instead a you gwine off to throw you'self away on some lousy dinghy and me chasing around all the time lak a hungry dawg. (273)

It can be argued that Jake evokes his sister as a surrogate for his own unvoiced desires, for moments before he had like "a black Pan out of the word looked into Ray's eyes with a frank savage affection" (272). Whether this desire is explicitly voiced or simply suggested, Ray and Jake's bond of instruction cannot be authenticated through formal education, as Ray wishes that he could, in fact "get rid" of his "little education" and go lose himself "in some savage culture in the jungles of Africa." Ray declares: "I am a misfit... with my little education and constant dreaming, when I should be getting the nightmare habit to hog in a whole lot of dough like everybody else in this country" (274). With his inability to reconcile his intellectual daydreaming with life in Harlem, Ray parts ways with Jake, as Ray leaves the next afternoon on a freighter. Yet, Ray's romance of black life remains allusive, unspoken, because the text, while giving us shimmers of romanticized blackness, of color and beauty, abruptly cuts these scenes with images of conflict and violence, and offers meditative pauses on the very construction of blackness, itself.

The final part of the novel opens with spring in Harlem, and it is in these culminating moments that the impact of Jake's instruction under Ray is explored through insight into Jake's, altered, consciousness. In place of a Harlem of flashy colors and loud sound, the spring in Harlem section opens with a scenic portrait of the changing season. Jake ventures out of Harlem into "the near neighborhood of the Bronx" where he observes, instead of a "teeming" Harlem, "frame houses and open lots and people digging" (279). Jake sits down "upon a mound thick-covered with dandelions" and his relaxation among the flowers facilitates the narration of poetic passages, where it is observed that "common little things were glorious there under the tender spring grass." In place of an exploration of Jake's virility as emerging from his taboo-free *primitivism*, the passage instead portrays Jake's sexuality as a crucial factor in his development; it is represented as a grasping towards beauty and human connection.

There are hours, there are days, and nights whose sheer beauty overwhelm us with happiness, that we seek to make even more beautiful by comparing them with rare human contact.... It was a day like this we romped in the grass...a night as soft and intimate as this on which we forgot the world and ourselves. ... Hours of pagan abandon, celebrating ourselves . . . (280)

While Ray refuses to concede to his sensual desire, the exploration of Jake's desire gives these passages find their lyrical voice. During his respite in this naturalistic setting Jake posits that "A day like this feels like her" (281), a metaphor which reminds him of his quest to find his Baltimore brown. He concludes that with his Baltimore brown he "could make a hallelujah picnic outa a day like this" (281), and again seeks to reunite with her. His lyrical feeling is disrupted by the violence within Harlem; a violence which often emerges from tensions over sexual relationships and love triangles. It is evident that Jake will, like Ray, need to leave Harlem; this is a fact observed through his inability to wear the "fine gray English suit" and his sense and feeling that, like Helga Crane's rejection of Americanization, the "American suit did not fit him so well" (288). Eventually finding his brown, her real name revealed to be Felice,

Jake finds that he, too, must fight his friend Zeddy for Felice, which involves Jake out maneuvering Zeddy by pulling a gun to revile Zeddy's knife. After the altercation Jake feels "infinitely disgusted with himself to think that he had just been moved by the same savage emotions as those vile, vicious, villainous white men who, like hyenas and rattlers, had fought, murdered, and clawed the entrails out of black men over the common, commercial flesh of women. ... (328).

In recounting the events that led up to the race riot in the East End, Jake's desire to be with Felice, to be a man who loves "love for love's sake," (280) is casted as a critically divergent path from the violence he critiques. Zeddy, during the argument over Felice, reveals that Jake had deserted from the military, while in France; Jake explains to Felice "They didn't seem to want us niggers foh no soldiers" (331). Felice offers that she is willing to "desert" with him, offering that it will be safer for them to flee together to Chicago. Hazel Carby reads Jake's relationship with Felice as positioning him to be a member of an "emergent black middle class" as he successfully evolves to meet "urban codes of masculinity." In this context "urban black women are used as both the means by which male protagonist will achieve or fail to achieve social mobility and as signs of various possible threats to the emergence of the wholesome black masculinity necessary for the establishment of an acceptable black male citizenship in the American social order." Felice is moved "from the " position of prostitute to a figure of wholesome sexuality," which, in Carby's argument makes Jake's journey " a journey of back masculinity in formation, a sort of *Pilgrim's Progress* in which a number of threatening embodiments of the female and the feminine have to be negotiated." <sup>123</sup> Within this interpretive context, Ray's departure is another means to note his immigrant status, a way to reiterate his refusal to be made a citizen within the American social order. It is true that both Ray and Jake's

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<sup>123</sup> Carby in "Policing" 747-749.

construction of black masculinity are enacted through negations and revisions of black female intellectual and sexual desire. Yet, Jake exits the narrative, with Felice, as a military deserter, as essentially an outlaw, a position which calls into question his status within a larger scheme of American citizenship. Felice, indeed, facilitates a marginal space of black masculinity for Jake, although their relationship remains illicit.

McKay's novel, like Larsen's *Quicksand*, offers no tidy resolution for characters who navigate the complex terrain of immigrant status, education and the politics of black respectability and uplift. Sexuality and reproduction emerge as central themes within these narratives, which like numerous discourses of education and intellectual, during the Progressive Era, drew connections between African American educational progress, and the need to restrict exhibitiv displays of black sexuality and desire. In the face of anxieties about race purity, national borders and miscegenation, Larsen and McKay present characters whose immigrant, and marginal status, provide alternative insights, and perspectives, that critique and challenge conservative discourses of both citizenship and black instruction. While characters like Helga and Ray illuminate the struggle of black educators to reconcile educational ideology with their lived realities, McKay's Jake emerges as an unlikely student illuminating, through lyrical prose, the potentials of a pedagogy of embodiment.

Chapter Three: “The Child who is a mirror:” Civil Rights Fiction, School Desegregation, and  
the Construction of the Dissident Child<sup>124</sup>

My first lesson in how to live as a Negro came when I was quite small. We were living in Arkansas. Our house stood behind the railroad tracks. Its skimpy yard was paved with black cinders. Nothing green ever grew in that yard. The only touch of green we could see was far away, beyond the tracks, over where the white folks lived. But cinders were good enough for me, and I never missed the green growing things.

Richard Wright, *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow*

When I was six years old, the civil rights movement came knocking at the door. It was 1960, and history pushed in and swept me up in a whirlwind. Ruby Bridges, *Through My Eyes*

Thulani Davis’s first novel, *1959*, begins with its narrator, and protagonist, Katherine “Willie” Tarrant offering an elegy for the black shore town that acts as a location for the events of the novel. The novel concerns itself with the events of its titular year, when the black inhabitants of Turner, Virginia contemplate and attempt to actualize a plan for school desegregation. Structurally, the novel is bookmarked by the adult voice of Katherine “Willie” Tarrant, who grapples to make sense of the year she turned 12 years old and became a civil rights activist. The introduction, of *1959*, reads as a post script to the community’s activism and positions the novel as a historically expansive tale of cultural and spatial disjuncture.

*1959*’s portrayal of desegregation, of family dispersal and border crossing, begins with the arrival of Africans on the shores of Willie’s seaside town. The descendants of the town are

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<sup>124</sup> The “child who is a mirror” is a line from the poem “Something About You” by *Jessica Hagedorn*. In the poem Hagedorn explicitly references both Ntozake Shange and Thulani Davis. Shange includes the lines of the poem as an epigraph to *Betsey Brown*. Davis, Shange, and Hagedorn worked together in the San Francisco based multidisciplinary art non-profit Kearny Street Workshop.

likened to “nomads” who “move on from one of their weather, disassembled villages.” Willie expounds that these nomads, dislocated over “the long stretches of savannah now turned to desert” can “make themselves heard by means you would call supernormal.” Willie narrates: “my tribe never practiced any magic arts, but storytellers all, they cling very close to my ear and tell softly what I have forgotten or have never know” (3). These last words –the act of telling what is not known- offers a paradox, but it is also an idea which aptly names the counter-intuitive, and counter-institutional, knowledge that permeates black educational narratives. In these narratives, education is not bound by institutionally sanctioned knowledge, instead they emphasize extra-institutional and supplemental meditations on education.

Willie’s adult voice performs an interventionist action at the onset of Davis’s novel. More specifically, while numerous representations of the mid-twentieth century fight against institutional segregation center ideological conflict between conservative and violent white supremacist tactics and black educational aspiration, Davis’s narrative centers the historical meaning of racialized educational spaces and capital in our understanding of institutional desegregation. In Davis’s account, desegregation did not signify a dismantling of white supremacist logic of racial segregation, but instead, in the name of commercial progress, willed the erasure of history, of black cultural memory connected to the landscapes of the town. The “uncertainty of freedom’s first days” meant that “the people built no monuments. A few bulldozers could take down their ancient wooden bungalows sitting close to rosebushes and dandelion weeds on the low-lying seashore” (3). Willie narrates: “When, a hundred years later, the town was razed, as if to erase the minds of those who tried to claim it, all the sounds and voices of the place were torn free from where they were sheltered.” In Willie’s elegiac telling “mansions were kept as part of the town’s history,” yet she provocatively avers that “history was ripped up and set loose to cry through the cracks of boarded juke joints and hair salons in tacky

storefront” (4). In this construction, the town’s history, manifested through the preservation of mansions, is juxtaposed to another history, an aural history that cries through the cracks of abandoned artifices and “tacky” storefronts:

Still, the new municipal building, the parking lots and garden apartments could not revive a place that had died when all the front porches were over and all the buried treasures were unearthed. The old socks and flat tires, the broken picture frames and lye pots, the slave “dog tags,” the Sunday school certificates and stillborn babies and broken promises shared their secrets when the nights seemed so quiet and a thin fog sat low in the sea-level streets. (4-5)

Davis’s narrative points to these historical artifacts, although rife with signifiers, as being painfully, and systemically, decontextualized. Understanding that these objects cry for contextualization, Willie continues: “I still return to root and forage . . . I am the last of my line. I return to curl up in sun there because I know the sound of the birds, the smell of the tide when it has gone out” (5).<sup>125</sup>

Ntozake Shange’s *Betsey Brown* tells the story of school desegregation as black children are bused to white schools in St. Louis, Missouri. The central protagonist of the novel is the adolescent daughter, Betsey, the daughter of Greer Brown, a doctor, and Jane Brown, a psychiatric social worker, Betsey lives in a multigenerational home with her three siblings, a cousin, and her maternal grandmother. Despite the presence of three adults within the home, Shange narrates the silences within the home between children and adults, and more, specifically, suggests that the lofty ideals of authoritative adults fail to provide meaningful instruction. Shange shares Davis’s engagement with the (physical) cartographies of race: her novel is characterized by a lyrical rendering of the St. Louis, imagined, primarily, from Betsey’s

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<sup>125</sup> These opening pages are reminiscent of the introduction to Toni Morrison’s *Sula*: “In that place where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. . . . It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called The Bottom” (Morrison 3). Gloria Hull remarks that within *1959* we find “Toni Morrison echoes passim” that speaks to Morrison’s “immense influence” on a generation of writers (5-6).

experience of its shifting meaning on the threshold of desegregation. The city's increasing complexity and malleability is mirrored by Betsey's shifting subjectivity as it is affected by the changes in her institutional and informal education.

This chapter defines adolescent subjectivity as a critical narrative device for understanding the shape of desegregation politics. The prominence of children's voices, within civil rights fiction, suggests that children can write a different narrative of their political agency and participation in school desegregation politics, one that moves beyond both a damage thesis of black childhood, and surface representations of black children's innocence. *1959* and *Betsey Brown* offer a cogent critique of Jim Crow from, and because of, a child-centered interiority. Situated at the interstices of segregation and desegregation, Davis and Shange uses their protagonists' burgeoning engagement with imagination and language to interpret the complexities of the threshold space of desegregation. Willie Tarrant and Betsey Brown exists within the context of school desegregation activism –a space that politicizes them, yet, also, constricts them to specific standards of adolescence, propriety and family.

In *1959*, the objects that are unhinged by the “razing” of black spaces can be given meaning through the interventions of the storytellers who, in an effort to make sense of post-Brown realities and events, must collapse the lines between fiction and non-fiction, the experienced and the imagined, the historical and the present. In Davis's novel, the great leader narrative of the classical civil rights movement<sup>126</sup> is decentered by Willie's voice, as Davis invites us to inhabit Willie's voice as an interpretive location for memorializing civil rights activism. Shange imagines Betsey's critical gaze as offering an expansive portrait of the city. Both novels

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<sup>126</sup> In “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past” Jacqueline Dowd Hall makes an argument for a long civil rights movement by connecting the “classical phase” of the 1950s and 1960s to the labor rights movement—what she defines as civil rights unionism— of the 1940s. Dowd Hall also critiques the diminishment of the black political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s; she writes that the black political movements of the 1960s and 1970s are commonly misunderstood as an abandonment of the integrationist appeals of the classical period.

assert that the contextualization of desegregation project is inextricable from an engagement with the intra-communal and domestic meanings of gender and class.

The prevailing narrative of school desegregation is reminiscent of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's sense that "remembrance is always a form of forgetting, and the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement—distilled from history and memory, twisted by ideology and political contestation, and embedded in heritage tours, museums, public rituals, textbooks, and various artifacts of mass culture—distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals."<sup>127</sup> Educational integration is an on-going project, a project that critically engages with the meaning of racial capitalism, defined by Dowd- Hall as "racial domination compounded with economic practices."<sup>128</sup> Noting the maintenance of structures of racial capitalism, autobiographical and fictional narratives of school desegregation often resists triumphant proclamations about the end of educational segregation. These narratives speak to the complicated legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

As legal scholar F. Michael Higginbotham argues, *Brown v. Board of Education's* complicated legacy emerges from the failures of the two mandates that comprised the decision. Decided in 1954, *Brown I* declared that legally mandated segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. *Brown I* rejected the "separate but equal doctrine established in "Plessy" on the basis that segregated schools were "inherently unequal." In 1955, *Brown II* asserted that black children had the right to attend a desegregated school, called for local school boards to "implement the desegregation remedy," under the supervision of local federal courts" and famously declared that these actions were to be done "with all deliberate speed." Higginbotham opines that *Brown I* failed to "address long -held notions of white superiority" and, while

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<sup>127</sup> Dowd-Hall 1233.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid 1243.

prohibiting government-mandated racial segregation, allowed “white choices of isolation and privilege” to remain largely in place. *Brown II* failed to “require immediate desegregation” and consequently allowed “states to make exceptions to desegregation.” <sup>129</sup>

In addition, as I will discuss later, the over emphasis on black children’s psychological damage in arguments against educational segregation eschewed both the economic and spatial realities of segregation and white superiority. The memorialization of *Brown v. the Board of Education* as a finite occurrence that, within the span of a few years, integrated educational institutions has resulted in the overshadowing of the actual long history of school desegregation and obscured lingering realities of segregation within educational spaces. Dowd Hall describes the most significant movements towards school integration as occurring after 1954. She explains that while “the *Brown* decision and the rock-throwing mobs of Little Rock occupy pride of place in the popular narrative of school desegregation in the South” the “move from token to comprehensive school desegregation in the South” took place “not during the turbulent short civil rights movement, but in the 1970s, after the media spotlight had swung away from the region.” <sup>130</sup> The literature explored in this chapter conveys an overarching sense of incompleteness—a sense that the authors map through the entangled experiences of desegregation and adolescence.

### A Call to Remember

Civil rights fiction about school desegregation not only tells a post-Brown story; these texts, also gesture towards a political project of the present, one that continues to engage with the construction of the civil rights movement and its participants. Children’s participation in the

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<sup>129</sup> Higginbotham 122.

<sup>130</sup> Dowd-Hall 1255.

Civil Rights Movement was a highly contested issue. While black parents expressed trepidation at exposing their children to violence, some white commentators used the presence of children to question the moral imperative of the movement. Despite conflict over their participation, as Martin Berger suggests, “children—and their photographic representations—stood at the heart of white American conceptions of civil rights.” The participation of children “catalyzed otherwise unremarkable protests into emotional and seemingly transformative events.” The juxtaposition of black children’s perceived innocence against the raw brutality and aggression of white citizens and law enforcers was so jarring that they were often seen as the “perfect victims,” Berger avers that, because of this status, children “fit into the dominant racial dynamic that deemed blameless and submissive nonwhite victims to be most worthy of white concern.” In order to maintain this fiction of black submission, even in protest, adult protesters were also imagined to have “childlike qualities.”<sup>131</sup>

Notions of innocence constructed through renderings of black childhood are still activated in the national memorialization of the Civil Rights Movement, and school desegregation, more specifically. Whether, as in Davis’s *1959*, the author presents a fictional adult narrator that remembers school desegregation by *looking back* to assess the after-effects, or, as in the case of Shange’s *Betsey Brown*, the author gives a slice of life portrait of an adolescent swept into the history of school desegregation, both narratives explore and engage with the politics of remembrance. These closely autobiographical texts, like Toni Morrison’s *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (2004), fictionalize children’s subjectivities and memories. The move to children’s interiorities coalesces with Morrison’s larger body of work which, as Cheryl Wall argues, “reveals a preoccupation with history as lived experience.” (86). Wall writes:

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<sup>131</sup> Berger 98.

Using the term “literary archeology,” Morrison describes her method as journeying to a site and surveying the remains that were left behind. Through this process, she can “reconstruct the world that these remains imply.” The catalyst for the imaginative act is an image, a picture that enables “an exploration of an interior life that was not written” and the “revelation of a kind of truth” (112) She emphasizes that unlike some writers, the approach that is “most productive and trustworthy” for her “is the recollection that moves from the image to the text” (115).<sup>132</sup>

Divided into three parts, “The Narrow Path,” “The Open Gate”, and “The Wide Road” *Remember* is written with children in mind, aiming to build bridges between its perceived child reader, and the photographed children who appear throughout the book. Morrison seizes on the prominent role that photography had in the media construction of the Civil Rights Movement, and photography’s continued use in the memorializing of the civil rights movement and more specifically, school integration. Morrison writes in the introduction that “this book is about you” and asks her readers repeatedly to remember, as if the history that she will explore in the subsequent pages are not simply events of the past, but are memories that constitute those who read. Although, she notes that “none of that (history) happened to you, and questions “Why offer memories you do not have?” when remembering “can be painful, even frightening,” Morrison insists that her readers remember. Remembrance, here, is defined as laborious and emotionally wrought, as Morrison continues to situate “recollection as the serious concentration of thought.”<sup>133</sup>

Morrison asserts that remembrance is a collective endeavor, and more pointedly, that all students, “are a part” of the story of school integration. As William Fitzhugh Brundage articulates in the introduction to *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, the “remembered past and debates about it have a deep significance for both

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<sup>132</sup> Wall in *Worrying the Line* 94.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid 110.

public life and regional identity.”<sup>134</sup> While Brundage focuses on “a social history of remembering in the South,” his assertion that “personal memories” are “shaped by social circumstances and hence private memory imperceptibly incorporates collective memory,” and that these memories “are learned, inherited, or, at the very least, informed by a common stock of social memory,” is apropos for understanding the means by which Morrison, and other writers, use narratives of individual experience and memory to dissect and engage with the national memory of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>135</sup> Brundage defines black countermemory as pushing against “the fixed images of the past,” having far reaching implications for how we construct, and reinterpret, visual and written manifestations of the Civil Rights Movement. Following Brundage’s terminology about the political use of memory, I would argue that predominant images and narratives of black children of the Civil Rights Movement, have in many ways attempted to render their “physical form” as permanently legible, in ways that attempt to defy the “transitory” nature of both historical memory and childhood. Brundage notes that memories are “transitory”, yet “people yearn to make them permanent by rendering them in physical form.” Morrison’s narrative choice to fictionalize children’s voices demonstrates how an engagement with collective memory often reveals an “inherent dialectic between stability and innovation.”<sup>136</sup> A reinterpretation of children’s role in civil right politics most often destabilizes adult centered narratives of political engagement and activism.

