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Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Zora Neale Hurston, and the Creation of "Authentic Voices" in the Black Women's Literary Tradition

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ALICE DUNBAR-NELSON, ZORA NEALE HURSTON, AND THE CREATION OF
“AUTHENTIC VOICES” IN THE BLACK WOMEN’S LITERARY TRADITION

by
Anna Storm

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ABSTRACT

ALICE DUNBAR-NELSON, ZORA NEALE HURSTON, AND THE CREATION OF “AUTHENTIC VOICES” IN THE BLACK WOMEN’S LITERARY TRADITION

by

Anna Storm

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016
Under the Supervision of Professor Gregory Jay

This dissertation focuses on African American women’s literature from the 1890s through 1948, covering the New Negro movement and sentimental domestic novel, the folk writings of the early twentieth century, and white-life fiction. The study investigates writers and texts that at various points in the creation of a black women’s literary tradition have been labeled “inauthentic” or have otherwise received comparably little attention by scholars of the tradition. In particular, I examine the work of Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Zora Neale Hurston, placing them in conversation with one another and within the broader context of black women’s writing at the turn of the twentieth century. Dunbar-Nelson’s work is only beginning to be recovered by scholars; most of the recent criticism of her texts is intent on proving that she was engaged in discussions of racial politics, rather than considering how or why she wrote fiction that differed so greatly from her contemporaries. I consider how her regional fiction expands on and revises the work of earlier writers such as Frances E. W. Harper and Pauline Hopkins, especially their portrayals of New Negro Womanhood. I argue that Dunbar-Nelson uses the genres of regional and white-life fiction to critique uplift narratives and Victorian social conventions, common in earlier texts, and instead forecasts the root black identification in Southern culture that we find in Hurston’s writing. I compare Hurston’s less-frequently studied short stories and white-life fiction

to Dunbar-Nelson's, drawing attention to the similarity of their use of folklore as well as their politics more generally. Ultimately, I argue that Dunbar-Nelson's writing needs to be considered in context with writers already considered members of the black women's literary tradition, both as a part of her recovery and in an effort to interrogate the boundaries of that tradition. Literary traditions, I maintain, are constructed not only by the authors in them, but by the critics who create them; constructions though they may be, they are nevertheless necessary acts of critical resistance that must be continually examined and revised.

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“[I]f we are to have a sane, true view of the men and women who have made for a permanent place in the aristocracy of literature, we cannot regard them as sporadic efflorescences, illuminating some barren spot in the history of the world, totally unrelated either to the past or to their own present; that is not the way with literature” (1).

-Alice Dunbar-Nelson, “The Poet Scientist”

Introduction

When critics were just beginning to recover the works of Zora Neale Hurston in the 1970s and 80s, many hailed her as a literary foremother. Authors such as Alice Walker and Cheryl Wall named Hurston “the first authentic black female voice in American literature” (“Zora” 371). Their enthusiasm for Hurston, and more particularly for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is understandable given contemporary developments in critical race theory and black feminism. For instance, in *Their Eyes* Janie struggles for years against restrictions placed on her by her grandmother and overbearing husbands until she eventually takes control of her own voice and sexuality, all while symbolically traveling further south. Critics recognized Janie’s journey as a unique celebration of black womanhood and an indictment of patriarchal control. They praised Hurston’s boldness in critiquing the class and gender stratifications of the bourgeois family structure from a position within black folk culture—something they believed no black woman writer had done so successfully before. Zora Neale Hurston became, and remains, an icon of black women’s literature; her positive representation of Southern black folk culture became a kind of ideal for many writers and readers, a powerful example of how black culture and language could be portrayed in literature.

Since the early years of Hurston’s recovery, however, critics have questioned what it means to label her “the first authentic black female voice in American literature.” Hazel Carby shifted the direction of Hurston criticism when she revived Richard Wright’s critique of her. In a 1937 review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Wright accused Hurston of catering to the desires and expectations of a white audience by writing romanticized depictions of black life and minstrel-like folk characters. In 1990, Carby made a similar critique by comparing Hurston’s fiction, which she said portrayed ahistorical and essentialized “blackness,” to Wright’s urban

realism, which she saw as being more socially and politically engaged. For Carby, “authentic” black literature required more social realism and acknowledgement of the damaging effects of racism on black lives than Hurston’s fiction portrayed (“Politics”).

Other critics have claimed that valorization of Hurston’s fiction crowds out many other literary styles besides just social realism. Critics engaged in recovering writers such as Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Pauline Hopkins, or Frances Ellen Watkins Harper have questioned the unequal attention given to Hurston on the grounds that it privileges folk-centric texts, thereby excluding literature focused on the black middle-class. In his book *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance*, J. Martin Favor examines “the critical discourse of blackness that places the ‘folk’—southern, rural, and poor—at its forefront” while creating a highly disparate and less authentic portrayal of the black Northern bourgeoisie (4). He argues, “if the uniqueness of African American culture lies in its folk forms, then the authenticity of folk identity is privileged in the discourse of black identity,” creating what he calls an “antielitist elitism” that “facilitates a critique of the black bourgeoisie” (Favor 4, 8). Favor and numerous other critics have speculated that so heavy a focus on Hurston in scholarship and syllabi has helped advance the notion that writing by authors such as Fauset or Hopkins was less worthy of critical consideration; as it was not focused on “real” black lives, the conclusion was that these authors were overly concerned with appeasing white society.

My dissertation takes up this same question of what it means to label black women writers “authentic” or “inauthentic.” To do this, I examine the writings of numerous black women between 1890 and 1948, the year Hurston published her final novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*. I pay special attention to Alice Dunbar-Nelson, a turn-of-the-century writer, editor, politician, teacher, and activist most commonly known (if she is known at all) as the wife of Paul

Laurence Dunbar. I propose a closer look at Dunbar-Nelson's work, not solely for the sake of recovering her, but for what her writing and our criticism of it can tell us about how we construct the black women's literary tradition. With fiction more sentimental than political and diction more flowery than folk, Dunbar-Nelson has often been ignored in discussions of black women's writing at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet despite their vastly different styles, Dunbar-Nelson's writing has a great deal in common with Hurston's. Though it is categorized as "local color fiction," many of Dunbar-Nelson's short stories take place in the South. The region and its inhabitants shape one another in her stories, just as in Hurston's short stories and novels. Similar to Hurston's anthropological work, Dunbar-Nelson took an interest in writing non-fiction sketches capturing cultural festivals and holidays of the regions in which she lived, as well as more scholarly studies, such as an article she wrote for *The Journal of Negro History*, entitled, "People of Color in Louisiana." While Hurston is often praised for her use of the black vernacular, Dunbar-Nelson's fictional characters also often speak in Creole or other dialects. Yet Hurston became "the first authentic black female voice," a critical figure in the black women's literary tradition while Dunbar-Nelson was excluded from a black tradition altogether, her writing deemed too out-of-touch with the lives of real black women, leaving her contemporary readers "wish[ing] for more" (Hull "Introduction" xlvi). Furthermore, both experimented with writing fiction featuring white characters, which is an aspect of Hurston's work that is often overlooked. I argue that an examination of these two writers together, and within the broader context of black women's writing at the turn of the twentieth century, reveals the importance of continuing to interrogate the construction of literary traditions: how are they formed, who is included, and who is left out?