Morrison’s text interrupts the traditional means by which photo collections are compiled and narrated. In lieu of photos supplemented by captions that offer historical detail– who, what,

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<sup>134</sup> Brundage in *Where these Memories Grow* 2.

<sup>135</sup> Brundage derives his definition of “collective memory” from the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs who coined the term in the 1920s. Collective memory focuses “on the conscious memory expressed in social contexts.” It consists of those shared remembrances that identify “a group, giving it a sense of its past and defining its aspirations for the future” (3-4).

<sup>136</sup> Ibid 5, 8.

and where—Morrison makes a decision to “enliven the trip” by imagining “the thoughts and feelings of some of the people in the photographs” (Preface). The historical details of each photo are placed in the appendix, as Morrison instead takes on the voice of the young people in the photographs, and speaks from a subjective I. Morrison fictionalizes the autobiographical self in her text, marginalizing historical detail, for the imagined voice of the child who is not naïve, but is, instead, an instructor and interpreter. Richard Wright’s *The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch* (1937) is exemplary of how narratives of racial segregation uses a language of instruction to center the performance of an autobiographical self. Wright’s autobiographical “I” emerges from the lessons of Jim Crow—his instruction in the “ethics” of Jim Crow are mapped on the same axis as his struggles to produce an independent self, to become a writing subject, who through linguistic imagery memorializes the hard lessons of segregation. Autobiographical voicing as a means to present and critique Jim Crow is not new, yet the plethora of autobiographical works about the experience of school integration point to both the continuance of this impulse, and also presses us to contemplate how desegregation politics revises and (re)contextualizes child and adolescent subjectivities.

Morrison features ubiquitous images of school desegregation, Elizabeth Eckford facing a Little Rock mob alone in 1957, a small Ruby Bridges being escorted out of her New Orleans school in 1960, as well as other images of unnamed black students. A picture of an angry white mob—opposing the passing of an integration law in Montgomery, Alabama in 1963— is juxtaposed against the defiant faces of black children entering their new school in Queens, New York in 1959. Images of violence and aggression are intercut by tentative gestures between newly integrated students: two girls, one white, one black, sit across from each other, the captions reads “I think she likes me, but how can I tell? What will I do if she hates me?” (23). In this image, and in others, either student could be saying these words. By “The Wide Road” the

text broadens the frame to include other images of Jim Crow, as well as resistance to Jim Crow laws. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is placed in the center of the final section, one image from Boston, Massachusetts in 1965, the other from the March on Washington in 1963; the caption for these two images breaks the subjective voice and, instead, reads “Then the loneliness melts away” (64-65). The final image of the collection is that of two adolescent girls, hands touching, interlocked, as they peak out of a school bus window. The caption underneath this final image of adolescent girlhood and interracial friendship is “Anything can happen. Anything at all. See?”

The historical citation in the back of the book explains that this final image of school integration is from Boston Massachusetts in 1975, “after local unrest over using busing to desegregate the schools.” While the central content of *Remember* offers a progressive narrative that collapses time, the marginalized historical citations detail an expanded portrait of school integration. The expanded portrait underscores the extent to which the story of school desegregation pushes against legal and social frameworks that have, traditionally, attempted to mark integration’s trajectory of progress. Morrison includes in “The Wide Road section” the isolated image of a young student in front of a chalkboard; the chalkboard looms over him, and his back is to us; his face is obscured. The image is startlingly similar to a pre-Brown image of a boy on the floor included in the earlier pages of the book. Both images represent the black student as enveloped by his environment. The photograph of the boy at the chalkboard is cited as dating from a classroom in Washington DC during the late 1980s, a time when media attention increasingly focused on the city as a locus of poverty, violence, and drug-related crimes caused by what was widely identified as the crack epidemic.

In totality, the images of *Remember* span from the 40s to the late 80s; these photographs, although temporally bound by specific places and dates, repeatedly signify on each other. Similar lighting, postures, and compositional gestures reveal the extent to which the

representational aesthetics of school integration often pronounce the concerns of the present through engagement with the politics of the past. The expansive timeline revealed in the appendix offers a supplemental narrative, one that might elude the intended audience, but that exposes the complex nature of writing about educational integration. The imagistic and narrative content of *Remember* conforms to a trajectory of progress, at the same time that its temporal expansiveness challenges declarations of closure concerning the story of educational segregation.

*Remember* ends with a dedication to Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, Addie Mae Collins, and Cynthia Wesley, the four young girls who Morrison explains “died in the racist bombing of their Birmingham church on September 15, 1963.” On the dedication page, Morrison writes: “Things are better now. / Much, much better. / But remember why and please/ Remember us.” The images of the four little girls who died in Birmingham are separated from the text; their collective voices speak, “please remember us,” a plea that reiterates the primary instruction of the text. Removed from the other images of children, Morrison isolates the violence of their murder, in many ways, quarantining her central school integration imagery from the haunting legacy of the murder of McNair, Robertson, Collins, and Wesley.

Yet, the inclusion of violence against black children is as pertinent to understanding how, to use the language of historian Wilma King, black children made “the transition from scripted actors to viable activists.”<sup>137</sup> King opines that while the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision represented “hope for the future,” its impact must be understood alongside the “deaths of several black children,” which, together, provided a catalyst for children becoming “civil rights agents.” The 1955 murder of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi and the killings of Collins,

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<sup>137</sup> King in *African American Childhoods* 155.

McNair Robertson and Wesley, in addition to the murders of Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware, acted as a reminder of the “aborted hope for growth and development.”<sup>138</sup> While Birmingham civil rights leaders eventually agreed that young people should participate in demonstrations, children already participated in the Civil Rights Movement “with or without consent from parents and civil rights leaders.” Between the Brown decision and passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, “thousands of black children participated in mass demonstrations, boycotts, and/or school integrations.”<sup>139</sup>

Toni Morrison’s memorialization of the four girls asks that we remember the names of girl victims of racist violence in the United States and is indicative of the gender politics within the civil rights literature read in this chapter. In its entirety, images of black girlhood are abundant in *Remember*. As Kathryn L. Nasstrom opines, in her work on civil rights autobiography, life writers often press the younger generation to remember and often express feelings that the legacy of the civil rights movement is under threat due to the indifference of subsequent generations. These writers offer their life stories to their audience as a means to make a larger history more intimate and recognizable. Within these life narratives, collective memory and self-identification are “tightly bound together,” so that memory becomes the “thread of personal identity.” It is at the personal level that collective memory is sustained by what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall calls “the everyday performance of self.”<sup>140</sup> For Morrison, Davis, and Shange, the performances of self by young girls remain central to the authors’ (re)telling of educational desegregation.

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid 156-157.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid 165-166.

<sup>140</sup> Kathryn L. Nasstrom in “Between Memory and History: Autobiographies of the Civil Rights Movement and the Writing of Civil Rights History” 330-331.

### Constructing Black Children's Interiorities

In the mid-century legal fight against segregation, the social sciences were used to provide compelling arguments about childhood development and, more readily, the impact of segregation on the psychological development of black children. The joining of psychological studies with the educational assessment of black children's learning experiences predated *Brown v. Board of Education*. In the late 1930s, the American Council on Education surveyed black schools in the Deep South and released the report *Growing Up in the Black Belt*. As Peter Irons explains, the report stressed the "psychological impact of Jim Crow" asserting that "the classroom experience has left its mark on these youth." In a 1950 issue of the *Journal of Negro Education*, Benjamin E. Mays, then president of Morehouse College, wrote that the Jim Crow system, with its inevitable consequences of inequality, had "warped the minds and spirits of thousands of Negro Youths." Mays concluded: "It is the rare Negro child who 'comes through perfectly normal and poised under the segregated system.'"<sup>141</sup>

Even before Mays's argument about segregation's impact on the "minds and spirits" of black children, NAACP lawyers had worked to challenge racial segregation within the nation's primary and secondary schools. In the years leading up to the *Brown* decision in 1954, there had been successes in fighting against segregation in universities, law schools, and graduate programs. Early on, Thurgood Marshall's team had concentrated on a legal strategy of pursuing equal funding for black and white schools, with the hopes that the financial burden of educational segregation would eventually lead to its dismantling. This was one of two legal strategies outlined by the Jewish lawyer, Nathan Margold, who had been hired by the NAACP to study Jim Crow laws. In an extensive document, Margold put forth the "equalization" strategy as

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<sup>141</sup>Peter Irons in *Jim Crow's Children: The Broken Promise of the Brown Decision* 40-41.

a method of attack against segregation that would not involve a direct assault on *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The second strategy outlined by Margold would involve arguing against the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision; this strategy asserted that “separate schools could never be equal because segregation imposed a “badge of servitude on black children.”<sup>142</sup> This would become the legal strategy that the NAACP team would use when they presented their case before the Supreme Court.

Criticisms of Jim Crow and race relations coalesced around the “child’s mind” and more narrowly situated segregation as a glitch in development. Frequently, the social-science based arguments against segregation called for the inhabitation of the child’s mind. In the lower court cases<sup>143</sup> which preceded the Supreme Court ruling, social scientists were brought in to describe the adverse effect Jim Crow had on the development of black children. Dr. Kenneth Clark’s, a City College professor, and Columbia University graduate, along with his wife, Mamie Clark’s, oft-cited doll tests were a crucial component of the case against segregation in public schools. The Clarks conducted the doll tests from 1939 through 1947. The experiment asserted that the majority of black children’s preference for a white doll, instead of a black doll, was a direct indicator of the children’s lower self- esteem and internalized sense of racial inferiority due to the experience of Jim Crow and racism.<sup>144</sup> The Clarks published their work in the *Journal of*

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid 52.

<sup>143</sup> *Brown v. BOE* was comprised of cases from five different locations, with each having its own distinct racial composition: Summerton, SC in Clarendon County was 70 percent black but governed by whites. Prince Edward County VA was “racially balanced” with a significant portion of black farmers who owned land; Washington DC with its educated black population; New Castle County, was the most northern; and Topeka Kansas which had a “quarter million students but segregated just a few hundred black children in four elementary schools in Topeka-the state’s capital” ( Irons 131).

<sup>144</sup> For an interesting reading of the doll test experiment see Robin Bernstein’s chapter “The Scripts of Black Dolls” in *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. Bernstein argues that a crucial problem in Clark’s experiment was their “positing of dolls” as solely functioning as “delivery systems for racial concepts.” The Clark’s findings did not account for black children’s experiential knowledge of the “material form of

*Experimental Education* (1939) the *Journal of Social Psychology* (1940), the *Journal of Negro Education* in 1950, and were featured in an *Ebony* article in 1947.<sup>145</sup> In *Briggs v. Elliot* (1951), a case brought against the Summerton, South Carolina school district, Kenneth Clark cited their research to testify that segregation had a “detrimental effect” on the black child’s “concept of his own self-esteem.” Clark asserted that racial segregation caused in the black child “feelings of inferiority, conflict, confusion in his self-image, resentment, hostility towards himself, hostility towards whites, intensification of a desire to resolve his basic conflict by sometimes escaping or withdrawing.”<sup>146</sup> The introduction of psychological concepts was so persuasive that one of the judges on the panel in *Briggs v. Elliot* used a similar language in his dissent. Judge J. Waties Waring asserted that the “humiliation and disgrace of being set aside and segregated” had “an evil and ineradicable effect upon the mental processes of our young which would remain with them and deform their view of life until and throughout their maturity.” Waring used his dissent as a platform to paint a compelling portrait about the relationship between developmental psychology and racism. He explained:

There is absolutely no reasonable explanation for racial prejudice. It is all caused by unreasoning emotional reactions and these are gained in early childhood. Let the little child’s mind be poisoned by prejudice of this kind and it is practically impossible to ever remove these impressions however many years he may have of teaching by philosophers, religious leaders or patriotic citizens. If segregation is wrong then the place to stop it is in the first grade and not in graduate colleges.”<sup>147</sup>

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the doll” within children’s play culture (199). Bernstein contests that the Clarks “represented their findings as transparent revelations of black children’s damaged self-esteem;” she asserts that the tests were, instead, “carefully structured” to ensure that “most children would prefer the white doll” (236). After a close reading of how the sequencing of questioning enabled the dramatic display of black children’s crying, Bernstein concludes that the “Clark doll tests may ultimately prove little about self-esteem,” but, instead tell us a “great deal about how African-American children of the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s thought about racialized play” (239).

<sup>145</sup> Bernstein 235.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid 69.

<sup>147</sup> Quoted in Irons 75.

Waring described racism as having a negative impact on the the development of both black and white children. He warned that racism left an indelible mark, intractable after earlier stages of development. This heightened the urgency of saving children from segregation. The difficulty of removing the “poison” of racism also implied that notions of racial inferiority and superiority were a traceable development flaw. In addition the Clarks work, Louisa Holt, an assistant professor at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, also testified in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* to the negative impact of segregation on black children’s “sense of ego-identity.”<sup>148</sup> Holt’s argument was crucial to the Supreme Court case; her testimony was referenced and qualified by the works of both Clark and Chein in Chief Justice Warren’s majority opinion in *Brown v. BOE*.

Psychologists such as Holt and the Clarks interrogated the damage done to both black and white children and adults and raised new questions about the emotional health of black children within a racist society. Robin Bernstein opines that the Clark’s doll tests aided “not only in the task of legally desegregating,” but also in “culturally desegregating childhood innocence itself.” The Clarks “scripted, through dolls, a spectacle of black children’s pain, they cast black children in the role of “suffering child,” “innocent child,” and therefore “child.”<sup>149</sup> The political and social implications of reclaiming the identity of the “child” for black children should not be diminished, particularly, as the inability to recognize black children as such had very real material, physical, and psychic consequences. Yet, this movement through suffering to innocence to child is a trajectory which, often, continues to emphasize a limited construction of black children’s internal processes and behaviors.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid 129-130.

<sup>149</sup> Bernstein 241.

The recognition of experiences beyond a binary of suffering and innocence allows for a more complex portrait of black children; a portrait that, very necessarily, challenges static notions of race *and* childhood. In one sense, the emphasis on black interiorities, and psycho-development, did not adequately address the structural and spatial maintenance of white supremacy, even in the absence of de jure educational segregation. One must also wonder if this emphasis on the black child's wounded interiority came at the expense of examining how cartographies of racial separatism maintained structures of racial exclusion within educational spaces, a theme that is central within Davis's novel. As Higginbotham compellingly asserts, in the *Brown* decision, the Supreme Court "held the view that the harm from segregation could be undone simply by providing blacks with an opportunity to associate with "the right" whites," regardless of the prejudices those whites exhibited against blacks."<sup>150</sup> The implications of this logic are many fold. First, as Higginbotham notes, white notions of superiority remain unchanged. More implicitly, the emphasis on interactions with the "right whites" has definitive spatial and material consequences within the educational context. It suggests first that predominately white educational spaces must be maintained as a site of instructional aspiration. In a convoluted turn, it constructs these spaces as a site of racial reconciliation for a select few black students, suggesting that access to openly hostile and restrictive environments benefits black students. This type of trial by fire, in the individual stories of black students is, indeed, a recurrent motif. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the interior worlds of black children helps explain why representations of their imaginations and psychic experiences act as sites of political and literary engagement and redressing. Shange and Davis prioritize interiority, but also work to externalize the subjective gaze of their adolescent protagonists, so that the reader

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<sup>150</sup> Higginbotham 121.

witnesses the racial-spatial logics that buttress segregation, as well as the continuance of structures of racial exclusion across time and space.

### Civil Rights Fiction and Dissident Childhoods

Civil rights fiction often disrupts reductive projections of subjectivity onto protestors and deconstructs nostalgic representations of the movement's activists. Children as embodied, as non-innocent, revises the gender and familial representations that entrench black men as the sole progenitors of political discourse, even within seemingly progressive movements. The maintenance of innocence as a criterion for the ideal protestor was a means to concretize an idyllic portrait of the black middle class and to reify black male leadership within domestic and public spaces. Erica R. Edwards suggests that African American literature has been a central location for the interrogation of black political leadership. Edward posits that African American literature has been "over the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the very ground for contesting the prime fiction of black political leadership: that charismatic political leadership is a necessary precondition for survival, progress, political power, and social unity." Rather than proclaiming that African American literature corrects or rectifies, Edwards suggests that African American literature has "historically restaged" the "charismatic scenario" by redressing the "violence of charismatic authority." Black male leadership marks "charisma as authority," and consequently perpetuates an "undemocratic relational structure" used for the (re)inscription of "gender and sexual normativity." Redressing, within African American literature, imagines "a new political style, fabricating new visions for social life."<sup>151</sup> Civil rights fiction "constructs a counterarchive of the post-World War II freedom struggle, composing scenes of disappearance that confront the official story of the civil rights movement as it was constructed, first by

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<sup>151</sup> Edward 33, 20-21, 26.

televisual and print media in the 1950s and 1960s and by popular history in the years that followed.”<sup>152</sup> Christopher Metress makes a similar suggestion about the work of civil rights fiction, asserting that literary discourse has a “cognitive value” in the “production of social memory.” Expanding the “material artifacts of civil rights history” to include fiction interpolates our understanding of the civil rights movement with “powerful, dangerous, and hotly contested meanings.”<sup>153</sup> Civil rights fiction with black children as the central protagonists and narrators of the movement challenges the default male *and* adult centered image and narrative of the civil rights movement. Centralizing the figure of the child/student restages the socio-political and, correlative, aesthetic fields of civil rights narrative and representation.

The fictionalization of the worlds of black children who were active in the movement has representational and cultural power. The precedent to present black children, as incapable of feeling, through literature and material objects, makes more vivid the urgency of complicating black children’s narrative interiorities, of seeing history through their eyes, and of imagining their responses to being made political agents. The politicization of black children in movements against educational segregation calls for black children to engage in political acts, to be central to the fight for full citizenship, while these same children are not given full political agency or power over their representations. Despite this lack of agency, their centrality to political representation and actions undermines the precarious boundaries between adult and child, and destabilizes ownership of the political field. The foundation for this reading of the child within civil rights fiction requires the reader to disregard childhood as an “unspecified abstraction,” and, instead, understand it as a “historically constituted location within a complex web of power

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid 108.

<sup>153</sup> Metress in “Making Civil Rights Harder” 141.

relationships.” Within this context, the child becomes a “signifier in mind, evocative, contradictory, an intervention in public history.”<sup>154</sup>

Literary black childhoods intervene in public history, often, positing that innocence is politically, ideologically, and racially determined. These literary interventions reject innocence as a natural state; they envision education as a space of preparation for political commitment, and, relatedly, as profoundly more important than innate characteristics of innocence in defining what makes the child and childhood important. The child is, explicitly, understood as central to the instructional and political project. The writing of black childhood in much of civil rights fiction engages in “poetical and political interventions into childhoods,” actual and remembered, and “invoke the skillful negotiation” of “various languages, genres, and identities.” The figure of the “disadvantaged” child, conceived synonymously as “black,” is quite often “reified as an object of pity.” In opposition, black women writers have depicted “children’s agency by helping them to become writing subjects.”<sup>155</sup> A priori to imagining the black child figure as a writing subject is both the acknowledgement of, and engagement with, the child’s interior self as a site of valued experience and interpretation.

Civil rights fiction that concentrates on the experiences of the young narratively arches between young adult and historical fiction, between prose and poetry. The use of adolescent girls, in particular, poses “crosswriting” as a central form in narratives of adolescence that memorialize the civil rights movement. Mitzi Myers and U.C. Knoepfelmacher define crosswriting as “a dialogic mix of older and younger voices occurs in text too often read as univocal.” Authors who write for children “inevitably create a colloquy between past and present selves...” Typically an “older writer” gives voice to the young and, consequently, produces

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<sup>154</sup> Mitzi Myers in “The Erotics of Pedagogy” 1-3.

<sup>155</sup> Richard Flynn 163.

intergenerational dialogue.<sup>156</sup> In a 1990 interview, Davis explained that she used the first person narrative in *1959* to replicate the work of civil rights activists, the “one-to-one basis,” where a “person learned from them by being within the vicinity of their voices, hearing them talk.” Within this context, the proximity to Willie’s voice situates the reader as recipient of Willie’s political instruction. Yet, Davis also identifies “many manifestations of storytelling within the book,” which she claims was important for writing “adult stuff that I needed the readers to know that my twelve year old wouldn’t know.”<sup>157</sup> For example, an intimate sexual encounter between adults ruptures the typical discretionary limits of what is included in literature classified as young adult. In her review of the novel, Gloria Hull describes this scene as “intensely rendered but essentially irrelevant.”<sup>158</sup> Both novels brim with an implicit interrogation of the sexual norms that police constructions of children, a questioning that is definitive of adolescent literature. It is the discordant elements of *1959*, the pushing of the boundaries of what can be known by a 12 year old, through interrupting adult interiorities, which query the limits between child and adult, between public politics and private desires and identities.

During periods of societal change, Rachel Falconer observes, there is a “heightened appetite for fictions that focus on the edge of identity,” for the “points of transition and rupture.”<sup>159</sup> Falconer proposes that the “governing chronotype” of much of young adult fiction is the “threshold,” the time space of crises.<sup>160</sup> Within what Falconer terms “crossover young adult

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<sup>156</sup> Myers and Knoepfelmacher in “‘Cross-Writing’ and the Reconceptualizing of Children’s Literary Studies” Vii.

<sup>157</sup> Fleischmann “Interview with Thulani Davis” 56.

<sup>158</sup> Hull “Liberating History” 6.

<sup>159</sup> Falconer in “Young Adult Fiction and the crossover phenomenon” 89.

<sup>160</sup> Falconer theorizes her reading of adolescence through appropriation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of the chronotype and threshold.

fictions” adolescence is situated as a “threshold state” by definition “imperfect, unfinished and radically open.”<sup>161</sup> In this chapter, I am invested in adolescence functioning as a trope of time and space in civil rights fiction about school desegregation. More specifically, it is adolescence as a border position that complexly metaphorizes the threshold space of educational desegregation and its related border crossing. Civil rights fiction, similar to Zoe Trodd’s reading of the movement’s protest literature, is marked by “an aesthetic of spatio-symbolism” that fuses “literal and figurative notions of space” in the fight for “literal, desegregated space” and imagined spaces of freedom. Willie and Betsey like the real “civil rights artists” who “reimagined the spaces of segregated America” draws upon what Trodd identifies as the “abolitionist aesthetic” as they merge “concrete boundaries” with the “abstract boundaries of democratic citizenship.”<sup>162</sup> The adolescent figure, as actor within and symbol of the threshold space of desegregation, mimics citizenship in the making. The adolescent struggle for identity is likened to the collective struggle for full citizenship, even as the meaning, of both citizenship and identity appear elusive and contradictory.

Because the adolescence protagonist is positioned at the cusp of political identity formation her gaze is essential to denaturalizing the politics of segregation and racial inequality. The adolescent critiques notions of black inferiority, and blackness as threat that buttress the politics of segregation. Her perspectives and discoveries are destabilizing forces that render the quotidian violence and performances of racial segregation uncanny and strange. Youth-centered narratives, often, revise the memorialization of school desegregation, by offering a nuanced rendering of the black adolescent, that goes beyond constructions of racial innocence within a civil rights politic of representation. As the adolescent protagonists in *Betsey Brown*

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<sup>161</sup> Falconer 94.

<sup>162</sup> Trodd 223-224.

and 1959 are also burgeoning writers, they use their landscape to imagine other spaces of identity and community that could be sites for alternative visions of political priorities. This alternative vision restages patriarchal politics, not always through a coherent realization of what school integration should mean within the larger context of the civil rights project, but by exploring individual feelings of ambivalence or confusion, and by exposing fractures in totalizing narratives that often silence and exclude.

### Desegregating “The Colored World”: Ntozake Shange’s *Betsey Brown*

Ntozake Shange’s *Betsey Brown* began as a prose poem and has since existed in multiple forms. In 1978, Shange added the story of Betsey Brown to her performance piece, *Boogie Woogie Landscapes*. In 1980, she expanded the prose poem into a play, which she workshopped at the New York Shakespeare Festival. By 1983, the text had gained several songs and Emily Mann joined Shange as a director of play. The play was not immediately produced, and in 1985, when Shange received a grant to write a novel, she developed Betsey Brown as such, using the form to “get an emotional pulse for each of the characters [and] investigate their dreams.” As she wrote the novel *Betsey Brown*, she sent pages to Mann, so that the novel and play were developed in tandem. As Assunta Kent notes, in her review of the play, Shange works at “the intersection of dance, poetry, music, and theatre” and Betsey Brown, like Shange’s “well-known choreopoems” uses these forms to explore “inequalities in race, gender, and class relations.”<sup>163</sup> Performance is woven throughout the novel, found within the lyrical qualities of the prose. Black music and performance join the novel’s broader themes of desegregation and family life. Black music exists as a counter discourse within Betsey’s changing environment; it acts not simply as a cultural accent, but as an integral aspect of Betsey’s political and social development.

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<sup>163</sup> Kent in “The Rich Multiplicity of Betsey Brown” 151-152.

Criticism and reviews of *Betsey Brown* have largely focused on its adaptation as a play; I critically read the novel to engage with the emotive terrain of desegregation and family. In addition, it is through novelistic prose that Shange imagines the city of St. Louis as both character and setting. Shange maps the city as a location of race and class defined borders and enclosures, as she graphs both the restrictive and expansive contours of the black middle class world of the Brown family. Early in the novel, as Betsey arises to take care of her younger siblings, Shange writes: “There was a preciousness to St. Louis at dawn or dusk, that was settling to the child in the midst of a city that rankled with poverty, meanness, and shootings Betsey was only vaguely aware of” (14). The novel suggests that it is not simply Betsey’s youth that mutes the harsher realities of the city, but also the insular nature of her middle-class existence, as well as the obfuscation of black contributions to the city:

St. Louis considered itself the only civilized city on the Mississippi, after New Orleans, of course. Every boulevard bespoke grandeur and Europe, for even the colored avenues weren’t without some token frenchified accent. The Civil War accounted for most of the monuments in and about the colored section, and the buildings were graced in marble and granites, as if the nappy or straightened heads and many-hued skins simply had no implications. Betsey’s school was such a place. (32)

While the landscapes and monuments of the city, extol European architectures, black spaces are infiltrated by a romanticized interpretation of Southern identity. Within this context, Betsey’s black middle class life and enclave acts as an alternate space, situated in opposition to both the romanticized vision of European and Southern culture, and to the poor, less educated spaces of black St. Louis.

This latter distinction between the Brown family and the other side of black St. Louis is apparent in the subsequent social interactions between the other black characters, more specifically the black women who are caretakers to the Brown children. This division is also structurally etched into the interior space of the Brown home. The basement is described as a

dark dungeon: “It smelled funny down there. Jane said that white folks usedta make the colored help sleep down there. Now that Jane would never do, put a Negro in the basement” (15).

Throughout the novel, Jane’s relationship to the servitude of other “Negroes” remains a contentious issue. The satirization of Jane’s middle class trappings is immediately apparent. Jane’s insistence that she would not make a Negro sleep in the basement is undermined and contradicted by Jane and her mother Vida’s condescension, and power-wielding maneuvers, towards the revolving line of women who come to care for the home and children. The domestic space of the house mirrors the dividing class lines that distinguish the Brown family from other blacks. Just as Jane inscribes different types of black servitude to gird her class identity, Jane’s narration of the city is informed by her need to protect her status. After the children have left for school, in a rare moment of solitude, the narrator explores the meaning of the street for Jane:

Brick houses, ranging from sun-yellow to night maroon, etched the walks and the maids swept the stairs as if dirt were a sin. Soon the housewives would saunter back and forth cross fences, sharing gossip and recipes or the plain old doldrums of living in the roses as they did. Haitians, East Indians, Ricans and prize-fighters’s wives went on bout their business: being beautiful and fertile. ..Weren’t many places the likes of them could be themselves and raise their children to own the world, which was the plan never spoken. (31)

Jane’s mother, Vida, echoes her daughter’s sentiments highlighting Betsey’s innocence, specifically, pointing to Betsey’s unawareness “that white folks could get away with things a Negro’d be killed for.” Vida’s critique of the “integration talk” is that “it made the children believe in things that just weren’t possible. It was best to be the best in the colored world, and leave the white folks to their wanton ways” (30).

The street is markedly ethnically and culturally diverse, and, from Jane’s perspective, not marred or marked by racial difference. What is on display is the means by which the street functions from within an economy that compounds the aesthetic presentation of the body, as well as the landscape, class, and sexuality. The presence of “maids,” who fervently sweep away

dirt, the partnering of beauty and fertility remains paramount to Jane's sense of her own identity. The initially distant, but narratively inevitable, moment of school desegregation is for Jane, not a hopeful promise, but a threat to her individual and communal status. Interestingly, Jane is not, like the women described in the passage, a housewife. She is a professional woman, employed as a psychiatric social worker. Yet, she is contained by a reproductive determinism that, similarly, worried Larsen's Helga Crane. Yet, unlike *Quicksand*, this reproductive determinism is not solely the product of an uplift ideology. Shange makes legible the contradictory position of Jane Brown, as she is bound by her own investment in black middle class respectability and her husband Greer's desire to evade the cultural trappings of his middle social status. Greer Brown is a talented and eccentric surgeon, whose cosmopolitanism causes tension within his household. A central conflict within Shange's novel emerges from Greer's "Africanizing" –enacted through lessons in Afro-Diasporic history, music and contemporary events, and his laissez-faire attitude towards the work of pregnancy, child rearing, and care. While Greer was able to offer Jane a secure middle class existence- in Vida's narration Greer "took Jane outta the Bronx" and to a "fine old house in St. Louis, but he'd filled her svelte body with more chirren than a she-heifer in heat should ever know" (29). Greer, although not engaged with the toll, and toil, that caring for five children has on Jane, is deeply invested in creating an alternate space of instruction for his children, each day performing a morning quiz punctuated by his beating of a conga drum.

Greer's lessons emphasize a panoramic sense of black culture and education as he evokes pop cultural icons such as the Ikettes and scholar activists such as Walter White and Du Bois, while also emphasizing a geographically boundless sense of the aesthetic. The narrator explains: "Greer knew a lot about the worlds Jane had never considered. Matisse, Gauguin, Pippin, Bearden and Modigliani" (24). His medical work connects him to the lives of other blacks

outside of their neighborhood and social circle, and his willingness to expose his children to other social strata within St Louis produces tension between the adults in the house. Greer's lessons produce within his children a sense of pride, particularly for Betsey who, as a burgeoning poet, is able to articulate a legacy of black writers and poets. Yet, Greer's lessons in diasporic wisdom also remove him from the laborious realities of his household and shield him from fully acknowledging female domestic labor performed that allows him to maintain his cosmopolitan masculinity.

Betsey and the other children of the Brown household are initially shielded from the knowledge that their experiences are shaped and marked significantly by their socio-economic status in St. Louis. They approach the women who come into their homes as challenges to their freedom, and their mocking of a worker's speech or physical presentation, through hair or clothes, is understood, by Betsey, as a revolt against adult authority rather than an indication of their privileged position in relation to their caretakers. After Betsey and the other children, sabotage Bernie Calhoun, a migrant worker from Arkansas, and ultimately cause Jane Brown to fire Bernie, Betsey, triumphantly, boasts to her school friend, Veejay. Veejay compares Betsey's behavior to the actions of white children towards her domestic mother. She explains that her mother "takes care of nasty white chirren who act up like y'all acted this morning. She doesn't do it cause she likes it neither. She does it so I could have clothes and food and a place to live. ...Y'all act like white people, always trying to make things hard on the colored. Lying on em and making a mess of things" (67). Veejay's speech interrupts the conflicting instructions of Betsey's parents. In place of Greer's lofty idealism and Jane's repressive notions of class and gender identity, Veejay's speech allows Betsey to question the meaning of her social position. Betsey will, subsequently, be drawn into the social worlds represented by her caretakers- Regina, a teenage granddaughter of one of the families that Greer treats, and Carrie, an eccentric Southern

women. As the move to school desegregation via busing moves from background to foreground within the novel, Betsey is positioned at the intersection of competing ideologies and sites of black instruction.

School desegregation enters the narrative abruptly, exposing the fault lines within the family about the responsibility of children to advance particular narratives of black progress. Integration, according to Jane, is based upon the whims of white folks who now “put their minds on integrating some things.” Jane “didn’t miss white folks, she didn’t like white folks, she tried not to think about them. She kept her world as colored as she could. There was enough of it. From Langston Hughes to Sojourner Truth, her children’s worlds were hardly deprived” (90). For Greer, his supplemental lessons were not meant to replace the social and political necessity of school integration. He explains to Jane: “They’re paving the way for those yet to come, Jane. There’s thousands of lives that depend on our children having the courage to go somewhere they’ve never been accepted, or wanted, when they have the right to go and a right to the best education our taxes pay for” (91). Greer interprets school desegregation as a politic of the past, present, and future. The politic of the now rests on the question of full citizenship: equal educational access is derived from obligations of citizenship demonstrated through the payment of taxes. He also engages with the futurist implications of school desegregation- Greer understands his children to be paving the way for “those yet to come.” Greer’s argument also demonstrates the representational nature of the act of desegregation; the black child who desegregates the school represents a collective body, perhaps young and old, who are collectively liberated via the students who cross the figurative and material thresholds of education.

Greer and Jane are portrayed as understanding that their children are at risk of being “hurt or pierced to the quick by some flying words outta peckerwood mouths.” Shange expounds:

They knew about these things. They'd been chastened since birth by the scorn and violence the race had known. They'd been brought up on lynchings and riots, namecalling and "No Colored Allowed." The neighborhood had saved them, they thought. With the Negro-owned businesses, the hairdressers and laundry, the school teachers and the shadows of the great trees, the neighborhood had sheltered them from what they knew was on the outside: the white people. (91-92)

The promise of their middle class enclave was to shield their children from the cultural knowledge and trauma of racial violence. An effect of these protective stances is a historical disconnect: Betsey and 1959's Willie are unable to connect or understand the racial traumas that will confront them as agents of desegregation.

School desegregation fragments Betsey's sense of her home and self. Betsey questions why white children can't leave their neighborhoods and why the black students aren't "good enough already?" (92) With lyrical intensity, Betsey questions how white children interpret the world: "Did they search the skies at night for beauty and answers to wishes? The darkness was a comfort to her" (93). Betsey's experience of being bused to school alters her relationship to the racial cartography of St Louis. In a nod to the legacy of educational progressivism, Betsey is bused to the Dewey School which looms "like a granite tomb over her head" (98), a gesture towards the historical profundity of Betsey's movement into the white school. The initial kindness of her new teacher dulls the immediate threat of violence, yet it does not solve the dislocative effects of school busing. The Dewey school "would never be like her real school. It wasn't till the bus eased up Delmar Boulevard and the colored people were going on about their business, carrying things from the dry cleaners, going up the stairs to their apartments or the beauty shops...playing honest-to-God double dutch and liking it, that Betsey felt she was at home" (101). Yet, Betsey's experience of home is also altered; at home there "wasn't enough time." Betsey "was to keep her mind on her studies, now she was competing with the white children-as if that hadn't been the case in the beginning" (110). Betsey's explorative nature, her

desire to nestle under sycamores and oaks, is replaced by the sense that her life is now marked by new measurements of her ability to compete against the white children.

Black St. Louis, as we knew it through the eyes of Betsey, begins to change as school desegregation evokes new insight and narrative commentary on what was previously a hermetic portrait of middle class black existence. “Everybody’d gone off to swim at the Y. Friday was the day they cleaned the pool, that’s how come the colored could swim on Fridays. Betsey’d missed that cause she got home from the white school too late to take the carpool of colored children over there.” Betsey is now temporally and socially distinct from the other children who are not being bused to Dewey School. “Betsey thought she must know all about the white people by now, she listened to them all day long. Every day...White folks got on ya like gnats. She missed everything on account of them. She thought on what she could do as hard on the white folks as they were hard on her.” On the Friday that the other children swim, Betsey is left alone on a “vacant” street which resembles “a big old movie set.” Betsey wonders “what could she do alone that could exclude the white folks, who were nowhere to be seen except in her wounds and aches of memories. Betsey decided to play hop-scotch, but she laid the hop-scotch pattern out with enough room to write “For Colored Only,” “Crackers and Dogs Not Allowed,” “Peckerwoods Got No Welcome Here,” “Guineas Go Home.” Betsey’s hop-scotch was something to behold” (112). The site of school desegregation is also the site of memory’s inception, where memory is conceptualized as a location of racial trauma. The child’s vision is used to continuously evoke the strangeness of racialized space. The young poet/child who, because of her affinity for language is able, through moments of quiet introspection, to narrate a boundless understanding of her city, distinctively, notes the moments when the blunt realities of segregation attempt to foreclose poetic and spatial possibilities.