Early recovery efforts helped to shape our critical reception of Dunbar-Nelson. When Akasha Gloria Hull reintroduced Dunbar-Nelson to the public in her 1984 publication of *Give Us Each Day: The Diary of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* and her 1987 book, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women of the Harlem Renaissance*,¹ she argued that Dunbar-Nelson's stylistic choices led her to produce work that featured weak female characters and "bore no relation to most black life" (*Color* 53). According to Hull, Dunbar-Nelson was not writing within a black literary tradition, and "especially not a black female tradition" (*Color* 53). Dunbar-Nelson's writing was "charming" and "aracial" and had little to do with the lives or experiences of actual black women (Hull "Introduction" xxxii). Hull claimed, "None of her heroines are black—no Iola Leroy or Megda or some other figure to carry us forward to Helga Crane or Janie Starks" ("Introduction" xlvi).

Hull's assessment of Dunbar-Nelson's writing was not without critical or theoretical precedent. In the late 1970s through the early 90s, black feminist critics were attempting to define the characteristics of black feminist criticism and literature. Critics searched for definitively "black" markers in texts, such as a common aesthetic or language while also

¹ Hull's title is somewhat misleading. Critics since have sometimes treated Dunbar-Nelson as a member of the Harlem Renaissance, listing her name among writers such as Nella Larsen and Hurston in passing, but she is more accurately considered a post-Bellum, pre-Harlem era writer, as I argue later in this introduction. Her writing is characterized by some elements (namely aesthetic) of turn-of-the century fiction, and by others that have more common with Harlem Renaissance texts, highlighting the ambiguous and problematic nature of literary and historical periodization.

promoting a teleological view of black literature—one in which a black aesthetic was perfected with each successive generation. In Barbara Smith’s 1977 article, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” she argues that black women’s literary texts constituted a “verifiable historical tradition that parallels in time the tradition of Black men and white women writing in this country,” at the same time arguing that what brought black women writers together into this tradition were their “common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share” (137). Other critics of the time were theorizing just what these “common approaches” were, and what made them specifically “black.” Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates famously argued that folk or vernacular practices formed the backbone of black literature. Gates argues that “the black vernacular has assumed the singular role as the black person’s ultimate sign of difference” (*Signifying* xxii) and that a black literary tradition “emerges and defines itself” when “writers read other writers and *ground* their representations of experience in models of language provided largely by other writers to whom they feel akin” (“Foreword” xviii). Thus writers read and revised those black women who came before them in a practice that mimicked black vernacular culture, creating a tradition as they did so, drawing on a shared experience, language, and political ideology. The implication of the work of these critics is that writers who do not fit the mold by incorporating folk or vernacular language or structure in their texts, who do not appear to “carry us forward,” (Hull “Introduction” xlvi) are less authentically “black” and are therefore not part of the black literary tradition.

Later theorists have since questioned the teleological construction of black literature and the notion that black writers spontaneously create their own tradition because of common themes, experiences, and language, especially a vernacular one. As Ann duCille argues in *The*

Coupling Convention, the concept of a literary tradition is highly problematic, the term itself “troubled and troubling” (146). She notes that the concept of a literary tradition is often invoked, but rarely examined, a practice that leads to “the development of a black feminist canon based on the belief in an essential, definitively black female experience and language” (147). Texts are often only included so long as they represent our notions of what an “authentic” black experience and culture looks like, leading to what duCille calls a “race for race” in canon formation (148). duCille’s arguments help to explain why Dunbar-Nelson generally gets little more than a passing mention in discussions of black women’s literature while Hurston is praised as a foremother of the tradition. Because Dunbar-Nelson wrote in a “white” genre featuring characters who are often either racially ambiguous or Creole (a group many readers have categorized as “not black”), she was originally excluded from our understanding of a black female literary tradition. Dunbar-Nelson has suffered from the same problem as Larsen, Fauset, Harper, and Hopkins, all of them excluded on the basis of their choice of genre and the complexion of their characters.

Recognition of Dunbar-Nelson’s work has also suffered from the general lack of attention paid to the post-Reconstruction, pre-Harlem Renaissance era of black literary production. The Harlem Renaissance has long been portrayed as a high point of black literature and particularly of black folklore. As Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard note, “the idea of a ‘renaissance’ itself suggests a particular paradigm of cultural development—a sudden and miraculous flowering, a dramatic break with the past” (7). In order to construct such a narrative, the immediate past—the post-Reconstruction, pre-Harlem Renaissance era—has been portrayed as the “nadir” of black literature. Until recently, it was figured “as a time of accommodation and passivity, of false white idols and thus a literary as well as political failure” and had little relation to the Renaissance except that it made that period all the more remarkable (McCaskill and

Gebhard 3). The fact that Hurston, as the largely undisputed queen of the Renaissance, has been portrayed as a spontaneously gifted writer with little to no precedent, especially in terms of her folkloric writing, is prime evidence of this historical narrative. In recent years, critics have done much to recover the post-Reconstruction era “as a crucial state in African American cultural and literary history, a period of high aesthetic experimentation and political dynamism” (Moody-Turner 11). For instance, McCaskill and Gebhard’s 2006 collection, *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem, African American Literature and Culture 1877-1919* shed a light on the significant and sophisticated art created during the period.

Even with such reappraisals of the era, our attempts to recover writers and literary periods need to be continually reexamined. Work by scholars such as duCille, Favor, and Claudia Tate as well as more recent work by critics such as Lauren Berlant, has done much for shifting our understanding of early black women’s novels by writers such as Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins so we no longer view them as being accommodationist, but instead recognize them as offering powerful arguments for civil equality. Even with our broadened understanding of Post-Reconstruction black women’s literature, Dunbar-Nelson has not been so readily embraced as have Harper and Hopkins. As duCille notes, in reshaping the canon, black feminist critics have “privileged the ‘authentic’ voices and experiences of black women of the rural South” and even the “poor black women of the urban North” and “bourgeois black women such as Larsen’s Helga Crane and Irene Redfield” while not knowing quite what to do with heroines that do not fit into any of these categories (146). As for the post-Reconstruction era, it seems that the black women’s sentimental domestic novel of the 1890s, with its foregrounded racial politics has been retroactively constructed by critics as *the* black women’s literary tradition in the late nineteenth century—a tradition in which Dunbar-Nelson’s fiction does not comfortably fit.