In this solitary act, Betsey inverts the signs of segregation to imagine her neighborhood as a place where she can command segregation's structures of exclusion and control. "Betsey jumped all over her great design. She danced on the "No Whites" till it smudged beyond recognition. Then she wrote it over again till she was so tired she went into the house to take a nap" (112). The discovery of her hop scotch game is met by neighborhood outrage and confusion: "How in an era of desegregation and reconciliation of the races could such an ugly, hateful hop-scotch game appear on their street?" (112). No one connects Betsey to the game; nor do they understand Betsey's attempt to make legible the "wounds and aches" of her busing and school experience. The street exists as an effect of segregation, yet because it is also an exclusive refuge from segregation, it also functions to rescue the street's inhabitants from the realities of segregation. Betsey's inverted signs are interpreted as ugly and hateful on a street that because of its idyllic nature hopes to balm the wounds of social and geographical racism.

Betsey's hop scotch game is only the beginning of her increasingly unstable relationship towards her identity and her home. Instructed in the sensibilities of love and sexuality by pop culture's romantic reductions and her recently dismissed teenage caretaker, Regina, Betsey aims to forge an identity that unites the contradictory impulses demanded by school integration's representational politics. Betsey attempts to reconcile the demands that she be "better" than the white children with her discoveries of the sensual in both experience and aesthetics. Betsey constructs a space where she can be in her "own time, practicing her dancing and proverbs: the Bible and a little dance were a girl's way to salvation, if you counted a good man as salvation, which Betsey did." She dances to Etta James and her "little backside went everywhichaway trying to keep in the correct ambiance." Betsey "What am I 'sposed to do? Be deaf, dumb, and blind? A girl's gotta practice her dancin, the fast as well as the slow kind. Be up on her Bible and the ways of the Negroes from the Akron Ohio all the way to Machito" (115).

After the family chastises her for playing her music and acting like a “niggah,” Betsey muses on the different labels she is given each time she exhibits behavior that, not just her mother, but, larger society finds unacceptable. She muses: “Everytime she played music she was a niggah. If she mentioned Nasser, she was a communist. If she wanted to boycott her school, she was a rabble rouser. If she wanted to eat at Howard Johnson’s, she was giving whites more than was their due. No matter what she said or did, it wasn’t right” (117). Soon after she runs away not to be Sojourner or Susan B. Anthony but to be her “own persona” (117). Betsey decides to run away to Mrs. Maureen, the hairdresser across town, where she would not “have to be worried bout white folks cause there weren’t none around there, hear all about the Shirelles and Dinah Washington (121). Her journey to Mrs. Maureen’s allows her to be “on the trolley heading toward the colored section of town for a change. She wouldn’t be seeing no white folks today. That was one thing for sure. Just some police, maybe. That’s all. She wouldn’t be seeing too much of anybody, actually. Everybody was going in the other direction. Weren’t many jobs around Mrs. Maureen’s way...” (124). Even as opportunity is positioned as heading in the opposite way of the “coloured section” of town, a theme that will prove central in Davis’s novel, Betsey is eager to join a world that is different than her isolated, and misunderstood, existence within her new school and her home.

Betsey’s trip to Mrs. Maureen is a moment that reunites Betsey with her teenage caretaker, Regina. With aims of learning a trade until she can be a wife, and elope with her first boyfriend Eugene, Betsey learns that Regina, now pregnant and deserted, is a prostitute. Betsey uncovers that Mrs. Maureen’s salon is really a storefront for prostitution, as Mrs. Maureen collects money from different women, and mocks Regina for her fantasies that her boyfriend will return to rescue her. Betsey complains to Regina that her mother “doesn’t want me to be like everybody else.” She wants “me to be special, like I lived inside a glass cage or something. She

actually thinks those white kids where I go to school think I'm alive. Gina, they hardly speak to me..." (138). Both Regina and Mrs. Maureen listen to Betsey's frustrations about being the first to integrate The Dewey School, with Mrs. Maureen asserting that Betsey has "a right to be a child," even as she denies this same right to Regina. Mrs. Maureen critiques the idea that Betsey has a representational obligation to "take up for the whole damn race." It is Regina that asserts the centrality of class difference in the destinies of the young people within the novel. Regina explains: "You and I can do certain things together and then there are other things we can never do together. It's hard to explain, but there's all different kinds of colored folks. You're one kind and I'm another, that's all (138). Regina accepts her condemnation to Mrs. Maureen's brothel as punishment for her sexual indiscretions, but also a reflection of the two distinct "colored worlds" that Betsey and she represents.

Betsey understands the larger significance of the salon/brothel, and the façade it maintains between the world in which she lives and the hidden economies of sex and money:

Niggahs they'd say and leave it to the will of God that people, especially colored people, suffered. Yet, they couldn't go anywhere else to have their hands done but a bordello. Betsey burst out laughing. She could tell by the looks on the women's faces that it was an "inappropriate" laugh. As if being a Negro was appropriate, Betsey knew they'd never get that joke. (138)

Betsey's posits these facades as further evidence of the entrenched ideology of segregation. The same impulses that ask her to be exceptional and representative and repress the elements of herself that she most appreciates are correlated to the delineations made within black St. Louis. The Negroes who see "niggahs" do this as a means to distinguish themselves but do not understand that they are yoked to those they ostracize.

Just as Vida's angry assertions allowed Betsey to see her class, the experience of the salon and its economy of prostitution allows Betsey to think about gender, and the social mechanisms that separate women. Although she would "never see Regina again" Betsey also

claims that “they’d never be separate, either. Women who can see over the other side are never far from each other” (139). The claim of seeing over the other side acts as a configuration that aims to collapse the class-defined geographical boundaries, imagining a space of connection and communion. Betsey previously saw the mimicking of middle class constructions of sexuality as the pathway to womanhood, in this moment Betsey’s names herself as a woman because of her defiance of these conventions. Betsey’s awakenings to the realities of class and gender speak to Shange’s description of the world she wanted to create. In an interview with Brenda Lyons, Shange explained:

I had to create a world that a feminist can come from. You see, I didn’t have any books I could read where I could see a child who was actually trying to come in from- a book of different women’s perspectives of the world AND different politic-so I thought it was important to create a person who could do that and say, yes, these things are possible. Feminists don’t start up at twenty-one and know the correct way. <sup>164</sup>

Claiming a new relationship to the city and to the gendered manifestations of segregation, Betsey leaves Mrs. Maureen and travels to “a very special place” within the city. Betsey arrives to a central boulevard in the heart of the city “where the white folks had their parade each fall and crowned a queen of the Veiled Prophet, who was a white man no one ever saw. Then they had a big ball with pictures in the newspapers for days of this white girl and that white girl” (139). Betsey “marched as grandly as possible to the middle of the street where she proceeded to stop traffic and create a great stir while she declared herself Queen of the Negro Veiled Prophet and his entourage.” Betsey’s parade ends when police find her and warn her about the dangers of the city. Betsey’s sojourn ends but with the concluding sentiment that she, now, “reigned on her own streets for the first time in her life. She wasn’t afraid anymore. The city was hers” (140). The implication in *Betsey Brown* is that school desegregation acts as an impetus to demand entry into other locations exterior to the school building.

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<sup>164</sup> Shange Interview with Brenda Lyons 688-689.

Betsey's symbolic parade foreshadows Greer Brown's subsequent demand that the family, and more specifically, the children participate in the desegregation of a local hotel. His ultimatum to Jane that he must have control to use the children to protest initiates Jane's departure from the household. Greer's contention that the children must participate in the political action, unlike 1959's Mr. Tarrant's joining of the sit-in, is not a catalytic or climatic event that signals an inter-generational activism. Instead, Shange's narrative portrays a more complex portrait of the Brown family's movement towards political activism at the urging of Greer Brown. While Jane Brown's reticence to disrupt the stability of their middle class lifestyle is not characterized as heroic, neither is Greer's assertion of his masculinity through an anti-segregation politic. Greer's assertion about the political necessity of these actions appear opaque, dictatorial, and, once again, detached.

The domestic rift that emerges as Greer and the children are politicized calls for a second reading of Betsey's earlier parade through the center of the city. The Negro Veiled Prophet of Betsey's newfound construction shifts the racial implications of the city's symbols and mythologies. Yet, when read alongside the actions of Greer, the veiled prophet, with his entourage, reads as a troubling (re)entrenchment of the gender fallacies that buttress the black middle class life of the Brown family. When Jane returns to the household, she brings a desire for "Greer to feel how she'd grown" and to "grasp her new understanding of him, what he stood for, for their people, for the children" (190). His decision to use the children politically, and Jane's acquiescence, allows for a re-assertion of his authority within the home. The legibility of Jane's conversion, and Greer's politics, remains as elusory as the symbolism of veiled prophets.

The purported change in her parents does not address Betsey's continued need to navigate the realities of her isolating experiences at The Dewey School. Again, it is the supplemental instructions of a third domestic caretaker that offers Betsey insight into how to

understand her role within her new school. The new caretaker, Carrie, arrives to the Brown household during Jane's absence from the house, and like Bertha, is markedly country when juxtaposed to the Browns. Carrie "tied her dresses with a rope, a real thick rope. Not like one for hanging clothes, but more like one for making a swing on a tree." Carrie "wouldn't use any of the bathrooms, even though there ought to have been enough for her, cause there was one on each floor. But Carrie said she liked to use the latrine in the cellar cause that's what her mama had in Arkansas. And that's where she went, where she could think about her mama" (184).

An inversion of the Northern teachers and educators returning to the South motif, Carrie, with hair standing "on edge like there'd been a short in the electricity somewhere," brings her own "peculiar teachings and quirks, while the children brought home tales of the ways of white folks and young love" (181). Most poignantly, it is Carrie who offers Betsey a strategy, instead of rhetoric, to utilize at the Dewey School. Upset that she has to inform her teacher "Paul Laurence Dunbar was an American," Betsey informs Carrie that her teacher thought "that being colored meant you couldn't write poems or books or anything. She called him an unacceptable choice. Now she did this only cause she doesn't believe that we're American" (183). Betsey insists that she is not obligated to teach her teacher. Yet, Carrie instructs Betsey not to teach her peers or teacher but instead, making an analogy between Betsey's dilemma and her own physical confrontations, to "call em out," to directly call out her teacher "bout these colored poets. Make her take a step back." Carrie expounds: "I don't mean like in no boxin ring, darling, but with them words you be throwing round. Surely you could put that ciddidy old woman down. And then carry your pride out withcha in all them long hallways. Then see, when it comes time for somebody to be messin with ya, they gonna know you just gonna call em out" (187). Carrie's instruction allows Betsey to see the political dimensions of her

cultural knowledge, and she directs Betsey to use it to forge an intellectual paradigm outside of the limits of the instruction at her new school.

Carrie's presence within the Brown household is brief, like the domestics that precede her. Like Bertha and Regina, the cultural work, the counter instruction, which Carrie offers does not conform to the strivings of the middle class. Carrie is soon fired, after she informs Jane Brown that she is in jail for a knife fight. Despite her conversion to Greer's campaign, Jane still cannot tolerate a woman in her house who would find herself incarcerated. In the final pages, the narrator reveals that Betsey "just took Carrie's place in the house," which peculiarly situates Betsey as caretaker to her siblings and cousin. Carrie's instruction remains, offering the adolescent Betsey a pathway to fuse her aesthetic and intellectual knowledge, with the special feelings "that tingle and rush through the body" like wrens "hovered by the telephone wires." Noting that Carrie would "have said there was nothing dishonorable about being an Ikette, either," Betsey no longer marches in a simulation of the white parade, but now lingers "over her city making decisions and discoveries about herself that would change the world. In one way or another, one who could hear merengues and basketballs, feel loose and free in a comforting oak, was sure going to have her way" (207). The transcendent narrative move here is contextually intact with the novel's representation of adolescent romanticism. Betsey's poetic sensibilities represent an alternate space for the black girl student, at the same time that it evades the material realities, and psychic traumas, of desegregation.

### *1959's Pedagogies of the Past*

In the beginning of Thulani Davis's *1959*, racial violence is a peripheral, but, tangible reality. An unarmed high school student has been shot by a white man; the mob violence of school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas acts as a warning, looming in the background as a cautionary tale for the adults of the town. Yet for the adolescent Willie, whiteness and

blackness, is most easily delineated within the context of pop culture. Willie connects her journey into adolescence to the death of Billie Holiday. The first line of the novel reads: “Billie Holiday died and I turned twelve on the same hot July day.” The mourning of Billie Holiday’s death is an action specific to black radio, “race radio that is, the radio of the race.” Willie notes that Southern white radio does not mark the occasion, instead they continue on their “relentless rounds of Pat Boone, Teresa Brewer, and anybody else who couldn’t sing but liked to cover songs that were once colored” (7). Billie Holiday’s death not only signifies the pop cultural color line, but the characteristics of her identity and aesthetic also embodies, for Willie and her cousin Marian, a certain way of being a woman in the world. Willie describes Holiday’s tones as “shattering.” According to Willie, Billie Holiday was “in the faces of grown women, in looks we didn’t stare at too long” (7). *1959* contemplates integration as not solely an issue of cross-racial contact but also as physical and metaphorical border crossing. On the other side of experience, in the eyes of Willie, is the mystery of womanhood, a mystery made more unreadable because like many girl characters in novels of black education, she has lost a connection to the past through the death of her mother. Due to this absence, she has lost the maternal directive that can instruct her on how to navigate her transition out of girlhood.

The multiple pedagogies enacted through Willie’s formal and non-formal instruction are positioned to fill this rupture between mother and daughter, between the past and the present. Dixon Tarrant, Willie’s father, teaches at the local Negro College, Turner; Willie narrates that teaching was both her father’s “occupation” and the way he lived his days (23). Dixon Tarrant’s pedagogy is grounded in his training in, and faculty for, the sciences. The physical world—a garden, the nearby ocean, and the landscape of the border Chesapeake town—acts as the locations of Dixon’s instruction. His telling of history is told through acts of classification, quantification, and labeling. Dixon’s methodology is in direct contrast to what we know of

Willie's deceased mother, Leigh Stanley Tarrant, who arrived to teach at Turner College in the 1920s. A free-thinker, Leigh came to Turner College, during the 1920s, to teach and is remembered as "upsetting the school inside of a week" (25). Asserting that the Negroes running the college were "stuck in the past," Leigh as a "believer in all things modern-modern dance, modern dress lengths and hair lengths, modern art, modern lampshades" thought "the school ought to teach modern dance and modern music, and failing that, at last they could teach black students something about black music and black dances" (25). This brief biography of Leigh connects her to the New Negro student protest movement— detailed in chapter two.

Leigh's assessment of Turner's non-progressive ideology will prove to be true, as resistance and protest strategies against segregation unfold in the novel, and the college administration resists the actions of Turner College's students. Like Leigh's fight against the conservatism of the college administration, the school desegregation movement also involves a battle against stifling concepts of black respectability. Poor members of Turner's black community are excluded; a pregnant older sister results in the exclusion of a younger sibling from the group selected to desegregate the schools. Within this context of strict social codes and mores, Willie Tarrant must discern what desegregation might signal for her: *What types of performances of learning are expected of her? What requisite gender politics are tied to the various instructions that she receives?*

Willie grapples with these questions through engagement with the historiographies of black education. The elders of Turner share narratives of discontent about the exclusions and racial politics of education. Dixon Tarrant's experiences of racialized hazing from white peers, and antagonism from white teachers, heightens his unease with the desegregation plans. As the novel's central historian, Dixon Tarrant's rootedness in familial and social history also means that he is "stuck in the past." The coastline and ocean act as his background, and context, as he

details to Willie and her brother, Preston, their great grandfather's escape from slavery, his reunification with his family in a seaside lighthouse. The science lessons couple with social history and critique, providing a means for Dixon to both engage and evade his children/pupils. The repetitive familial history lessons allow Dixon to detach from pressing contemporary issues and not recognize his children's grappling for an understanding of their identity within the shifting context of desegregation.

In contrast, Willie's teacher, Mrs. Taliferro, uses history to create critical consciousness, to implore her students to (re)think the common story of slavery and to connect it to the politics of the present moment. Mrs. Taliferro's instructions are made even more dangerous when white observers are brought in to observe the black students in order to assess their "readiness" for integration. The encroachment of these observers into the black classroom alters the manner in which the students interact with each other and their teacher. A "silent pact" is sealed between Mrs. Taliferro and her students as the students must be "better than any other seventh graders that the white men had ever seen." Willie narrates that this new context "had an ugly edge to it. The watchers never smiled. Everything we did now was driven by an enemy. We were on some scary red alert all day, as if the watchers might call in an air raid. Before that week no one had ever expected us to be dumb, or fail, or waited for us to act like savages" (120). The common trope of desegregation, in civil rights representation, is the movement of black protestors into white spaces. Yet in this climate of white observation, the educational space is disrupted; Willie and her classmates face new threats of being labeled stupid or savage.

Mrs. Taliferro's instruction provides a counterpoint to these constructions of black inferiority, as she teaches a revisionist history of the South, more specifically, offering an alternate version of Southern History that challenges the romanticized depiction of white heroism and benevolence. Mrs. Taliferro presses her students to critically engage with the socio-

historical roots of anti-black sentiment, as the media is complacent in erasing and distorting the community's struggle. Mrs. Taliferro implores her students to contemplate the meaning of the sit-in conducted by Turner college students, even though it is absent from the newspaper. The sit-in at the local Woolworth surprises both the white citizens of Turner and the adult strategists of the school integration plan. The college students, seemingly, impromptu act of civil disobedience *forecloses* the white community's ability to defer, through legalistic and bureaucratic maneuvering, the pressing call for integration. The college students' actions bring to the fore the necessity of violence to maintain the racially specific borders and spaces of Turner.

Mrs. Taliferro is able to offer lessons in political consciousness and critique, yet Davis's novel also addresses the matters of girlhood and development that are not configured in the classroom space or through collective political rhetoric. Willie's most important instructors within the novel are women who speak defiantly from the past. Billie Holiday and Josephine Baker, the written words of a deceased paternal aunt, and the ghost of a rebellious mother all demonstrate the extent to which this story of black education, in its fictional representations, is concurrently about the construction of black womanhood. Fannie, Willie's aunt who died from tuberculosis at a young age, is, according to Willie, "one of the characters" from her father's stories who impacts her understanding of black womanhood and also tells the story of deferred possibility and circumvented opportunity. Willie's grandmother, Louisa, who lives in the decaying family home, gives Willie Fannie's diaries which are composed of entries that detail her unfulfilled dreams of leaving Turner. The restrictions that Fannie faces during her time are contrasted to the dilemmas and possibilities of school integration for Willie. Fannie's dreams of escape from her small town are limited by her gender and her father's notion that primary school teaching is the only proper occupation for his daughter. At night, Fannie escapes to spy at

the minstrel show, where she voyeuristically consumes the performance, and sexual swagger, of the black women performers.