Recovering Dunbar-Nelson, a post-Bellum, pre-Harlem writer, continues to add to the work of these scholars while prompting us to rethink historical periodization and its consequences.

duCille reminds us that literary traditions “are made not born, constructed not spawned” and while she makes this point to question their very existence and to emphasize how our own biases shape tradition, I wish to emphasize that we also then have a responsibility to continually question and re-make those traditions (147). One of the ways we can do this is by using the work of non-conforming writers such as Dunbar-Nelson to trouble the tradition and shed light on the process of canon formation. Traditions are, after all, dynamic and not static. The very word comes from the Latin “traditio” or “tradere,” which entailed a passing or handing over a custom from one generation to the next. While the word entails transmission and movement across time, it also is connected to concepts of preservation, safekeeping and entrusting. The action of passing down traditions is deeply emotional, and as such, traditions are often constructed by their transmitters as natural or sacred, even more so in times of social and cultural change.

Nevertheless, as Gates argued and as Dunbar-Nelson notes in the epigraph, writers are not “sporadic efflorescences,” nor are literary traditions static customs to be simply studied, described or preserved intact and unchanged (“Poet” 1). Identifying a tradition entails, as Gates suggests, examining how writers borrow from and revise one another while also keeping in mind how they are influenced by their historical, social, and cultural contexts. Examining traditions also requires that we consider how scholars hand down texts to future generations of readers. As scholars, we have the capability of (and even the obligation to) interrupt the seeming naturalness of traditions by ensuring that forgotten voices are incorporated into the tradition and handed down.

Problematic as the literary tradition can be, duCille does not entirely discount it or the value of “cultural moorings and racial markers,” as her own study demonstrates, but she does

advocate a more critical approach to the concept, urging us to think of “traditions and canons” (148). The necessity of constructing traditions and canons is a political one, an act of critical resistance. Traditions are dangerous if we think of them as discrete and parallel entities, but become more useful if we recognize that writers do not merely belong to *a* tradition as a result of their race, gender, or other identity category, but that they borrow from, intervene in, and extend multiple literary traditions in every text they create. Examining how and why neglected authors have attempted to revise tradition, to tell a different story, is vital and necessary work. Though duCille emphasizes the dangers of relying too heavily on tradition as a heuristic device, the concept is useful in that it allows us to imagine how collective agency might work. As Chandra Tolpade Mohanty has argued, “Genealogies that not only specify and illuminate historical and cultural differences but also envision and enact common political and intellectual projects across these differences constitute a crucial element of the work of building critical multicultural feminism” (136).² I argue that it is necessary to place Dunbar-Nelson in conversation with black women writers such as Pauline Hopkins, Frances Harper, and Zora Neale Hurston, not only to

² Another useful study of the black women’s literary tradition is Cheryl A. Wall’s *Worrying the Line*, in which she urges us to think of the tradition as a “worried line” in the blues tradition where repeated lines are revised or altered in some way “for purposes of emphasis, clarification, or subversion” (8). In this study, Wall cautions against the use of familial metaphors such as “genealogies” to describe literary traditions, as they tend to assume heteronormativity.

Problematic terminology aside, Mohanty’s point that a critical multicultural feminism based in the multivocality of women is essential to the point I wish to make concerning the value of the black women’s literary tradition.

recover the work of Dunbar-Nelson, but to gain a fuller understanding of the work being done by those writers we have chosen to include in the ongoing project that is the black women's literary tradition. Recovering Dunbar-Nelson and others like her is essential for shifting our understanding of racial "authenticity," and for a fuller understanding of the post-Reconstruction period as a rich era of artistic achievement in which black women engaged with race and gender politics in a variety of ways. We need to examine how Dunbar-Nelson fits within the black female literary tradition, and how our understanding of the tradition might change as a result of her inclusion.

The Life and Work of Alice Dunbar-Nelson

Alice Ruth Moore (later known as Alice Dunbar-Nelson) was born in New Orleans in 1875 and moved north with her mother and sister in 1895. Her mother was African American and a former slave, while her father was likely a white sea merchant, as Alice herself had auburn hair and a complexion light enough to pass.³ She had an early start in the literary world. She wrote short stories, poems, and newspaper columns in her teen years and published her first

³ Contrary to what some critics have suggested, Dunbar-Nelson was not Creole. In *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, Hull surmises that Dunbar-Nelson "would much rather have been taken as a descendant of Louisiana's (preferably free) *gens de couleur*, those mixed-blood 'colored' people who considered themselves superior to pure Negroes" (34). This wish to be Creole is turned into actual "Creole ancestral strains" in Hull's edition of *The Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* ("Introduction" xxix). Eleanor Alexander continues Hull's theory that Dunbar-Nelson was ashamed of her black ancestry, but points out that since her mother was an ex-slave and her father a white or light-skinned merchant marine, she was not of Creole ancestry.

book, *Violets and Other Tales*, in 1895, when she was just twenty years old, followed shortly by her most well-known collection, *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, in 1898. She would continue to write fiction and poetry for the rest of her life, only succeeding in occasionally publishing short stories and poems in various magazines. Nevertheless, her sporadic publishing record did not mean she was idle. In addition to those two published collections, she also wrote manuscripts for several other novels and short story collections: *Women and Men*, a short story collection she wrote in the early 1900s; *The Annals of 'Steenth Street*, a short story collection inspired by Dunbar-Nelson's teaching work in New York; *The Confessions of a Lazy Woman*, a book written in the form of a diary; *A Modern Undine*, a novella written around 1901; *Uplift*, a satire on a black club woman and a manuscript which Dunbar-Nelson destroyed; and *This Lofty Oak*, a lengthy fictional biography of her close friend and fellow Delaware educator, Edwina B. Kruse. She also wrote numerous plays, *Mine Eyes Have Seen* being the most successful of these as it was published in *The Crisis*. Along with this significant literary output, Dunbar-Nelson was also an editor and wrote engaging and insightful non-fiction essays and articles. In particular, she edited two collections of speeches and writing meant to educate black youth, *Masterpieces of Negro Eloquence* and *The Dunbar Speaker and Entertainer*, and helped her third husband, Robert Nelson, to edit the *Wilmington Advocate* newspaper. She also had two rather successful columns in the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Washington Eagle* in the 1920s.

Aside from her writing and editing, Dunbar-Nelson was an active scholar, educator, activist, and politician. She was a teacher and administrator at numerous schools in New York and Delaware (two of which, the White Rose Mission and the Industrial School for Colored Girls, she helped found) and a student at Cornell University, where she wrote a thesis on Milton and Wordsworth. She was also an active participant in the black women's club movement, a

field representative for the Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense during World War I, the first black female member of the State Republican committee of Delaware, a key member in the fight for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, and the executive secretary for the American Friends Interracial Peace Committee. Despite this impressive resume, only one edited collection of Dunbar-Nelson's partial works exists, and no biography save Hull's chapter on her in *Color, Sex, and Poetry* and Eleanor Alexander's study of her marriage to Paul Laurence Dunbar. Hundreds of pages of her writing and correspondence remains unpublished in the archives at the University of Delaware.

As one can imagine from her intense literary and political activity from the 1890s until her death in 1935, Dunbar-Nelson was deeply engaged in the debates over how to best represent the race. Dunbar-Nelson was active in a transitional period, writing under the influence of the restrictions of Victorian Womanhood and the dawn of the era of the New Woman. Additionally, she was writing in the midst of the "New Negro" era, as writers and intellectuals were working out just what that meant. As Adenike Marie Davidson succinctly puts the intersecting pressures of race and gender on her, "Dunbar-Nelson, at the turn of the twentieth century, found herself between the worlds of the New Negro and the New Woman. The restrictions and pressures of the former, to uplift the race, and the uncertainty of the latter for African American women are what she defiantly protests against in her imaginative prose" (52). While Dunbar-Nelson's style may reflect the Victorian preference for the refined and sentimental, her stances represent a shift toward the racial protest novels and celebration of folk culture more common in Harlem Renaissance literature. Given Dunbar-Nelson's hard-to-define status, it is worth considering to whom and what her writing was responding. What aspects of sentimental domestic fiction did she borrow and build on in her own fiction? Alternately, what did she reject and why? How did

political and cultural movements in the black community shape her fiction and non-fiction? How did pressures, especially regarding the representation of black women, impact what she wrote or could not write? Given that many features of Dunbar-Nelson's writings are also found in Hurston's, and that they shared remarkably similar views on aesthetics, it is also useful to consider how their writing compared. What accounts for their similarities and differences? Were they responding to similar pressures and movements within the black community? Additionally, what changed from Dunbar-Nelson to Hurston and why, keeping in mind that literary traditions are not self-perfecting or linear-progressive?

The New Negro, Art, and Propaganda

The years immediately following Reconstruction's end in 1877 were especially difficult for African Americans, as they were marked by disenfranchisement and increased racial violence. Damaging stereotypes permeated white thought and culture; African Americans were characterized as generally lacking civilization and refinement and depicted as lazy, lascivious, intellectually inferior, and savage. To combat such representations, the cultural trope of the "New Negro" emerged. The New Negro was, as Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Garrett have noted, a "self-willed beginning," a speech act based more in a dream of possibility than an actual historical past or present (4). African American intellectuals at the turn of the century had little to no control over their representation in the dominant culture, and the common belief was that changing their representation in art and popular culture would create a greater respect for African Americans and therefore less racist treatment. Furthermore, by increasing the publicity of the New Negro figure, African American intellectuals hoped to raise the consciousness of members of their own race, thereby creating a movement of "New Negroes."

Though the term was used as early as 1745,⁴ at the turn of the century, it generally implied a break with or abandonment of an “old” Negro, connected with the memory of slavery. As Favor notes, “The very idea of the ‘New’ Negro implies an ‘Old’ Negro who is somehow outdated, inadequate, or insufficient for the new cultural moment; the question of what constitutes blackness had to be rethought and reasserted” (3). For instance, in Booker T. Washington, N.B. Wood, and Fannie Barrier Williams’ 1900 collection, *A New Negro For a New Century*, the collected essays emphasize again and again the progress of the race since slavery. The introduction boldly states,

This book has been rightly named... The Negro of to-day is in every phase of life far advanced over the Negro of 30 years ago. In the following pages the progressive life of the Afro-American people has been written in the light of achievements that will be surprising to people who are ignorant of the enlarging life of these remarkable people. (Washington, et al. 3)

For the editors of the collection, African Americans had progressed far beyond their immediate ancestors, a contrast between “Old” and “New” Negro made more stark by the idea that one belonged to the nineteenth century past while the New Negro was on the other side of the century, the other side of history, and was the version that would lead the race into the future. The New Negro in this collection is defined by respectability, which necessarily entails assimilation or acculturation to a single standard of correct cultural and social behavior. For men, education, refinement, money and property ownership were what distinguished the New from the Old, as greater political rights were thought to accompany all of these. For black women, being “proper” was emphasized more than property. For example, in Fannie Barrier Williams’ essay,

⁴ Gates and Jarrett cite this instance in the *London Magazine* (5).

she speaks of “domestic virtues, moral impulses, and standards of family and social life that are the badges of race respectability” and the value of black women’s clubs and conventions for “sending far and wide a warning note that the race must begin to help itself to live better, strive for a higher standard of social purity, to exercise a more helpful sympathy with the many of the race who are without guides and enlightenment in the ways of social righteousness”

(Washington, et al. 54, 58). It was, therefore, the duty of the few already “enlightened” women to uplift the masses by teaching them these standards of “social purity” and “righteousness,” often associated with bourgeois domesticity. Thus Barrier Williams’ model reflects Washington’s emphasis on domestic economy, Christian morality, and uplift as well as W.E.B. Du Bois’s “talented-tenth” leadership model (M. Patterson 5). The imperative to achieve this standard of respectability did not allow for the coexistence of black cultural traditions, which were often thought to be at odds with proper New Negro behavior.

Many black feminists and writers at the turn of the century helped invent Washington and Barrier Williams’ portrayals of the New Negro in their fiction. Women’s sentimental domestic fiction of the 1890s was intent on proving African Americans to be valuable contributors to society and worthy of citizenship by showing them to be capable of achieving a standard of civilization defined by the white middle-class. For this reason, many of the central characters in black fiction by writers such as Pauline Hopkins and Francis Ellen Watkins Harper were respectable bourgeois citizens. The families in their novels either were middle-class property owners, or worked toward the status by the end of their novels. Their heroines in particular were typically depicted as chaste and refined models of New Negro Womanhood as it was defined by writers such as Barrier Williams and Booker T. Washington’s wife, Margaret Murray Washington. Though the central plots were often romantic courtship stories, the novels were

highly politicized arguments for equality. Claudia Tate describes them as “a pedagogical instrument among black people for disseminating lessons about exercising citizenship and for promoting social justice” as they borrowed from the nineteenth century sentimental novel and the rhetoric of racial uplift (*Domestic* 64). Domestic fiction offered black women a political platform and it was effective in overturning traditional power dynamics; nevertheless, their representations did occasionally “[reflect] their own intellectual and economic privilege and moral authority, as their refined fictional figures stood as beacons announcing the existence of a class of pious, pure, bourgeois black women” (duCille 45).