Willie reads Fannie's life as a means to compare past constraint to new freedom, and to also locate where she, too, lacks choice. For Willie, the town that Fannie narrates in her journals is "another world, a place of other names . . . Fannie's wonderings were too far away, fairy tales where a girl could live on her dreams because everything else was laid out for her" (187-88). Fannie's story implores Willie to confront familial and cultural archetypes of black womanhood, in an effort to discover a trajectory for her own development. After reading Fannie's diary, Willie explains: "Something turned over in me like the day I'd turned around in my room and let my eyes rest upon my favorite doll and discovered it was dying like something that had lived" (188). On that day, Willie's Josephine Baker doll had "become infested with worm-like insects and their residual "yellowish powder" with "pollen encrusted in drips all over her dress." Gone was "the fabulous Josephine with jeweled wrists and rainbow crown" (189). The beginning of the novel narrates Billie Holiday's death and, in this passage, the aesthetic and exotic allure of Josephine Baker is rendered into a disintegrating doll. These iconic constructions of black womanhood are opposed to Fannie, who confesses in her diary that, with mobility foreclosed by patriarchal restriction, she must come to travel in her head. Although Holiday and Baker act as cultural signifiers of black women's freedom and mobility, this status is destabilized by the stasis produced by the flat iconography that encases them. The stability of Josephine Baker, forever locked as "the fabulous Josephine with jeweled wrists and rainbow crown," is disrupted by Willie's longing for a flesh and blood rendering of black female humanity. Willie's need for this is so overarching that, in this passage, a doll dies as "something that had lived." The emphasis on the macabre, and the depiction of the black feminine as ghastly, increases our awareness of

Willie's loneliness, but it also positions Willie's participation in acts of civil disobedience and protest as a site of rebirth.

### How far is up?

The young people who are expected to actualize social change are ambivalent about the narrative of educational ascension. The students are expected to integrate without question, as Willie, is spoken *about*, not spoken *to*: "No one said anything to me about it, and no one would. Good testers, or good athletes, or good debaters belonged to the teachers, the whole school, were community property. If they wanted me to sit down and take tests like a school representative at a testing tournament, I would be doing it" (112). Once her father joins the other adults in their movement towards school integration, Willie narrates: "Every time he saw me it was as if I were wearing a sign on my forehead that said Progress or Forward the Race . . . Homework was no longer homework, it was the race struggle, the French teacher who once told him "Negras" lips were too big. Homework was his old man, who'd said Negroes had to do better" (205). Willie is not allowed ownership of herself within the adult's plan for school desegregation; she is continuously removed from the room during discussion. As Rachel McLennan observes in her reading of *1959*, Willie's "repeated exclusions from her community" works as an "obstacle to enlightenment. Yet, because Willie "metaphorically represents her community and her race" and "facilitates connections" and bears the "burdens of representation," she is also able to gain "narrative power."<sup>165</sup> It is the representational status given to the youth in the movement towards desegregation that allows them to inhabit spaces where their voices gain authority.

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<sup>165</sup> McLennan in "Unpacking 'something dark': Narrating Southern female adolescence" 149.

Because of this status, Willie and the other young people in the novel can challenge the underlying assumptions of the narrative of educational ascension through desegregation. Unable to enter white locations, but under observation from the white board members, Willie contemplates the meaning of the “place” from which the observers come: “What place did these other people come from that was so different, so right, so smart and sparkling, so beyond us, that they had to see us to know if we were normal?” (120). Willie’s questioning of the observers’ presence in her classroom reveals the dynamics that both perpetuate the unequal distribution of resources to her school and that consequentially declare the black students academically inferior. She wonders if they “were the victims of some horrible plan. Our textbooks all came late... Because the books came from wherever the watchers came from, they knew they’d left us shorthanded, sharing old books, and playing catch-up with a schedule from that same other place. Maybe the clock we race against sped ahead faster than time really moved” (121). Willie’s description offers an obvious critique of the doctrine of separate but equal, as she outlines how her school receives inadequate and outdated material, yet are still expected to compete with the white students. The passage also speaks to Davis’s larger meditation on the nature of progress, time and history within the novel.

Within 1959’s landscapes of history and memory, time moves back and forth, and the youngest characters, through the handing down of stories, even as these stories exist half-told and unexplained, exist within this palimpsestic modality. The imaginative traversing through time is exemplified in Willie’s alter-ego Nancy La Haute Couture. Willie fictionalizes La Haute Couture to be a “Creole colored woman detective,” her “answer to Nancy Drew,” an ageless woman from Louisiana who “turned up in Harlem during the twenties, where she went to a lot of rent parties and heard a lot of Negro poets talking a lot of poetic mumbo jumbo”-then “found herself in Paris with Josephine Baker” (102). The passages where Willie imagines her adolescent

adventures, through occupation of her imagined alter ego, emphasize the sense of adolescent play, the time spent by the young protagonist creatively constructing a not-yet realized self. More interestingly, the space given to detection, and the unraveling of the mysteries of the town, underscores the novel's desire to unlock the past, to disrupt the normality of the grounds of segregation, by uprooting the town's secrets. Desegregation without the decoding of both the past and present is untenable for the novel's young characters.

Willie's teenage brother, Preston, resists the integrationist impulses that he reads in the civil rights discourse. For Preston and his friend, Little Cole, the emphasis on college and the American Dream means that "somebody wanted them to be like white people" (132). According to Willie, the American Dream is not about becoming white: "[I]'d heard Reverend King talk about the American Dream, and I thought what it means was that we should have a chance as we were." In her remembrance of the previous summer, when she acted as a guide to Martin Luther King, Jr. during his visit to Turner College, Willie offer an interpretation of the meaning of desegregation. Before Willie's encounter with King, she observed that "Turner didn't really have any leaders" (132) and that black leaders "seemed remote" (133). Willie marks her movement into adolescent through description of coming into knowledge of segregation narrating: "I could still remember when I didn't know what the word "segregation" meant, when I hadn't noticed the white side of town and its seats at the front of the bus. It seemed as though I had just gotten big enough to go out on my own and see the town when it began to look blighted" (134). Now able to see the town because of new freedom and mobility, Willie must make sense of the racial epithets spewed by white teenagers, of the signs of segregation in waving Confederate flags. Willie describes Dr. King's speech as making her feel "joyful instead of ashamed." King's speech removes "the shame that enveloped me when I had to think about how I couldn't go in the parks or playgrounds, the library, or drive-ins, the churchyard now owned by white folks

where my great-grandfather was buried. William Walker Tarrant must have been tapping his feet in my bones as I listened” (134). King’s speech sutures Willie’s connection to her paternal ancestor; King’s words disrupt the ownership of his body by the white-owned graveyard. William Walker Tarrant’s taps issue a protest from the grave.

While King’s speech on segregation made Willie feel “that Negroes felt the same way about things, that the same kind of fire was in all of us,” Preston and Cole made her “feel it was temporary.” In opposition to Willie’s sense of happiness from being audience to King’s rhetoric, Preston and Cole are, according to Willie, “more angry than happy.” As aesthetes, Preston and Cole “were always talking about jazz and what beat poets said and how it was all *illusion*, man, *illusion*” and that the “white people should me more like the Negro, and it was all clear in the music, no illusion.” Willie, distanced from the teenagers by age and exposure confesses: “I couldn’t understand them at all. Martin Luther King was talking to me about where I went to school and how Turner was and I could understand it. For Preston and Cole, reality was a place they’d never been called the Five-Spot” (136). These discordant readings of the desegregation agenda are underscored as each young character trespasses deeper into taboo spaces, spaces that are made so because of the spiritual and social difference within black Turner.

The multiple readings of the intentions of desegregation are reminiscent of the distinction Tyler Schmidt makes between integration and desegregation. In *Desegregating Desire: Race and Sexuality in Cold War Literature*, Schmidt writes that “desegregation” is “not a linear narrative of progress but a discourse of failings, trespasses, unreciprocated desires, and personal transformations.”<sup>166</sup> As integration signals an inhabitation of previously prohibited “workplaces, educational institutions, and public spaces,” desegregation, beyond signaling a

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<sup>166</sup> Schmidt 19.

“moving outwards” and away from “discriminatory habits and communities of comfort,” is motivated often by “desires self- serving and often seeking, across color-lines and social prohibitions.”<sup>167</sup> The outward movement away from “communities of comfort,” signals intensive questioning of what civil rights rhetoric and the emphasis on education means for the youth who are expected to represent the, assumed, collective interests of the black community. The authoritative version of desegregation, as much as it emerges from the dreams and aspirations of the adults of Turner, does not coalesce with the budding passion and desires of the novel’s youth. For them desegregation, also, engenders the ability to resist the aspirational narrative in small acts of self-definition, acts that happen away from the public stage of protest and beyond the rhetoric of uplift and representation. Preston and Little Cole resist the spiritual-aesthetics of their parents by secretly visiting a rollicking Baptist Church on the outskirts of town. New Jerusalem church “with its singing and river baptizing” was to Little Cole “about the warmest thing he’d ever found in the town of Turner.” Little Cole and Preston “shared discomfort with their parents’ pushing and striving and driving.” They question the call to integration: “Where would it go but where they had already been? They thought the younger ones would go higher and farther, but where was that? Into an all-white world somewhere? A white college, a white office, a white neighborhood somewhere up north? Where was up?” (68) This is an essential examination of the progressive narrative of integration. Little Cole’s question “where is up” moves the narrative from a standard metaphorical rendering of educational ascent, and progress, to an actual question of racialized space and cartographies.

As much as Willie is emboldened by the speech of King, the leader’s presence is ephemeral, and works to mark the lack of an authoritative leader within Turner. This lack suggests that civil rights fiction tends to “disappear the public declarations of the movement and

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid 3.

to focus on scenes of disappearance and silent political labor so as to call attention to the dangerous and debilitating effects of charismatic leadership on the leader, on followers, and on history itself.”<sup>168</sup> Without the presence of a leader, Willie’s experience of protest is less about the complete digestion of a politic of racial representation, e.g. the singular child protestor acting for the black community and correlatively acting as proof of racial innocence, than it is about her own unique claim to space, familial history and the right to narrate the public story of civil rights. In this context, Davis’s novel critiques our attachment to assessing civil rights history via grand narratives of great men.

As the protests spreads, Willies joins in actions against Turner’s commercial center. Through the physical work of boycotting, Willie’s body is physically marked, as her hands are made “red from gripping the wooden stick as if it were a bar by which I hung from the air.” “I shifted my sign from one hand to the other and looked at my hands, which no longer even seemed a part of my body...” In the moments of marching and protest, Willy slips “to the free place,” narrating “I didn’t think about my life.” From this location, Willie imagines that “the insurmountable shattered and fell around in soft pieces quietly around us. Defeat was small like a pebble, and even though I too was tiny and harmless, like another pebble, I would wash past the stones that looked large enough only if you didn’t approach” (272). In this passage, Willie’s sense of herself as “tiny and harmless” is not used to define her body as insignificant in increasingly physical and violent clashes with Turner’s segregationist. In fact, her diminutive stature gains her proximity; her position on the front lines of the protest enables her to see the fractures in the regime of segregation.

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<sup>168</sup> Edwards 109.

Willie's participation in civil rights activism allows her access to new spaces within Turner, that work to revise the histories that she has been handed. Willie, conducting a voter-registration drive, visits the marginal space of Turner's poor black neighborhoods, where she encounters Evelyn Turner, who recognizes Willie as the daughter of Leigh. Even as her poverty renders her voiceless in the collective politics of Turner's black middle class, Evelyn Turner, sharing the name of the town, offers another history of activism within the town. It is Willie who, by traversing across class and educational boundaries, is able to collect Evelyn Turner's story; a story which enables Willie to understand her mother- the "oddball everybody talked about as if she were a saint but for no reason," who the "the women sometimes spoke of with a tone as if they were trying to be nice because they didn't understand something she did." Willie explains that Evelyn Turner "told me things I had never heard in my life about my mother, myself, how she carried me around everywhere and left me lying in the grass while she and some boys she got together began plotting out a softball field "out yonder" for the kids" (281-282). Leigh's activism, speaking out against the segregated buses, protesting against the failure of the town to grant a charter for a Boy's Club, and leading a march to City Hall, provides an addendum to Leigh's biography. Leigh is not made legible by the middle-class black women of Willie's everyday life; she becomes readable once Willie is able to move beyond the obfuscations of her social strata. In unearthing the story of her mother, Willie lays claims to a legacy of grass roots activism that is not known within the confines of the official narrative of desegregation. Through Evelyn Turner's remembrance, Willie is able to access "*protest memory* as memory of protest and memory used *to* protest."<sup>169</sup>

Subsequently, Willie's narration also offers a defiant politic—one that depicts adolescence as a space of discovery and experience, mapping a portrait of black girlhood that

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<sup>169</sup> Trodd 224.

cannot be contained by a segregationist logic which works to obscure the complexities of black life in Turner. *1959* exposes how the manipulation of racial borders post *Brown v. Board of Education* worked to obstruct school integration. The culmination of *1959*, again, suggests Jacqueline Dowd Hall's critique of the deployment of a reductive narrative of school desegregation. The reality of judicial and socio-economic setbacks explain why Davis's novel is rife with ambivalence and refutations, as the actual school integration plan remains stalled for the entirety of the novel. While *1959* situates protest as a means to heal a family, by posing sites of protest— a school, the lunch counter— as a space for intergenerational contact and instruction, the novel offers an acutely critical assessment of the nature of progress. Despite the escalation of violence within Turner, and the boycott of white stores, the mayor of Turner refuses to talk about the sit-ins, and the reactionary violence. He addresses the school integration suit only to downplay its significance. The biggest news is that of an emergence of a new center of commerce for the white residents of Turner:

The main news was about this huge thing called a “shopping center” that was being built several miles out at the edge of town. They showed a model of the monstrous parking lot and all the glassy stores built in a horseshoe around the lot with its towerlike lights. ..It was out where the white folks now had huge flat tracts of tiny houses that the old man said were called “matchbook” houses. ..They had new roads, no trees, and lawns that hadn't started growing in yet. It was as if men from outer space had just blinked and manufactured this fake place for alien humanoids to live, complete with street names that were made up from magazines. (255-256)

The new shopping center and white neighborhood, from Willie's adolescent perspective, signify a power that is beyond her world. The protest modality of Willie, her family, the college students, and others is outpaced by the ability of the community powerbrokers that quickly buy and develop new spaces for the white residents.

As the protests continue through the course of the year, “Confederate flags went up outside every white drive-in hamburger joint” and “places we never went anyway, and life went

on as normal.” The entrenchment of the white community and the relocation of commerce, to shut black Turner out of the town’s commercial renewal, is a reality that the adult Willie mourns in the opening and closing of the novel. At the same time, she also lays claim to the space of black girl adolescence, an embodied space of experience. She narrates: “Ike and Tina Turner were singing, “You’re just a fool, you know you’re in love,” and the Shirelles had put out “This is Dedicated to the One I Love,” a song that made black girls croon in groups on the sidewalk, in the kitchen doing hair, in the basement after school. In 1960 white folks were a dog but the flip sides were really good. I became a thirteen-year-old” (291-292). The changing desires of adolescence suggest that the experiences of pleasure can co-exist with the urgent politics of the moment. The suggestion here is that the emphasis on the rituals of black girlhood-the crooning to music, the hairdressing in the kitchen- is also a politic. The central objective of black Turner’s laying claim to the spaces of Turner inevitably matters, particularly as this lack of realization produces the haunting sense of loss in the novel’s introduction and conclusion. Yet, Davis’s novel, by taking seriously the unruly thoughts of girlhood and the gendered performances and rituals of black girlhood, allows Willie to claim a space of her own, in memory and in the tradition of storytelling, even as black Turner is threatened by erasure.

The concluding pages of the novel, written from the other side of the Civil Rights Movement, resist a triumphant portrait of the movement for integration in Turner. The voice of an adult Willie returns; her unmoored presence highlights the effects of the dismantling of black Turner, but also signals that unlike her aunt Fannie, she was able to move out of Turner. Willie informs us that school integration did eventually occur albeit after the completion of her secondary education. Willie narrates that the “faces” of the classroom observers, like “faces of the family in town who once owned my family” are “invisible.” Willie explains: “Once they might have seemed unforgettable, but we retreated and we let them be forgotten. Of course, for our

defiance, the invisible faces sought their retribution against the whole lot of us by declaring our southern town in need of urban renewal. But then, like the rest of this story, that would be hard to prove” (296).

This thread of doubt, that the story she has told may not be considered to be sufficient “proof,” underpins the notion that representations of school desegregation and civil rights are contested ground. This ground is contested not simply because of the porous and slippery nature of truth and memory –the variety of experiences that often conflict and challenge each other–but also because narratives of progress and memorialization often deny both the traumatic hauntings of experience and the continuities between the past and present.

The sense that “urban renewal” was not a sign of progress, but an act of retribution and erasure offers a complicated portrait of the relationship between space and race. With “only two big churches standing, the town cleared itself of any visible signs of our claims to the place. Only the street names remain. We all moved to pockets of black homes tucked here and there, or to the next town, or, like me kept moving like nomads, scattered to the invisible perimeter” (297). The *invisible perimeter* is an apt, yet spatially paradoxical, location to situate readers at the conclusion of a novel where the major conflict of the narrative arose from a call for black inclusion. The invisible perimeter enounces itself as not simply a spatial reality of black Turner’s marginalization, but also as a narrative device and historical e/affect necessary to telling a different story about the relationship between school desegregation, adolescent identity and the meaning of progress. Betsey and Willie are actualized through their participation in the politics of school desegregation. Betsey discovers that she can reconcile seemingly disparate notions of young womanhood; Willie connects with her absent mother by walking similar roads of activism. Yet, both authors’ detachment from the materiality of the desegregating, and desegregated, spaces also suggests the unspoken dilemmas posed to the children of the

movement. More profoundly, the inability of Betsey and Willie to have a tactile relationship to the spaces of her hometown underscores the way in which cartographies of race and class separation remain, even as the school desegregation project implies the dismantling of these cartographies. Betsey Brown and Willie Tarrant call attention to the not yet realized possibilities of school integration, by filling the gaps of historical and fictional memory with their stories.

## Epilogue: The Unruly Conversation of Race and Education in the Post-Civil Rights Era

It is no longer the case that historically marginalized groups are simply excluded from good schools, jobs, neighborhoods, and the like. Rather the terms of their inclusion—the rule that regulate their participation—have grown in importance. Patricia Hill Collins, *Another Kind of Public Education: Race Schools, the Media, and Democratic Possibilities*

First, I would like to say I do not know what I can offer the kids who come on Saturday. Except for two of them (sisters), the others come with a shocking history of no education in language. That they come out to shame all the so-called teachers who have perpetuated this history of no education. But shame will not help these young people. And my question is, what will be helpful?