Dunbar-Nelson’s fiction notably does not follow the formula of the domestic novel. While still characterized by sentimentality—Kevin Gaines notes that Dunbar-Nelson’s “literary and aesthetic tastes were modeled on Victorian standards of moral uplift and respectability”—her writing rejected Victorian restrictions and didacticism, particularly as it affected black women (225). Situating Dunbar-Nelson’s writing in the context of this popular genre allows us to see that her fiction was not lacking by comparison in its social or political importance; rather, it invites us to see how her fiction actually responds to the constraints of Victorian social conventions that were often typical of genteel domestic race fiction.

Even Dunbar-Nelson’s early writings rejected the uplift model of New Negrohood at the turn of the century. In her first letter to Paul Laurence Dunbar in 1895, Alice Ruth Moore responded to her future husband’s question concerning her opinion on race literature with a characteristically bold answer. She stated that African American writers should not feel obligated to use dialect and then said, “I haven’t much liking for those writers that wedge the Negro problem and social equality and long dissertations on the Negro in general into their stories. It is too much like a quinine pill in jelly” (qtd. in Metcalf 38). This statement, made at about the same

time that Dunbar-Nelson was writing her first short story collections, matches her own literary aesthetic. Her first collection, *Violets and Other Tales*, a collage of stories, poems, essays, and reviews published in 1898, is nothing like the work produced by Harper, Hopkins and others. In the introduction, Dunbar-Nelson claims that her work “seeks to do nothing more than amuse” (*Works* “Introduction”; vol. 1). Nevertheless, her first volume contains a manifesto of New Womanhood in her essay, “The Woman,” in which she questions why well-salaried women should marry, going so far as to call marriage “often...galling and unendurable” (*Works* 25; vol; 1). New Womanhood was a movement thought to be reserved largely for white women, too risky for black women who felt they needed to steer clear of an image that would associate them with sexual liberty and a challenge to white male supremacy. Yet Dunbar-Nelson claims it for herself and black women in this volume. In her next volume, as I will discuss in my second chapter, Dunbar-Nelson avoids overt didacticism altogether by choosing to write in the “local color” genre, and sets her stories in the South, featuring Creoles of various class and racial backgrounds instead of the refined bourgeois race leaders of domestic novels. In both of these early works, Dunbar-Nelson expressed a love for the beautiful, the refined, and the tragic, but she also defied Victorian restrictions on black womanhood and the dictates of uplift that put pressure on black writers to use literature as an argument for racial equality.

Dunbar-Nelson’s early writings anticipated definitions of the New Negro that we typically associate with the Harlem Renaissance. While the New Negro began as a political figure, it had changed by the 1920s to a cultural one. In 1925, the prominent black intellectual Alain Locke edited a special collection of the *Survey Graphic*, which, later that year, he turned into the groundbreaking anthology of the Harlem Renaissance, *The New Negro*. In his introductory essay to both collections, Locke argues that racism would be overcome through a

greater recognition of the cultural and artistic achievements of African Americans. He states, “The especially cultural recognition they win should in turn prove the key to that reevaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relationships” (Locke, “New Negro” 118). For Locke, African Americans were undergoing what he called a “spiritual emancipation,” in which a “thinking few” were beginning to shed the belief in their own racial and cultural inferiority (“New Negro” 113). As such, a new generation of race leaders and artists were beginning to see the value in folk art and music, especially black spirituals, and it was the realization of the contribution that African Americans had already made that would lead to improved race relations. Locke states, “more immediate hope rests in the reevaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective,” and he goes on to claim that the Southern “peasant matrix” had already contributed to America “spiritually” through “the gift of his folk-temperament” (“New Negro” 118). Locke romanticized the folk figure as the “authentic voice of the people” (“Propaganda” 264), and as Gaines argues, he was “reformulating uplift’s sense of the mutuality of black elites and masses by stressing a symbiotic relationship between black folk culture and the Negro artist” (Gates and Jarrett 224). Locke appeared to maintain a separation between what he calls the “migrant masses,” leaving the South, and the urbanized Northern African Americans, the latter group being at an advantage for what he sees as their greater experience. At the same time that Locke hoped art would lead to better interracial relations, he did not believe that art should be used in the service of propaganda. On the contrary, he believed that all propaganda only served to reinforce “the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it” (Locke, “Art” 260). He believed that a focus on artistic creation, especially on “the art

of the people” and “native materials” would be more effective than propaganda, saying, “Beauty...and psalms will be more effective than sermons” (Locke, “Art” 260-61).

Similar in opinion to Locke, at least in the early years of the Harlem Renaissance, was W. E. B. Du Bois. Like Locke, Du Bois also recognized the value of folk traditions, writing what is perhaps black literature’s most well-known ode to black spirituals in 1903 in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Written years before the Renaissance’s beginning, Du Bois’ influential volume balanced a sociological, undoubtedly political argument for social justice and equality with a tribute to (and argument for the cultural value of) folk traditions. As Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Maberry Johnson point out, Du Bois called for a renaissance of art and literature in the early years of the twentieth century, long before Locke’s publication of *The New Negro* (40). By the 1920s, the debate between art and propaganda came to a head and Du Bois was forced into declaring a position. Johnson and Johnson note that “his ideas on aesthetics were undergoing considerable transformation during the first half of the decade” and that he had difficulty defining exactly what “art” and “propaganda” were (45). Before Locke’s publication of *The New Negro*, Du Bois equated art with “truth,” writing in the 1921 issue of *The Crisis* that literature which propagandized and only told “of the best and highest and noblest” of African Americans was “wrong and in the end it is harmful” (“Negro Art” 55). He believed instead that art should portray the full humanity of black folk. Interestingly, it was only after reading *The New Negro* that Du Bois shifted his opinion, finding the volume hypocritical and encouraging “decadence” when propaganda could be used constructively (qtd. in Johnson and Johnson 46). In June 1926, months after the publication of *The New Negro*, Du Bois delivered a speech at the NAACP’s annual conference stating quite the opposite of Locke. He argues, “Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that

whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (Du Bois, “Criteria” 259).

In many respects, Dunbar-Nelson’s own opinions on art, politics, and literature aligned with Locke’s and with Du Bois’ prior to 1926. Similar to Locke, who praised the resurgence of black spirituals, in a January 1926 column Dunbar-Nelson also stated, “We have come a long ways in the appreciation of our own, and the realization of our own possibilities” (*Works* 110; vol. 2). She goes on to recall how “Colored people felt uncomfortable and self-conscious and humiliated when the old songs were sung, and few were there who saw any beauty in them,” but how there had been three editions of “sorrow songs” recently released and “the Negro public is falling over itself to buy and own them” (*Works* 110; vol. 2). She, too, greatly disliked art used in the service of propaganda. In a column she wrote in February of 1926, she echoes Du Bois’ 1921 statements concerning art and propaganda. While Du Bois criticized contrived portrayals of the “best” African Americans, bemoaning, “We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one” (“Negro Art” 55), Dunbar-Nelson wrote “we insist that every Negro be a propagandist... We want our novels, short stories to have a bludgeon, none too cleverly concealed within the narrative, hitting the Nordic and exalting the Negro... We forget that didacticism is the death of art” (*Works* 124; vol. 2). Despite Dunbar-Nelson and Du Bois’ friendship,⁵ and her clear admiration of his earlier

⁵ Evidence of their friendship and respect for one another can be found in their correspondence. Most of Dunbar-Nelson’s and Du Bois’ letters to one another are sent from their respective offices at *The Crisis* and the Interracial Peace Committee, requesting pieces of information, small favors, or complimenting one another’s writing. In one letter to a friend written in 1930,

opinions, she did not share his 1926 change of heart; instead, she continued to align herself with Locke's opinions on the issue of art and propaganda. In 1928, she wrote a review of Locke's collection, *Plays of Negro Life*, in which she agreed with him that "it is not the primary function of drama to reform us," saying in response, "Now when the race as a whole gets that attitude of mind—that drama, poetry, fiction must not be blatant popoganda [sic], but 'free' and subtle in their preachments, we shall have advanced a far stage toward that pinnacle of artistry which is our present goal" (*Works* 200; vol. 2). Like Locke, she saw propaganda and appeals to the white race as keeping African Americans perpetually in a position of inferiority.

None of this is to say that Dunbar-Nelson did not deal with racial matters in her fiction; in fact, one of the central arguments in my second chapter is that she did. Dunbar-Nelson believed that artistry should never be sacrificed to politics, not that art was incapable of molding and shaping opinions. In this way, she again echoes Du Bois' 1921 opinion on the value of art in portraying the full humanity of black people. In her essay, "Negro Literature for Negro Pupils,"

Dunbar-Nelson betrays a somewhat star-struck response to Du Bois, recounting in detail a compliment he gave her on a speech at a conference they attended together, saying "So I felt I had put it over" as a result ("Letter to W. E. B." 2). She even goes on to describe the dinner she served him, boasting, "DuBois actually complimented the cooking" (Dunbar-Nelson, "Letter to W. E. B." 2). Du Bois had equally kind things to say to and of Dunbar-Nelson, writing what can only be described as a sweet letter to her in the event of the illness that would lead to her death. He teases her, saying, "'I see 'be the papers' that you are trying to be an interesting invalid and collect bales of sympathy from your friends and enemies. I hasten to comply" (Du Bois, "Letter").

published in *The Southern Workman* in 1922, Dunbar-Nelson argued that black children should be taught literature by black writers to instill in them a sense of pride in their own history and culture. She notes, “for two generations we have given brown and black children a blonde ideal of beauty to worship, a milk-white literature to assimilate” (Dunbar-Nelson, “Negro” 59). While she objects to black children reading only white literature, she also objects to them being taught about the achievements of their race through overt didacticism, complaining about the use of “dull statistics,” and “tedious iterations that we are a great people” (Dunbar-Nelson, “Negro” 59). Instead, she counters, “But we will give the children the poems and stories and folklore and songs of their own people. We do not teach literature; we are taught by literature” (Dunbar-Nelson, “Negro” 59). For Dunbar-Nelson, literature did have pedagogical value, but only when the moral was not foregrounded. For instance, she praised several novels centered on race and wrote numerous passing stories herself. She gave Larsen’s *Passing* a highly favorable review in her column, calling it a novel with “universality of appeal” (*Works* 262; vol. 2); likewise, she praised W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Dark Princess* because it “is artistic. The propaganda contained therein is so disguised that it is not obtrusive as it was in the *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*” (*Works* 215-16; vol. 2). As her dislike of his novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, suggests, Dunbar-Nelson desired that any sort of propaganda in literature be “disguised,” while Du Bois eventually came to hold the position that black art was of necessity, propaganda.

Another writer famously took issue with Du Bois’ stance, and with later race theorists, activists, and artists who foregrounded politics in their works. In 1927, Hurston called Du Bois a “propagandist with all the distorted mind of his kind” and implied that he didn’t portray the South accurately (*Life* 108). She conceded that “He is doing a great service perhaps for his race,” but insisted that his “propaganda methods” were not to be trusted because she thought they

“never follow actual conditions very accurately” (*Life* 108). Throughout her career, Hurston took offense to activists who portrayed the South as a region beset by strife, hardship, and racism only. A great deal of her writing is devoted to complicating portrayals of the South, which has led to conflicting and often critical responses on the part of her readers. In her often-cited essay, “How it Feels to Be Colored Me,” published in 1928, Hurston responds to one of Du Bois’ most famous lines, saying, “I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored...My country, right or wrong” (829). Hurston is indirectly referencing Du Bois’ statement in *The Souls of Black Folk* in which he defines double-consciousness as,

this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2)

For Du Bois, African Americans were denied the status of full American citizens, both in a tangible sense of being denied equal rights, but also psychologically. While Hurston did admit to experiencing discrimination in “How it Feels” and in other places, she adamantly denied double-consciousness, refusing to feel or express what she saw as self-pity. In this same essay Hurston (in)famously states, “But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low-down dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it” (827). Disgusted with representations of struggling African Americans, particularly Southerners, Hurston insisted on positive portrayals of Southern black culture, instead of a group in need of “uplifting.”