...Around the table a fantastic thing was happening. One would show another a particular poem—secretively, with extreme delight, nervously, giggling, furtive—as though they could not really believe what they were reading. As though they were reading “dirty books” and might be caught. The furtive sharing grew into a very animated kind of interaction.

June Jordan, *Civil Wars: Observations from the Front Lines of America*

The late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have been replete with cinematic representations of educational environments that depict black students and teachers as under siege within predominately urban and poor educational settings. Independent features and documentaries increasingly represent either the desperate need to escape public schools in controversial documentaries like “Waiting for Superman” or oppositional narratives of black students entering elite and majority white institutions, as seen in Andre Robert Lee’s documentary “The Prep School Negro,” and Jo Brewster and Michele Stephenson’s PBS documentary “American Promise.” We remain collectively enchanted with stories of black education, in their conflicting inspirational and bleak proclamations. These representations have produced a dichotomous field of visual and literary representation, a binary of educational representations that increasingly paint a stark black and white picture of the racial context of primary and secondary

education within the nation. Admittedly, I find myself critical of these contemporary representations of race and education, particularly because of the absence of representations of working class neighborhoods and public educational spaces.

Despite my contentions, compelling statistics about racial segregation in neighborhoods and schools, and the continued dismantling of school integration legislation, supports the notion that educational integration remains the dream deferred. I began this dissertation with the stories of Kelly Williams Bolar and Tanya McDowell, both accused of “stealing” education from adjacent wealthier districts. Recent studies have gone beyond the language of taxation, and neighborhood space which effectively worked to obfuscate the specific ways in which race still matters in 21<sup>st</sup> century discussions of education. For example, in October of 2013, reports issued through the joint efforts of Rutgers University’s Institute on Education Law and Policy and the Civil Rights Project at UCLA concentrated on racial segregation in New Jersey, with one study asserting that twenty-five percent of black students in New Jersey attended “apartheid schools.”<sup>170</sup> The language of this studies, and others explicitly name racial segregation as a problem that demands attention.

Despite the explicit conversations about race and education taking place in research initiatives, recent Supreme Court decisions concerning school desegregation plans question the legality of considering race at all in the context of education. In 2007, in *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education and Parents Involved in Community Schools (PICS) v. Seattle*

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<sup>170</sup> The CRP report, “A Status Quo of Segregation: Racial and Economic Imbalance in New Jersey Schools, 1989-2010,” concludes “that more than 25% of black students in New Jersey attend schools that the report labels “apartheid schools.” with 99%-100% students of color, as compared to roughly 16% nationwide. The IELP report, “New Jersey’s Apartheid and Intensely Segregated Urban Schools: Powerful Evidence of an Inefficient and Unconstitutional State Education System,” finds that “a greatly disproportionate number of New Jersey’s black and Latino students are “isolated in urban school districts” with “a high concentration of poor children.” The same districts are “located in close proximity to overwhelmingly white suburban school districts with virtually no poor students” (*Institute on Education Law and Policy*. Rutgers U, 2013 Web. 10 December 2013).

*School District*, the U.S. Supreme Court in “a 5-4 decision ruled that the use of race in student-assignment policies by the Seattle and Louisville, Ky., school districts violated the rights of the white petitioners whose children were denied admission to the schools of their choice.” In “Desegregation’s Demise” Derrick Bell writes that the court utilized the legal standard of strict scrutiny. Strict scrutiny, developed in the late 1930s, authorized “closer monitoring of government policies challenged for denying equal protection and due process to members of minority groups.” Bell argues that in the Rehnquist and Roberts courts it has been utilized to “strike down affirmative-action programs.” This use of strict scrutiny allows “any white person to challenge policies intended to remedy past discrimination, because those policies are typically couched in racial terms.”<sup>171</sup>

Brian Norman in *Neo-Segregation Narratives: Jim Crow in Post-Civil Rights American Literature* provides a compelling reading of the inversion of civil rights discourse in the dismantling of desegregation projects. Norman writes: “In his majority opinion, Chief Justice John Roberts argued that desegregation plans in schools that were never really segregated (Seattle), or that had “eliminated the vestiges of past segregations” (Louisville), had the same effects as legal segregation before Brown. Roberts concluded bluntly, “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.”<sup>172</sup> Norman describes the Robert opinion as swapping “postracism with postrace.” He argues that in the post-civil right era “the scripts of segregationists and antisegregationists have strangely flipped”

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<sup>171</sup> Derrick Bell “Desegregation’s Demise” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Web.

<sup>172</sup> Norman writes that Justice Stephen J. Breyer, in his dissent, noted a “cruel irony” in equivocating between acknowledging race and racism. Breyer lamented, “Finally, what of the hope and promise of Brown? In the twenty-first century segregation is being repackaged by some as an outcome of the very movements and programs designed to redress histories of racial disenfranchisement and achieve American promises of equal opportunity” (171).

as race consciousness “a key attribute of progressive post-civil rights politics, is accused of creating the very racial disenfranchisement it is meant to ameliorate.” <sup>173</sup>

A precise and honest account of the history of anti-black racism is marginalized in these discourse of postracism, even as black students continue to be impacted by legacies of educational inequalities, and shifts in the economics of how education is attained. For instance, within the larger debates about the rising cost of higher education, the figurative language of debt and sacrifice used by Harper and Griggs takes on a new meaning. While economic indebtedness has long been a historical reality for African Americans, it takes on specific dimensions for black students in the current educational climate. In the same year as the Supreme Court decision concerning the Louisville and Seattle Districts, John Gravois in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* column, “Trapped by Education,” profiled black PhD students earning their degrees in education. After noting that a third of black PhD students earn their degrees in education, Gravois described these students as incurring high levels of debt. Gravois provocatively traced the concentration of black PhDs in education as emerging from both a “proud legacy” of giving back to their communities through educating young students, and from the historical restrictions that concentrated black PhDs in educational departments despite their academic training and possession of degrees in other fields.

Studies and articles highlighting legacies of racial discrimination and continuing challenges to racial equality in education share representational space with headlines that focus on high achieving black students. Against the world of bleak educational statistics across the spectrum of educational levels, narratives of black educational attainment and access are circulated. They proclaim the capabilities of black students, in many ways providing fodder for

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

polemics about the role of class, culture and ethnicity in determining educational outcomes for black students.<sup>174</sup> Interestingly, the literature I read here does not venture outside the contemporary discourse of inner-city educational failure and prep school exceptionality. I deliberately choose not to read counter to this narrative, but, instead, I want to read along with the urban/elite binary in order to grapple with the moments of disjuncture and also illuminate the porosity of the lines that divide these divergent narratives of black education. The literature moves us from the language of high stakes to a prose of critical subtlety, offering the fictional worlds of black instruction as a site to navigate the complex terrain of contemporary discourses of race, place and education.

#### Post-Civil Right Literature of Education and the Complicated Meaning of Progress

In her educational memoir, *Black Ice*, Lorene Cary details her experiences as a student at St. Paul's boarding school in New Hampshire. *Black Ice* begins with an adult Cary, who has maintained connections to the boarding school, first as a teacher and now as a trustee, watching the black students during a graduation ceremony. While she has come to know these students intimately, helping them to negotiate their anxieties about their presence at the majority white boarding school, Cary has not examined her own experiences as a student. She describes herself as pretending; she acknowledges her "academic debt" to the school, yet, goes on to write: "[I] would not admit how profoundly St. Paul's had shaken me, or how damaged and fraudulent and traitorous I felt when I graduated" (4). She continues, "I remembered the self-loathing, made

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<sup>174</sup> Consider the story of Kwasi Enin, a 17 year old high school student from Long Island NY who, in the spring of 2014, was accepted to all eight Ivy League Institutions. Enin is a first generation American; his parents are immigrants from Ghana. His story was widely reported in multiple news outlet.

worse by a poised bravado, as close as my own skin, that I wore over it. I remembered duty and obligation-to my family, to the memory of dead relatives to my people. And I remembered confusion?" (5). Memoir suggests a single story, and Cary embraces the form's traditional devices of introspection and interiority. Yet, she also pushes against the individualization of her story, as she slips from first person subjectivity to speak as "us" and "we," a collective position she inhabits to embody the other black students who attended St. Paul's.

Cary details her journey from a black suburban neighborhood of Philadelphia to New Hampshire in terms that imagine her private education not only as figurative and educational ascent, but similar to Shange and Davis's narratives of desegregation, as a meditation on the relationship between integrationist educational politics and the inhabitation of geographical spaces. Cary's physical journey to St. Paul's begins with the literal movement through and out of black neighborhoods.

In 1971, a fourteen year old Carey lives in the west end of Yeadon, PA with "its leafy green grandeur and insularity." The information session for St. Paul's is held in Chestnut Hill which represents to the adolescent Carey "more a place name than a place for me until then, a symbol of money and social exclusiveness." On the trip, the family drives "through West Philadelphia, past the squat row houses where I had been raised" arriving at a stone driveway which reveals to her "how modest our Tudors were, our semidetached Dutch colonials, our muddy driveways and the cyclone fences that held in our dogs." She writes: "I felt as if we were a long way away from our home in the west end of Yeadon, an enclave of black professionals, paraprofessionals, wish-they-was-, look-like, and might-as-well-be professionals, as we called ourselves. We were far away from the black suburb that, as a West Philly transplant, I disliked for its self-satisfied smugness" (9). Cary's descriptions reflects the continuity of a literary legacy of black educational aspiration that challenges the material and purported psychic boundaries of

black middle class enclosure, particularly for those who are already, or expected to be, content with being located within that, often amorphous, social and spatial designation. Cary's description of the black professionals who people her neighborhood reveals how black middle class space and identity is an aspirational and expansive designation, yet not, always, the endgame of the black education narrative.

St Paul's school signals an entrance into a world where Cary comes into knowledge of things that are unavailable within her school and community. During the initial recruitment session, she is enamored by a senior student who "had more poise than I'd ever seen in a teenager." Likening him to Sidney Poitier, describing him as "sleek and articulate," Cary narrates that she wanted to "know the things he must know: about science and literature and language, living away from home, New England, white people, power, himself" (12). It is with the "force of religious conversion" that Carey describes the "great God of education," an "African Methodist God with a voice that boomed like thunder," as moving within her. She concludes: "It took all my strength to hold myself inside my skin" (12). Cary narrates a dissonance between this powerful scene of educational conversion, and the actual experience of being educated within the walls of the elite, majority white institution.

Cary's discomfort with her education does not solely emanate from her *outsider within* position in the educational space of St. Paul's, but it also emerges from the *exceptional* nature of her educational experience. For Carey to write about St. Paul's School, she must first allow herself the freedom to resist triumphant narratives of black educational ascent, narratives that downplay the unspoken, and sometimes painful, circumstances of newfound educational access. Carey must also tell her specific black educational story—one situated within the rarified space of an elite private school.

I began writing about St. Paul's School when I stopped thinking of my prep-school experience as an aberration from the common run of black life in America...The narratives that helped me, that kept me company, along with the living, breathing people in my life, were those that talked honestly about growing up black in America...I am writing this to become part of that unruly conversation, and to bring my experience back to the community of minds that made it possible. (6)

The introduction to Cary's memoir offers a springboard for critical inquiry because she acutely queries the relationship between black political-rhetoric and the construction, and experience, of educational spaces. Cary centers the discordance between the spirit and rhetoric of black aspiration and the figurative sense of black academic achievement as a debt. She explains that in the "aftermath of *Black is Beautiful*, I began to feel black and blue, big and black, black and ugly? Had they done that to me? Had somebody else? Had I let them? Could I stop the feelings? Or hide them" (5). The "they" that Cary references in this passage remains enigmatic-similar to how the feelings of perfidy she experiences upon graduation appear to lack a direct referent. Numerous questions linger: To what and who has Cary been disloyal? Her community? The ideals and ethos of the movement? The school that has awarded opportunity, yet left her bruised?

Compounded feelings of escape, triumph, guilt and betrayal are ubiquitous in contemporary representations of race and education. These sentiments are experienced by both student and teacher, particularly as they learn and teach in the shadow of the dreams of radical change and social justice that remain from black political movements. Within literature, narratives of black education, are, as Cary suggests an "unruly conversation." Yet, often it is the "unruly" elements that are removed in contemporary discourse about the relationship between race and education. Narratives of black education continue to be linked to notions of community and collective progress. Tensions between a communal political of education and the individual pursuit continue to emerge within black educational writings. Post-civil rights era educational

narratives, true to their literary lineage, consistently emerge from the story of the individual—the shape of her desires and passions— even as these stories grapple with the construction of community within the instructional space. The premise of this study has been that the site of education acts as a unique space of racial subjection. The post-movement education narratives, which I outline in this epilogue, demonstrate the continuance of this phenomenon. Yet, similar to the literature of black education in preceding chapters, the political meaning that a character attaches to the experience of racial subjection, at the site of education, remains “unruly.” An argument can be made that the responses of these post-civil rights era protagonists are nothing new. In Andrea Lee’s *Sarah Phillips*, we see the flight patterns of Larsen’s Helga and McKay’s Ray. In Sapphire’s *Push*, Clareece “Precious” Jones’s attainment of literacy allows her to develop an acute critical gaze which decodes the landscapes of New York City, in many ways, similar to Betsey Brown and Willie Tarrant’s use of their subjectivities. Even as these narratives utilize familiar tropes within the genre of black educational narratives, I also contend that Lee and Sapphire’s works are explicitly shaped by their engagement with the meaning of education in the post-civil rights era. Both speak to failures and anxieties about integrated education, and to the post-movement politics of educational access and communal belonging.

In her preface to *Sarah Phillips*, Valerie Smith delineates two responses to the “aftermath of the civil rights movement,” when the “the most obvious expressions of segregation and discrimination gave way to more covert but equally pernicious manifestations of racism.” According to Smith, these covert expressions of racism “masked by the veneer of acceptance and equality, elicit from some people admirably clear, decisive, and proud responses that recall earlier instances of black resistance.” Yet from others “the shock of betrayal and recognition calls forth the less noble reactions of ambivalence, self-loathing, and denial. Acknowledging that these latter responses are “certainly not new,” Smith asserts that in the “post-integration

era” writers like Andrea Lee are free to “illuminate the range of behaviors and attitudes displayed by African Americans in the late twentieth century” (xi). Applying Smith’s interpretation to an analysis of post -civil rights education narratives, readers encounter familiar criticism of the inequitable distribution of resources to poor and black school districts, and of curriculums and pedagogies that alienate black students and teachers. In many ways, these responses maintain the protest tradition within the genre. Accepting that “ambivalence, self-loathing, and denial” were already present in earlier narratives of education, I would suggest that we find these more “conflicted” responses as direct commentary on the meaning of school integration, particularly in narratives that depict the black students in elite institutions. Within these spaces, protagonists find it difficult to navigate the performances of assimilation and political resistance expected of them. Despite shifts in the appearance and perpetuation of racism, and the reality of an inverted script that defines acknowledgement of race as in itself racism, we still expect to encounter recognizable scenes of protest. Our expectation is that protest and resistance will resemble its previous manifestations, even as students enter into different educational terrains.

As the ability to identify and recognize protests has shifted, so has the representational authority given to black educational ascent narratives in speaking to a sense of collective progress. Uplift ideology and black middle class identity, whether located as the endgame of the educational journey, or identified as antithetical to the liberated educated subject, have been an integral theme within narratives of black education. Madhu Dubey, in *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*, argues that the spatial restructuring of cities, and related shifts in the nature of black community, produce anxieties about the centrality of literacy and print culture within African American literature and, consequently impact African American authors’ representational authority. Dubey explains that decades of “industrial restructuring of U.S.

cities, aided by shifts in public policy, and political rhetoric, deepened the immiseration of black urban populations, making it difficult to sustain a vision of the city as a promised land of opportunity.” As by the 1970s “urbanity” became the “given condition of black social life,” authorial “claims to racial representation could no longer be objectively grounded on organic models of community.”<sup>175</sup> Dubey’s central assertion is that “distanciation” between the black middle class and the black urban poor challenged the ability of black authors, who Dubey aligns with the middle class, to represent organic models of black community.

Dubey’s sense that African American literature, in the post-civil rights era, exposes anxieties around both print culture and community, is pertinent to the prominence of not only literacy, but also literature in the educational ascent narrative. Seen in the book within the book or in the urgent need to “tell the story” of the black student, the literary production has acted as the pedagogical intervention— a means to revise notions of black inferiority imbibed in the national narrative of education, and to counter the abjection of blackness and women in uplift ideologies of education. Here we can recall *Home to Harlem*’s Ray need to write a “romance of the race,” a project carried out through his interaction with Jake and the subsequent synthesis of language located in Jake’s newfound literacy. Ultimately, this project is carried out because of the spaces of intraracial and cross-ethnic contact, spaces that seem narratively less possible in contemporary discourses of race and education. As chapter three ended with the unfulfilled claim to educational spaces at the threshold of desegregation, in the post-desegregation narratives of education, fictional black students still grapple to lay claim to both home and the site of instruction.

Push

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<sup>175</sup> Dubey 5.

Sapphire's 1996 novel, *Push*, is the story of Clareece "Precious" Jones an illiterate, fat teenager living in 1980s Harlem New York. Precious has been the victim of physical, sexual and emotional abuse at the hand of her mother and father, and she shares a cramped apartment with her mother. The claustrophobic site of home, Harlem streets and the failing public school reveal the restrictive spaces available to Precious. *Push* is told through Precious's first-person journal entries. In her early entries, Precious reveals that she is pregnant with her second child by her father. Due to this pregnancy, she is removed from the public school, and selected to attend Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One. Precious tests on a second grade reading level and is placed in a pre-GED program at Each One Teach One. The novel goes on to depict the revelation of Precious's HIV status, which she contracts from her father, and her movement out of the traumatic space of the home into a transitional home with her son. A central tension in the novel emerges between the critical literacy she gains through her literature and composition centered classroom and the demands of the state and the family, which both see little value in the development of her humanities centered literacy.