Both Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson were responding to the New Negro movement, from their respective historical and political standpoints. Both, for instance, resisted the imperative to write race or protest literature, to make their art serve an obvious political purpose. In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston defined that stance, saying, “From what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race problem. I was and am thoroughly disinterested in that subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color” (171). Dunbar-Nelson held similar views on the goals and parameters of black literature, despite the fact that her style and genre is at first glance, strikingly different from Hurston’s. In the same letter in which Dunbar-Nelson likened race literature to “a quinine pill in jelly,” she stated that she preferred to “always think of [her] folk characters as simple human beings, not as types of race or an idea” (qtd. in Metcalfe 38). Both writers felt that for black literature to be respected, writers had to treat their characters as individuals, to establish first and foremost that African Americans were human and shared all of the same emotions in common with whites. For modern critics, skeptical of claims of universal experiences, both Hurston’s and Dunbar-Nelson’s statements can cause unease. To many, they sound eerily similar to the young man who told Langston Hughes, “I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet” (Hughes 91). It is likely for this reason that Kevin Gaines says Dunbar-Nelson was primarily interested in “mastering the elite culture of European civilization,” in her writing and that Eleanor Alexander has gone so far as to state, “Alice’s mind’s eye did not want to see herself as a Negro” (63).⁶ It is

⁶ Alexander also claims that Dunbar-Nelson “decided to become a Creole,” a statement that, in combination with Hull’s, has caused a great deal of confusion among Dunbar-Nelson scholars (66). Alexander also surmises that Dunbar-Nelson “Throughout her life... demonstrated a racial

also statements such as these that have contributed to Wright and Carby's criticism of Hurston, which I referred to earlier, and which accuse Hurston of a kind of minstrelsy, that her writing "Is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy" (Wright 17). Rather than dismiss such statements as evidence of racial self-hatred, or use them in combination with Hurston's and Dunbar-Nelson's fiction featuring white characters to write them out of the black literary tradition, we should examine such statements more carefully. When considered in context with Locke, Du Bois, and earlier activists in the New Negro movement, it becomes evident that Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson were responding to the pressure placed on black writers, and black women in particular, to write a certain kind of literature. While Dunbar-Nelson rejected the didacticism of the domestic novel, Hurston rejected the portrayal of black struggle in the protest novel. In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes' criticism of the young black poet was targeting another kind of black writer, specifically middle-class writers who imitated white cultural forms and were ashamed of the "beauty of [their] own people" (91). Hughes believed the best black art would come from "the low-down folks, the so-called common element" who recognized the beauty in their own culture and were not afraid of turning it into art (92). Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson were certainly among those writers who believed in emphasizing the beauty and uniqueness of black culture, while also

ambivalence that manifested itself in feelings of racial inferiority, as well as a strong dislike for dark-skinned African Americans," feelings which eventually caused her to "reject the black self" (62, 67). While Dunbar-Nelson did exhibit color prejudice in some diary entries and, most infamously, in her essay "Brass Ankles Speaks," in which she outlines the struggles faced by a light-skinned black girl, she always identified as a black woman.

challenging common understandings of what literature by black women writers “should” look like.

Both Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson devoted themselves to writing “folk characters” and art, which Hurston defined as the “boiled-down juice of human living,” as spontaneous and unstudied art that was, as a result, entirely free of didacticism (“Folklore and Music” 875). Despite their insistence that such art was written in a manner that avoided propaganda, the effect of their writing was to speak back to stereotyped Western representations of black folk culture, as well as New Negro representations of it as an embarrassing relic of slavery. In their similar stances on literature, it can be seen that Dunbar-Nelson is an early folklorist, a progenitor to Hurston in that she was trying to provide what she saw as a more accurate representation of the varieties of black life—one that did not engage in racial propaganda, but still countered problematic portrayals of African Americans, particularly Southerners. She, too, was engaged in the project of complicating what Southern rural black life looked like, not just to respond to white authors’ portrayals, but to black ones as well, who used images of black Southerners for their own racial propaganda. Her fiction represents black women, in particular, in ways that speak back to popular portrayals of New Negro Women, challenging ideas defining respectable black womanhood. In depicting Creoles of color, she challenges the notion that all black Southerners resembled a stereotyped plantation folk, thereby complicating notions of “authentic” blackness and black folk at the turn of the century. Hurston’s own folk writings are likewise dedicated to capturing black folk stories and speech. Hurston’s fiction is enhanced by her extensive study of the shifting and expanding field of anthropology and her numerous folklore gathering sojourns in the South as well as in the Caribbean. In Hurston’s fiction, she is able to challenge the field of folklore studies itself, particularly its Western, scientific/rational approach.

Despite the fact that Dunbar-Nelson did not have access to Hurston's anthropological education, both writers theorized black folklore as an ongoing cultural process; it was not, as earlier scholars believed, a remnant of the past or something to be progressed beyond, or from which to be "uplifted." Rather, it existed in the present, was valuable, and was continually being made as an ongoing source of empowerment and strength for the black community.

This is not to say that Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson held identical views regarding aesthetics and politics. Dunbar-Nelson's own fiction emphasizes more often than not the tragedy and hardship experienced by women of color. In her column, she expresses opinions that correspond with her own emphasis on the tragic, stating, "When we think at all, we think in terms of sorrow, and every artistic expression that we have had – literature, music, painting or sculpture – is inexpressibly and profoundly sad, but not gloomy, with Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears" (*Works* vol 2; 145). For Dunbar-Nelson, black art was characterized by sadness and trauma, which she saw as extending from the history of slavery. Likewise, Dunbar-Nelson leaned more toward political agitation and activism than did Hurston, at least in her non-fiction writing. While both Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson criticized race leaders for their empty speeches on progress, they did so for different reasons. Hurston was heavily critical of the "Race Man...and his Reconstruction pulings," saying, "they stand around and mouth the same trite phrases, and try their practiced-best to look sad... His job today is to rush around seeking for something he can 'resent'" ("Art and Such" 908). Hurston heavily criticized the emphasis on "sorrow" in black art in the post-Reconstruction era, believing it to be detrimental to the creation of art as a whole. Dunbar-Nelson also criticized race leaders and their speeches, particularly their resistance to movements by the younger crowd of African Americans, mockingly telling them in her column to "decry modernity and improvements with one breath, while you howl for progress

with the other. Don't forget the old slave grandmother, and the washwoman of the past generation" (*Works* vol 2; 114). Like Hurston, Dunbar-Nelson found trite appeals to sentimental slave figures to be useless. Unlike Hurston, however, Dunbar-Nelson believed that the central problem with race leaders was that their action stopped with speeches. In her essay, "Facing Life Squarely," she says, "We are fond of talking nowadays about 'Progress in Race Relations.' It is a phrase that is on the tongues of white and black—those interested in sociology and economics. We are deluged with releases giving statistics of the increased good will between the races...Much is doubtless true....But---let us face the situation squarely" (*Works* vol 2; 297-98). The rest of her essay lays out evidence of persistent structural racism, devoting special attention to the South, lynching, and segregation in schools. Like Hurston, Dunbar-Nelson was critical of too heavy an emphasis on sociology and not enough on life as it was lived by African Americans; unlike Hurston, Dunbar-Nelson devoted a great deal of her writing and political work to actively pointing out inequality and the damage and violence caused by white supremacy.