Even as the state, represented in the figure of her social worker, demands that Precious's education lead to a specific type of labor, the education that is centralized within Sapphire's text, is the attainment of a literacy which reconstitutes Precious's humanity. Led by her black lesbian instructor Ms. Rain, Precious joins a community of students—multi-ethnic black and Latina teenagers— who strive to read and write, who by the end of the novel produce their own book. Precious's coming to literacy is affirmed as a new birth, an entrance into subjectivity and self-actualization, outside of the discourses of domestic abuse and pathology that want to claim her as vampiric threat. Precious opines "I always did like school, jus'seem school never did like me" (36). Familial and public traumas mark Precious's childhood, as she had been ridiculed and ignored within the public school setting, even as she displayed symptoms of abuse. Precious

implicates school and specifically the “tesses” in perpetuating her abuse. She explains: “There has always been something wrong wif the tesses. The tesses paint a picture of me and my muver-my whole family, we more than dumb, we invisible” (30). Television images of aspirational whiteness and political rhetoric about the black poor also impact Precious. She describes herself and her family as “vampires. They eats, drinks, wear clothes, talks, fucks, and stuff but when you git right down to it they don’t exist...I know who they say I am-vampire sucking the system’s blood. Ugly black greased to be wipe away, punish, kilt, changed, finded a job for” (31). This early internal monologue mirrors the rhetoric of the black welfare queen popularized by Ronald Reagan during his 1976 presidential race, when Reagan made reference to a “fictional woman” from Chicago’s South side who “allegedly defrauded Medicare out of \$150, 000 and drove a Cadillac.” Rhetoric about the black welfare queen would “prove an effective political strategy that helped conservative drum up support for welfare reforms. This political “tactic left an indelible mark on the public’s perception of the average welfare queen.”<sup>176</sup> Notably, these public scripts of race and poverty are internalized by Precious, and are reinforced by the invisibility that Precious experiences.

Precious’s mother invokes welfare as a substitute for education, imploring Precious to discontinue her education; she instructs Precious to go “down to welfare, school can’t help you none, *now*” (22). Precious’s decision to attend the alternative school is the first break from the abusive script of her family life. The attainment of literacy disrupts Precious’s reliance on television imagery, and her internalization of rhetoric about the urban black poor. The narrative mode of *Push* recalls previous narratives of incest, abuse, and colorism seen in novels like Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, specifically, acts as a textual interlocutor within *Push*, as Ms. Rain’s pedagogy connects Precious to a lineage of literature.

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<sup>176</sup> F. Michael Higgonbotham 17.

This lineage enables Precious to find an inheritance that speaks to her experiences of poverty, incest, and race outside of a rhetoric of pathology. As Gillian Harkins notes, Precious's literacy is "linked to literacies of the self," and as the novel unfolds, her language becomes "less direct" as she experiments with more "figurative connections." Asserting the duality of the attainment of literacy for Precious, Hawkins observes that literacy pushes Precious "into so-called proper syntax," but it also "provides her access to the deforming aspects of language." Throughout *Push*, Precious's journal "entries are directed at an unspecified audience, one of the techniques deployed by the text to enfold its literary audience within the pedagogical audience within the plot itself" so that "throughout the text the presentation of words on the page is rendered pedagogical."<sup>177</sup> The reader acts as a witness to the labor necessary for Precious's attainment of literacy.

*Push* ends with "Life Stories: Our Class Book" a collection of writings by Precious and her classmates, which detail narratives of abuse, survival, family, and migration. The pedagogical imperative to produce a culminating text of instruction endures in Sapphire's novel. Dubey asserts, in her reading of *Push* and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, that both novels "override the problem of time-space distancing inherent to commodity culture" by creating "reading communities that are face to face but nonetheless urban in some key respects" (77). Dubey concludes that the value of literacy and print culture is "affirmed" due to the "special conditions of reception and distribution that are entirely removed from the circuits of commodity exchange" (97). I would also add that the creation of classroom space in *Push* relies on a special condition of educational instruction. Each one Teach One as an educational program revises the site of public education by transforming it into a private location and safe space of learning for vulnerable teenage girls. While Dubey's asserts that the "city" offers

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<sup>177</sup> Harkins in *Everybody's Family Romance* 218-220.

“educational opportunity” to Precious, in lieu of the site of family, it is interesting to acknowledge what spaces in the city actually provide instruction. Each One Teach One is located “on the nineteenth floor of the Hotel Theresa on 125<sup>th</sup> Street.” The night before her first day in the program, Precious ruminates on the space of the program: “I go to sleep thinking nineteenth floor Hotel Theresa, an alternative. I don’t know what an alternative is but I feel I want to know. Nineteenth floor, that’s the last words I think before I go to sleep. I dream I’m in an elevator that’s going up, up, up so far I think I’m dying” (16). Her first encounter with the instructional space continues to mark the theme of distance from other city structures: “The first thing I see when I step through door is the windows, where we is high up, no other buildings in the way. Sky blue blue. I looks around the room now. Walls painted lite ugly green. Miz Rain at her desk, her back to me, her face to the class and the windows” (39).

*Push* transfers the figurative idea of educational ascent into the literal instructional space of Each One Teach One. The historical landmark of Hotel Theresa, noted for its celebrity black patrons, now becomes a place where someone like Precious can be educated. At the same time, this is not a traditional school building. That it is not a public school underscores the novel’s central critique of the failed public school system. I locate *Push* within a longer line of black educational narratives that problematize the relationship between public spaces and black instruction. Even as *Push* “focuses on the creation of an alternative collectivity, the collectivity of the classroom,”<sup>178</sup> this alternative collectively acts as a substitute for the public school. The disengagement with public space can be noted as a particular symptom of post school desegregation literature, which depicts the return to spaces of instructional retreat, a theme that was central in post-bellum narratives of education. Like a long line of fictional black instructors, Ms. Rain proposes a pedagogy of self- actualization through knowledge of literature, but her

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid 222.

practice remains in contention with external forces. State structures divest from public spaces of instruction, while investing in GED programs that anticipate feeding Precious and her classmates into a pool of low-skilled, low-wage labor. One of Precious's classmates is so savvy about the underpinnings of what it means to finish the GED program, and to enter a world counter to the space of classroom, that she delays testing to earn her GED. *Push* doesn't reconcile the tensions between the alternative classroom space and the external demands of welfare to work, yet as I will discuss later, through the later mobilization of Precious, into expanded spaces of the city, her education exceeds the boundaries of the instructional space.

#### Sarah Phillips

If Sapphire's *Push* emphasizes a relationship between literacy and the city, other narratives of education depict the movements away from inner-city space and into elite educational settings as a means to revise the story of black education and explore other post-movement black subjectivities. Andrea Lee's *Sarah Phillips*, published in 1984, is a collection of vignettes that center on the titular character, an estranged daughter and inheritor of the Civil Rights Movement. Sarah, the daughter of a well-known civil rights activist and Baptist Reverend, is a beneficiary of the civil rights movement, yet throughout the narrative she remains isolated from the movement. The chapters that comprise *Sarah Phillips* were first published separately in *The New Yorker*. The collection, even as it shows Sarah moving through childhood and into her early 20s, does not offer a final educated subject that fulfills the once easily recognizable objectives of the black ascension narrative. *Sarah Phillips* does not center feelings of communal obligation or produce a politicized student who can read and critique the fallacies of instructional spaces. Unlike Lorene Cary, the fictional Sarah Phillips will not reflect, deeply, on the stakes of the elite educational space, nor grapple with what her educational experiences means within a collective context.

*Sarah Phillips* is central to the unruly conversation because it counters recognizable patterns of response within African American literatures of education. As Valerie Smith suggest in the preface to the novel, the exclusion of outsiders is paramount to Sarah's education. This positioning away from the language and activities of black politics, and away from a representable community aligned with these politics, gives Sarah access to elite educational spaces and it also becomes the means by which Sarah escapes from the "hermetic world of the old-fashioned black bourgeoisie." She describes this world as

a group largely unknown to other Americans which has carried on with cautious pomp for years in eastern cities and suburbs, using its considerable funds to attempt poignant imitations of high society, acting with genuine gallantry in the struggle for civil rights, and finally producing a generation of children educated in newly integrated schools and impatient to escape the outworn rituals of their parents. (4)

This oft-quoted summation of position and identity, as it operates in *Sarah Phillips*, suggest that "the outworn rituals" include the political engagement that led to integrated education. In this context, integrated education is conceived of as the breaking of a seal on the closed world of the black bourgeoisie; a final act necessitated by the "genuine gallantry in the struggle for civil rights." Sarah Phillips acts as bridge across movement and post-movement spaces who, unlike the politically minded Betsey Brown and Willie Tarrant, is, on the surface, quarantined from the socio-politics of race. Sarah Phillips casts her difference as a regional and cartographic break, where her location in the idyllic Franklin Place, separates her from a Southern narrative of the civil rights movement, and from imagined inner-city manifestations of race consciousness and community.

Sarah's sense of separateness is blatantly apparent in the first chapter of the collection, "In France." Sarah narrates that, in June, she had graduated from Harvard. At twenty one, she "was tall and lanky and light-skinned, quite pretty in a nervous sort of way." Equipped with "an

unfocused snobbery, vague literary aspirations, and a lively appetite for white boys. When before commencement my father died of a stroke, I found that my lifelong impulse to discard Philadelphia had turned into a loathing of everything that made up my past” (4). During her travels with her companions through Europe, Sarah keeps “lookout in London for certain types of tourists: prosperous black Americans, a little overdressed and a bit uneasy in hotel lobbies, and who might know my family” (8). Sarah cuts communication with her family, and rejoices at the news of a French postal strike as she “liked the idea of channels closing officially between America and France” (4). She lives in the apartment of her French boyfriend Henri’s uncle; Henri is an “illegitimate child raised outside Paris by his mother and adopted only recently by his rich uncle.” This wealthy uncle provides accommodation for Sarah, Henri and Henri’s two friends, Alain and Roger. In the spirit of “Bruderschaft” Sarah sleeps with Henri, Alain and Roger, and during late nights, the four of them play the game “Galatea,” a game where Sarah “stood naked on a wooden box and turned slowly to have” her “body appraised and criticized” (6-7). Repeatedly, Sarah’s carefree narrations dismiss the racial implications of her trysts.

American constructions of race and blackness subtly invade the French setting during Sarah’s sojourn, as symbols of the antebellum South and the celebration of a particular brand of white masculinity dispel the purported non-raced interactions between Sarah and her companions. Henri’s ideas “about the United States had a nuttiness that outdid the spaghetti-western fantasies I’d found in other Frenchman;” early in their relationship Henri had “just returned from touring Texas, where he had bought a jaunty Confederate cap” (5). While Sarah sought to escape the American context of race, all of France “was vibrating to the latest invasion of Anglo-Saxon culture.” In addition to the opening of Paris’s first McDonald’s, Sarah describes French commercials for Goldtea as “artless takeoffs on *Gone with the Wind*, with Senegalese extras toiling in replicas of American cotton fields, flat-chested French belles in hoopskirts, and

French male actors trying subtly to inject a bit of Wild West into the Confederate cavaliers they played” (7).

Sarah attempts to ignore the proliferation of America constructs of race, until she has a public argument with Henri. Bruised by the feeling that Sarah has mocked his illegitimacy, Henri uses Sarah’s “pale skin” and “kinky hair as that of a Haitian’ to tell a story of Sarah’s “pedigree.” Henri describes it as a “very American tale” where an “Irlandaise walking through the jungle near New Orleans, when she was raped by a jazz musician as big and black as King Kong, with sexual equipment to match. And from this agreeable encounter was born out little Sarah, *notre Negresse pasteurisee*” (11). Sarah is unable to formulate a coherent response to Henri’s story of American rape and miscegenation but Sarah explains, later, that it “illuminated” with “blinding clarity “the hopeless presumption of trying to discard my portion of America” (12). She concludes that “it seemed sad that I had spent years dreaming of Paris when all Paris dreamed of cowboys” (14). While she has attempted to avoid the familiar black bourgeoisie from which she descends, she confronts an abject depiction of slavery and the South, a circulating blackness that, in Sarah’s approximation, has little bearing on her life.

Immediately after Henri’s remarks, Sarah’s insists that she “wasn’t upset by the racism of what Henri had said.” She explains that nasty “remarks about race and class were part of our special brand of humor, just as they had been in the wisecracking adolescent circles I had hung out with at school” (12). The absence of offense is situated as a long-term interactional strategy—a way of being with her French companions and a way of belonging in the United States. Sarah’s assertion that her adolescent circles of school circulated similar racial language indicates Sarah’s education as a precedent to what we see now. The intrusion of race during Sarah’s expatriation in France later produces a dream where Sarah describes herself as “conducting a monotonous struggle with an old woman with a dreadful spidery strength in her arms; her skin was dark and

leathery, and she smelled like one of the old Philadelphia churchwomen who used to babysit with me” (14). The dream produces a call to home and structurally positions Sarah to narrate her past. In the subsequent chapters, we become acquainted with the events that produce the Sarah of “In France.”

Close reading of Sarah’s description of the meaning of the civil rights movement within the domestic spaces of her home and her interactions with her parents complicate an interpretation of a self-imposed break from their ideals. In my reading, Sarah’s education prepares her for the break not simply because of an assimilation into notions of color-blindness and individualism, but also because the political elite of the black bourgeoisie are indecisive, and inarticulate, about their children’s political and educational inheritance. Sarah narrates that the civil rights movement “seemed dull, a necessary burden on my conscience, like good grades or hungry people in India.” The civil rights movement takes on a decorative meaning—“unrolling like a dim frieze behind the small pleasures and defeats” of Sarah childhood. The civil rights movement signifies distance, transient adventure producing in Sarah “occasional hair-raising reveries of venturing into the netherworld of Mississippi or Alabama only added a voluptuous edge to the pleasure of eating an ice-cream cone while seated on a shady curb of Franklin Place” (39-40). This retrospective commentary employs the wry, detached voice of Sarah, a voice that disables either a sanitized or sentimental reading of memory. I read this detachment as an educational outcome, emerging from the institutional and familial instructions that Sarah has received.

While it is difficult to discern how much this voice is a ruse or performance, a central effect of this tone is the de-romanticisation of the vanguard of civil rights, textually embodied in the character of her father. Sarah recounts stories of her childhood that work to build up anticipation of political action, only to deconstruct the efficacy and impact of said actions. The

chapter “Marching” exemplifies this narrative approach. “Marching” opens with Sarah expressing confusion at the actions of adults and her father in particular. This confusion is illustrated by the story of her father and uncle performing whiteness, when her Uncle Freddy, a lawyer for the NAACP, takes her family on a tour of Harlem. Sarah describes her Uncle Freddy and Daddy as talking in “high, affected voices.” Sarah describes her uncle as exclaiming “Look at the tenements and the trash!” to which her father responds “I’m awfully glad I’m not a Negro, aren’t you, Frederick?” (47) The exchange between the two brothers ends with them chuckling “together, on an odd note.” It is through whiteness that they can distance themselves from the black poor and also mock the white understanding of poor and urban as synonymous with the Negro. Subsequent moments in *Sarah Phillips* brings into sharp relief how parody and humor belie how Sarah and her family work to mark themselves as outside of a narrow black identity, ubiquitously rendered as urban and poor.

This type of distancing continues throughout “Marching.” Sarah explains that Daddy “taught Matthew and me to stick out our chins and say “Negro” with near-military briskness when we spoke of ourselves in the classrooms of our Quaker school, and occasionally he brought home for us stacks of books filled with the strenuous exploits of heroic slaves” (48). Matthew and Sarah are instructed in these historical exploits but blocked from participation in the politics of the moment. A month before the March on Washington, Sarah visits Washington with her father, where she witnesses an exchange between her father and a cab driver, who discusses the march excitedly. The cab driver “turned his broad face around completely, so that he and my father could smile together like accomplices.” Witnessing this exchange, Sarah narrates that something “began to burn and flutter in my chest; it was as if I had swallowed a pair of fiery wings.” She explains that “suddenly a tremendous picture appeared in my mind...I saw a million men, their faces various shades of black, white, and brown, marching together between the

blazing marble monuments. It was glory, the millennium, an approaching revelation of wonders that made blood relatives of people like my father and the cab driver” (49-50). Within the novel, this is a rare moment that Sarah understands herself as having commonalities with other African Americans, where she is swept into a purely visceral reaction to the politics of the moment.

Within the school desegregation narratives of Davis and Shange, moments like this initiated Betsey and Willie into political action, but within Sarah Phillips these moments are transitory. Later, Sarah notes that her father “seemed unmoved by the conversation in the taxi; in fact, at the newsstand in Union Station he began to complain about the driver” (50). Sarah’s subsequent desire to attend the march, perhaps to have the moment of connection extended, is “immediately squelched” by her mother “for fear of stampedes and what she called “exposure”- by which she meant not sun and wind but germs from possibly unwashed strangers” ( 51). Matthew and Sarah are left to watch the march on television, where Matthew argues that the march “doesn’t mean anything” and won’t “help anybody” (51). Sarah attempts to counter his argument by proclaiming the march as a “symbol” and “wonderful.” Yet in the last sentence of “Marching” she confesses: “It was an argument in which I came off badly, because, as I found, I wasn’t sure what I really thought.” (51). Sarah’s experience of doubt and inarticulation, foundationally grounded in her inability to understand the significance of her father’s politics, will carry into her educational path.

As much as Sarah is present, she cannot interpret events, nor does she provide the type of memorialization of struggle present in preceding educational texts. Instead, the narrative moves us from the civil rights movement and sweeps us through Sarah’s educational journey, where even as she desegregates a school she is unable to make sense of her experiences. Valerie Smith offers that Sarah is not legible because of the “unwillingness of this work to conform to

conventions of representing “blackness” and “black womanhood” and thus, consequently, “raises for the reader challenging questions about what we mean when we use these terms” (x). The unwillingness of Sarah Phillips to conventionally represent “blackness” is linked to the reluctance to also engage a legacy of educational resistance. Adrienne McCormick identifies Sarah as an “embodiment of misinterpretation” as she is unable to “interpret how her class, gender, and race intersect in her subjugation” with these “misinterpretation of the intersections” providing a “template for reading” the entirety of Lee’s collection (809). I read Sarah’s response not as misinterpretation but as the actualization of her instruction.

In “Servant Problems,” Sarah desegregates the Prescott School for Girls. The chapter opens with Sarah juxtaposing Prescott’s “brick towers” –their almost “unearthly allure”– to magazine images “showing flames blossoming from storefronts in Newark and Washington” (53). Sarah enters Prescott in the mid-sixties, as a seventh grader, and contrasts her experience of desegregation to politically charged images of desegregation and racial conflict. For Sarah, the popular image of school desegregation is that of “a picture of a southern black girl making her way into a school through a jeering crowd of white student.” In counterpoint Sarah narrates: “Prescott didn’t jeer at me-it had, after all, invited me-but it shut me off socially with a set of almost imperceptible closures and polite rejections” (54). When questioned by her mother about her experiences at Prescott, Sarah explains that “it is a little like being in a play” and that “Everyone’s watching me all the time.” Her mother startles Sarah by “bursting into tears” and Sarah, later, overhears her mother saying to her father “We have to be careful. That school might ruin Sarah” (54). Mrs. Phillips does not explicitly identify how Sarah may be ruined. As depicted in other narratives of educational desegregation, the expression of fear by the parents does not necessarily translate into dialogue between the desegregating student and the parents. Instead,

the student is left to navigate the instructional space alone, devising her own ways to navigate the educational space.

Sarah's navigation of the desegregating educational space also includes her managing her relationship to the black domestic staff of the prep school. She explains: until "I arrived there" the school "had operated on a simple and logical basis: the teacher and students were white and the domestic staff-a discreet, usually invisible crew of cooks, chambermaids, janitors, and gardeners-was black" (54). Sarah is left to navigate the space between the girls who ostracize her and the domestic workers who seek connection with her. Defying orders to avoid the highest tower of the school, Sarah and her friend Gretchen- the chubby, outcast daughter of a Marxist professor at the University of Pennsylvania- discover the sleeping quarters of the black staff. The room is described as "the size of a closet" with "stained green walls, a small, barred window that seemed grudgingly to allow a view of the back courtyard, a tiny radio on the windowsill, and a black woman seated on the bed" (57). We are not sure if Sarah recognizes the woman from the campus, as her inclusion in the listing of objects obscures the woman's identity. Sarah immediately struggles to reconcile the "bleakness of the room; the fact that people lived on this floor;" a "fact contiguous to the bright, prosperous outer life of the school was another existence, a dark mirror image, which, like the other world in a Grimm's tale, was only a few steps off the path of daily routine" (57). In opposition to Gretchen's feelings of indignation, Sarah recalls "I tried to forget what we'd seen." In the place of an explicit language of indignation or resistance, Sarah's uses the visuals of a print, hung in her brother's room, as an analogy for Prescott. The print showed "a flock of white geese flying on a strong diagonal against a dark sky-except if you looked at it another way it was a flock of dark geese heading in the opposite direction." Commenting on the sentience produced by the image she explains: "You couldn't look at the poster and see both without a spinning feeling in your head" (57). This

experience of vertigo, as happens throughout the novel, uses Sarah's wordless physical and emotional response to suggest her discomfort. The language, the use of the second person pronoun, suggests a familiar distancing pattern weaved throughout the various vignettes; this pattern intimates the interior and the specific, yet ultimately moves "away from particularity" (Smith xviii).

Sarah's interpretation of the print hinges on the juxtaposition of white and black realities within Prescott, yet as outside viewer of the black/white imagery Sarah is not implicated. The print does not speak to her experience as the black student within the desegregating educational space, rather it cast black and white tensions as something experienced outside of her. Sarah is removed from the servants by her position as a student, but she also remains outside of the student body. The climatic portion of "Servant Problems" involves Sarah's audition for the middle school play. Despite compliments on her audition for the "pixieish dancing daughter Essis," Sarah is cast as the "colored maid named Rheba-a very black girl somewhere in her thirties," a "marginal part" that she had not noticed. Compelled by Gretchen, Sarah turns down the role. Sarah recalls, "I had to dig my knuckles into my mouth to control a fit of giggling that had seized me; it was laughter that burned my insides like vinegar, and it felt different from any way I had ever laughed before." This laughter that burns becomes for Sarah "the new way I had learned to laugh" which seemed "to bring me closer to growing up than the small breasts that had appeared with such fascinating suddenness on my chest" (58).

"Servant Problems" concludes with a return to the relationship between Sarah and the black domestic staff: "In the weeks that followed the casting announcement, when Gretchen and I walked by the cook who waved to us I didn't return his greeting, Gretchen did, but I looked seriously at him, as if had something to teach me" (58). McCormick reads these patterns of silence within *Sarah Phillips* as "indirect commentaries on the intersection of racism, sexism,

and class privilege, bringing silence as a response to those oppressions into play with a more highly valued African American orality.”<sup>179</sup> More pointedly, Sarah’s relegation to playing the maid speaks to the high stakes of speech at Prescott School and the impossibility of interaction with the already marginalized black staff. Notably, it is not solely silence that Sarah chooses to enact in moments like these. Similar to the parody of whiteness performed by her uncle and father during the sight-seeing expedition through Harlem, Sarah in the face of stigmatization of her blackness, chooses laughter as a new response. The laughter of her adolescence that she utilizes to explain her lack of offense at Henri’s racism, is remembered here as a mere volatile suppression, a physical self-gagging that emanates from the educational institution and which will define Sarah’s subsequent responses.

### The Dilemma of Place

The catalyst for movement in both Sapphire and Lee’s novels is the conflict between place and the individual desire to experience a new way of being one’s self. Yet, both narratives reveal escape as a peculiar fiction, because place matters in the construction and implementation of their education. Even as one needs to leave homes and neighborhoods to, as Irene Cary describes it in *Black Ice*, “know the things” that translate into cultural capital, undoubtedly Sapphire and Lee’s novels insist that attempts to break from home are a difficult ritual within narratives of education. *Sarah Phillips* concludes with “A Funeral at New African.” The chapter’s titular generality distances the reader from the reality that the funeral at New African is for Sarah’s father. The entirety of the last chapter’s contents maintains this distancing, as Sarah masks any signs of grief through the continued use of theatrical sensibilities. In the last paragraphs of the chapter, Sarah observes and encounters other young people on her train ride back to Harvard. Sarah describes her “brief new impression” that the “world was a place full of

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<sup>179</sup> McCormick in “Is this Resistance: African American Postmodernism in Sarah Phillips” 811.

kids in transit” who were “inexplicably” bound “on excursions that might end up being glorious, or stupid, or violent, but that certainly moved in a direction away from anything they had ever known.” She concludes in the final sentence of the novel: “I was one of them, and although I didn’t know what direction I was heading, and had only a faint idea yet of what I was behind, the sense of being in motion was a thrill that made up for a lot. I sat and squeezed my eyes tighter and hoped that it would turn out to be enough for me” (117). An aspiring singer studying at conservatory, a pimply teenager, and a black kid jogging on the sand of Connecticut are all collapsed into a collective narrative of a generation in flux. In one sense, this final rumination speaks to the novel’s proclivity to disrupt identity markers, to free Sarah from earlier iterations of race, education, and protest. Although this is the final passage of the novel, I want to counter the finality of this declaration by engagement with how Lee’s structure counters Sarah’s summation.

The structure of Andrea Lee’s novel allows the final chapter to act as an anticipation of the first chapter “In France.” In this chronology, “A Funeral at New African” attempts to be her break from the black uplift project of her father and his church. Yet, “In France” already revealed that the question of home was not finalized. “In France” has already demonstrated that history and home still lay claim to Sarah. This loop of escape and return is a reminder of Chery Wall’s contention that those “who desire to “free” themselves of the bonds of history are least able to understand the forces that kept them in bondage.” Wall avers that upward social mobility “weakens the will to know the past and consequently inhibits the formation of cultural identity; it leaves individuals vulnerable to psychic dislocation and despair.”<sup>180</sup> While Sarah does not fall into the type of despair that we find in Helga Crane’s fall –the privileges of family and class

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<sup>180</sup> Wall in *Worrying the Line* 6-7.

prevent this ending— themes of dislocation and avoidance figure prominently in the final chapter of the novel.

Distraction is the narrative and emotive vehicle Sarah uses to maintain distance in “A Funeral at New African.” As she recounts the events of her father’s funeral, Sarah is immersed in her intellectual pursuits, so that the Baptist rituals of the wake are countered to thoughts about her senior thesis written on “The Literature of Adventure in Nineteenth-Century America” (104). The tone of the chapter depicts Sarah attempting to inhabit a character for the rituals of the funeral. She describes herself as being dressed like an heiress by “the old women who had shaken our household into the proper symbolic order and “had produced from somewhere a slim black wool dress, a matching black coat with a fur collar, sleek leather shoes, and a lace mantilla, all of these things of an uncompromising luxurious quality that dazzled me a bit.” Sarah describes herself as “assuming a glamorous new character with the clothes” (109-110).

Arriving at New African, Sarah narrates: “[I] leaned my body against the window glass in an affected manner, hoping that passers-by in the March night would see and admire me as tragic heroine” (112). Sarah continues her previous strategies of masking and playing a role for outsiders; as readers, we are effectively barred from any narration of her grief. She describes herself in these passages as an heiress, an apt identity for her grappling with the issue of political inheritance. This quandary is magnified by the implorations of the eulogizer Stuart Penn, who “had grown up with Daddy at New African and had flown in from Washington, where he headed a commission for poor people and had his name constantly in the paper.” Penn addresses Sarah and Matthew directly, “in a voice that sounded harsh and peremptory, as if he were giving an order;” he requests that “for Jimmy’s sake” that “you two kids try to do something out of the ordinary with your lives.” Penn’s comments break the mask that Sarah wears at the funeral, returning her to the state of inarticulation that plagued her in earlier moments, as she expresses

her “desire to say something: a word, even a syllable, of explanation or assent.” She continues: “The moment came and passed almost instantaneously, and I had no idea what I might have said” (112-113).

Later, Sarah tries to locate the words or syllables through remembrance of her father. She recalls him “talking—preaching, or conferring with parties of solemn-faced men—and when he had no one else to talk to, he talked to himself.” Repeatedly, the scenes Sarah recounts reveal the impossibility of revelation, of speech between Sarah and her father. This theme of inarticulation features in a dream Sarah has about her father.

In the dream he had fallen overboard from a whaling ship—like the one in *Two Years before the Mast*—and had come up from the ocean still alive but encased in a piece of iceberg. Through the ice I could see his big hands gesturing in a friendly, instructive manner while he looked straight at me and said something inaudible. It was the same word or syllable I had wanted to say in answer to Stuart Penn, and I couldn’t figure out what it was. (114-115)

The romance of mobility that Sarah weaves at the end of the text is narratively seductive, but it is undercut by Lee’s construction of scenes that reveal the danger of Sarah’s inheritance of silence, of her inability to comprehend her own place. Racial and political incomprehensibility propels this narrative of educational ascent and also allows Sarah to be educable within sites of instruction that while including Sarah, insist on the exclusion and marginalization of other African Americans. The inability to comprehend race is not solely due to intra-racial class and cultural difference but is, as I have suggested, both an educational strategy and outcome. In counterpoint to the romance of mobility and expatriation that will lead Sarah to France, I want to conclude by focusing on the significance of home and place, by reading the encounter with the neighborhood that occurs in the later portions of both novels.

I read the encounters with neighborhood spaces, in *Sarah Phillips* and *Push*, with the sense that Precious and Sarah's musings expose a juncture point between these narratives of education. Where earlier I suggested that the space of educational retreat functions in both poor urban and elite narratives of education in the post-civil rights era as means to mitigate anxieties about public spaces of education, I read the encounter with the neighborhood as another bridge moment between these settings. More specifically, both Precious and Sarah, walk through the spaces of their home at the culmination of their education. I read their individual thoughts on home as moments where Precious and Sarah reveal their education, where previous instructions are embodied in their interpretations of spaces outside of the classroom.

As noted, throughout her education in *Each One Teach One*, Precious maintains a journal. The earlier entries of the journal largely focus on the traumatic events of her childhood, and the means by which she has attempted to escape these traumas through fantasy. As she forges a new literacy of the self that debunks these previous mechanisms, she begins to cast a critical eye on her environment. In staccato lines of poetry, she describes the faces of Harlem, "iron brown/black glas/tears," and asserts that her Harlem is "not jazzee/Harlem/ of Langston Hughes/ Harlmen Poet Laureeyet!" Precious asserts that "this/a Harlem done/ took/ a beating" (102-103). In observing the drug addicts, "dog shit," "crummel up briks," the "multiply ugly" Precious exclaims "I HATE/HATE/ UGLY" (104-105).

Precious's description of Harlem is bleak, so that even as there is a "jazzee" literary past taught to her by Ms. Rain, it appears as an abstraction when compared to the world within which she lives. Her descriptions of Harlem would ostensibly only conform other bleak portraits of 1980s Harlem. Yet, as she encounters downtown New York City, after she begins to attend an incest survivor group, Precious's thoughts go beyond description in order to ponder the relationship between uptown and downtown. She describes the bus as turning her "through

time/ past a Mama mama” where “first you see the buildings like watching/ a cartoon backards.” Movement into downtown acts as a temporal disruption-a movement so full of weight/significance” that she identifies herself as “homer on a voyage” from “our red bricks in piles/of useta be buildings/ and windows of black.” In contrast, downtown is a place where “everything is fine/big glass windows/stores/white people;” it is a “different city” which makes Precious wonder “Who I be I grow up/here?” (126-127). Precious in her analysis of the city is able to move beyond the confines of the closed domestic space where she is abused. She produces a capacious reading of the city that rejects an isolationist narrative of Harlem, imagining that the differences between these two spaces of the city matter in shaping her life. <sup>181</sup>

Sarah Phillips’s walk through her old neighborhood is linked with the change initiated by her father’s death. She walks through Franklin Place in a coat that was “puffy and stylish” but was now “dirty and deflated looking.” In the pocket of the coat, Sarah finds an “ancient stick of chewing gum” which as she chews dissolves “into a thousand tiny crumbs, each with a wisp of flavor that was like a memory of spearmint” (113). Loss and fragmented memory are transcribed into the landscape of Franklin Place- a neighborhood that in earlier descriptions formed a fortress between Sarah Phillips and outsiders, that before signaled a break between the North Philadelphia setting of *New African* and the life of the Phillips. Sarah narrates that the “stucco and fieldstone houses” in the “suburban noonday looked inexpressibly sloppy and depressing.” Continuing she observes

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<sup>181</sup> For a reading of how Precious’s interpretation of the city signifies a hip- hop feminist politics-one that emerges from post-civil rights realities of race, gender and the city see Brittney Cooper’s ““Maybe I’ll be a Poet, Rapper”: Hip Hop Feminism and Literary Aesthetics in *Push*” in *African American Review*. Vol.46:1, Spring 2013, 55-69.

As I turned the corner of my street and walked toward Hopkins Place, where the houses were big and Victorian and beginning to be torn down for garden apartments, I started to have the strange idea that every house I passed was in poor repair; was, in fact, falling to pieces as I looked at it. For a very brief instant, the space of a blink, I seemed to be walking on a broad dirt road in the middle of a tremendous mutable landscape in which the main tendency seemed to be break down, to decay. "People out to try to keep up their property!" I thought irritably, and then realized I had spoken aloud. (114)

Sarah's interpretation of the neighborhood can be read, justifiably, as a projection of grief onto the landscape. Yet, read alongside Sarah's previous patterns of inarticulation, in addition to her grappling with the legacy of the father, it is notable that one of her only exclamatory acts of speech is about the decaying neighborhood. In my reading, I take seriously Sarah's interpretation of her neighborhood as a site of decay, as an emerging problematic within the narrative of enclosure and escape that shielded Sarah from racial and class realities.

Although Sarah is incapable of producing a coherent narrative of the Civil Rights Movement's legacy, she is able to transfer anxieties about the movement onto the problem of neighborhoods and property. In the early portions of the novel, the neighborhood acted as a physical manifestation of her difference, enabling her to escape the outside world and maintain the spatial difference between herself and others. The neighborhood changing, Victorian houses that used to house single families becoming multi-family units, constitutes a crisis. For as much as Sarah is able to venture beyond the confines of the closed world of the black bourgeoisie, her mobility is a class and place determined outcome. She can attend Harvard and travel through France, because there is indeed not only a recognizable home, but a home distinguishable from the others she encounters throughout the novel.

The literature of school desegregation, in chapter four, ended with the assertion that there was a critical distance between the black student and the material spaces of home, due to the changing nature of racial capitalism. Reading *Sarah Phillips* and *Push* together suggests the

precariousness of place for both the urban poor and the black middle class in post-civil rights era narratives of education. This is not meant to collapse Lee and Sapphire's novels into a singular narrative of education; the stakes are obviously not the same for these protagonists. Instead, I want to offer a reading of place which situates the black middle class and black poor in narrative proximity. The maintenance of racial capitalism ensures that black expressions of vulnerabilities about place are not easily assuaged by class difference, even as we acknowledge that this difference produces steeply divergent narratives of identity, education and possibility—complexly evident in both works. Even as Sarah's middle class existence is repeatedly characterized by the barring of others, their ability to intrude suggest the fragility of the border. The changing neighborhood produces outcry because it signals the closing of the possibility for ascension. In the post-civil rights era the maintenance of borders still matter. Strategic lines between towns, between the suburbs and cities mark differences, and these differences impact the construction of educational sites. The struggle to maintain neighborhoods and place, the sense of dread and then subsequent flight when neighborhoods change, complicates the project of education.

The construction of instructional spaces which are markedly not public, in both the urban and elite educational narratives read here, signal the continuity of African American ambivalence and disappointment about instructional space. Derrick Bell in "Desegregation's Demise" concludes that "modest" desegregation programs fail because neighborhoods remain "racially segregated usually as a result of discrimination that is easy to recognize but hard to prove in courts." Bell notes that white parents, specifically, "do not wish to be burdened by efforts to correct the results of racial discrimination that they do not believe they caused." In a move that mimics the language of retreat in post-civil rights narratives of education, Bell contends that "racial integration as the primary vehicle for providing effective schooling for

black and Latino children has run its course.” Bell asserts that flight and retreat from the project of desegregation is so entrenched that they become insurmountable obstacles.

Bell’s final suggestion is that the dream of integration not be surrendered, but that activists embrace “flexibility” in supporting majority black and Latino schools, as they work to build academically rigorous, and self-esteem centered, schools. It is reasonable to imagine this flexibility as embracing an education like the one earned by Sapphire’s Precious, where the creation of alternate space enables the construction of critical literacies that eventually become mobilized within the public sphere. The spirit of Bell’s recommendations infuse debates about contemporary educational segregation with a pragmatic proposal. At the same time, I am concerned about the patterns of retreat from public spaces of education.

In many current discourses about education, I hear both the continued legacy, and fallacy, of separate but equal, and I also fear the seductive narrative of charter schools and privatization. As Patricia Hill Collins notes privatization is offered as the “ostensible antidote to the problems of public sector institutions,” gaining popularity through the rhetoric of “choice.” Here, freedom represents not the move “into the public sphere but the move *out* of it.” Cautious not to side with those who simply want to repeat and defend past practices, Collins acknowledges that “American public institutions of prior perspective were far less democratic and inclusive than they are now.” The literature of education reacted against these exclusions in multiple ways—through the creation of alternate public sites, and through speech and actions that directly challenged the logic of exclusion. Yet, as “scarcity and elitism” continues to be equated “with excellence and quality” private entities continue the propagation of patterns of exclusion from earlier public spaces.<sup>182</sup> Bell’s criticism and proposal represents, to use Collin’s

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<sup>182</sup> Patricia Hill Collins in *Another kind of Public Education* 22-23, 26.

analysis, the “deep-seated disappointment with public schooling” shared by many. Collins asserts that the disenchantment with the impoverishment of the public sphere and creation of “private initiatives (but often with public monies) presents real challenges for U.S. public institutions” threatening to shatter “American public institutions, if not balkanize American society itself.”<sup>183</sup>

The atomistic rhetoric of education in the post-civil rights era, undermines, in substantial ways, the shared responsibility of education, often negating an educational imperative that dares to imagine the site of instruction as one of heterogeneous and unruly contact. With uncomfortable bluntness, ambivalent postures and triumphant refrains, African American literature of education confronted, and continues to grapple with, the complex meaning and locations of the educational quest.

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid 26-27.

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