So what is "authentic" black literature? Is it literature in which art and aesthetics are foregrounded, as Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson theorized? Literature that contemplates the actions of individuals first, with their race and gender being secondary considerations? As numerous critics, including myself, have pointed out, the texts of Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson are often far more overtly political than they would have been likely to admit. Nevertheless, is the fact that their literature is politically valuable, or that it has some level of protest, however disguised, what makes it worthy of study? Kenneth Warren's recent book, *What Was African American Literature?*, would lead us to believe that both Dunbar-Nelson and Hurston belong to the African American literary tradition because they wrote in an era of Jim Crow segregation and that fact is

what primarily defines their literature as “African American.” Have valuations such as these—that a text is not political enough, has the wrong politics, is too bourgeois, not enough folk and blues, has the wrong color characters, etc.—prevented us from discovering or understanding important work done by black writers? The questions that concerned black writers and intellectuals at the turn of the century and during the Harlem Renaissance still concern us today. While Du Bois, Dunbar-Nelson, Locke, Hurston, and others debated how literature should best represent African Americans, we too continue to debate the black literary tradition. This is evident from our own uncertainty over how to consider the work of Dunbar-Nelson, or from the fact that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* continues to be Hurston’s most-discussed text while *Seraph on the Suwanee* receives little attention in comparison. All too often we dismiss texts and writers that do not fit our expectations, when it is these non-conforming texts that are necessary for continuing to challenge our understanding of the black women’s literary tradition.

Chapter one establishes a foundation for my dissertation as I examine fiction and non-fiction by black women in the 1890s—writers to whom Dunbar-Nelson and Hurston later responded in their own writing. In particular, I focus on how writers Victoria Earle Matthews, Anna Julia Cooper, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Pauline Hopkins adhered to and challenged uplift ideology and New Negro Womanhood. I consider how Harper and Hopkins used sentimental domestic fiction to argue for the political and social equality of African Americans in the turbulent years of the post-Bellum, pre-Harlem era. I argue that racial and gender expectations of the era and uplift ideology impacted their representations of black women and families, leading them to write fiction that countered negative stereotypes of African Americans while implying that the race needed to aspire to Victorian morality and bourgeois manners in order to “progress” beyond their slave pasts. As such, I also consider Harper’s and

Hopkins' complicated relationship to folk culture by examining their portrayals of African Americans of various generations and classes. Chapter one ultimately suggests that each of these writers struggled with how to represent African Americans (women, in particular) in an era of violence and stark inequality and calls for progress from prominent black leaders.

Chapter two turns to the short fiction of Alice Dunbar-Nelson, particularly her work in *The Goodness of St. Rocque*, but also several of her other stories published in magazines, or manuscripts published for the first time in Gloria Hull's collection. I argue that she uses regional fiction—a noticeably different genre than the overtly didactic domestic fiction of Harper and Hopkins—to challenge Victorian social conventions and New Negro Womanhood. Writing in this genre and about Creole society allowed Dunbar-Nelson to revise her readers' understanding of black life in the South, to provide a more accurate portrayal of folk culture and language than was being depicted in most black or white literature of the time. This chapter examines Dunbar-Nelson's relationship to narratives of uplift and "progress" and her use of dialect to suggest that she advocated a connection to folk culture and communities to survive in a modernizing and increasingly racially stratified society. I close the chapter with an examination of Dunbar-Nelson's critique of Victorian womanhood, particularly the pressure placed on women to follow gender and racial roles and norms. Throughout, I situate her in the context of popular black women's fiction of the 1890s to show how we have retroactively turned this more obviously political writing into the black women's literary tradition, causing us to leave out writers such as Dunbar-Nelson, whose short fiction anticipated the work of later writers such as Hurston.

Chapter three recovers the short fiction of Zora Neale Hurston, which is often ignored in favor of Hurston's novels or her folklore collections. The chapter traces Hurston's early short fiction to her more well-known folk tales to her practically unknown stories set in the North to

show her development throughout the course of her career. I compare Hurston's portrayal of the folk with Dunbar-Nelson's in her short fiction, focusing on many of the same themes: her use of dialect, her rejection of Western notions of "progress," and her repeated critiques of New Negro Womanhood. In doing so, I make the case that Dunbar-Nelson forecasted Hurston's work. However, I also contextualize Hurston's work within the shifting field of anthropological studies, arguing that advancements in the field along with Hurston's background in it allowed her to write about Southern black folk in ways that Dunbar-Nelson could not have. I argue that Hurston uses her short stories to challenge the terms of folklore itself, particularly the notion that it could be collected as an authentic bit of culture. Like Dunbar-Nelson, Hurston recognized that folk stories and a connection to one's community were essential forms of resistance and empowerment.

Chapter four brings Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson together by examining their white-life fiction. Both women wrote in the genre, a choice which has baffled many critics. Dunbar-Nelson's work has been left out of the black women's literary tradition because early critics mistakenly believed that the majority of her fiction featured white characters; likewise, Hurston's white-life novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, has been largely ignored or criticized as a failure because Hurston was thought to have turned her back on her strength—folk literature—in this final novel. I examine their white-life fiction to draw attention to our tendency as critics to reject or include writers or works from the black women's literary tradition because of unexamined assumptions of what makes a work "authentic" or valuable. I begin the chapter by looking at Dunbar-Nelson's manuscript, *A Modern Undine*. I argue that Dunbar-Nelson uses the novella to make a sarcastic and cutting critique of Victorian womanhood and the white men who protect and uphold it as an ideal. Dunbar-Nelson shows Victorian womanhood's defining traits to be

contradictory and therefore impossible to achieve—she goes a step further to imply that such women who aspire to the status are soulless and selfish and will remain so unless they interact with and genuinely care for those less privileged. The second half of the chapter focuses on Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee*, drawing connections between it and *A Modern Undine*. I argue that Hurston’s novel likewise critiques the white middle-class family structure, but Hurston’s novel focuses especially on the white family of the New South. Hurston uses her novel to reveal how the mythology of the Old South continued on into the New by portraying a white businessman and his former “cracker” wife and their attempt to create what is essentially a twentieth-century plantation. Hurston’s novel is complicated by her desire to redeem the South in the eyes of her Northern readers, however. I ultimately conclude that both writers turn the gaze away from supposedly troubled black families and on to flawed white middle-class society, implicitly (and in Hurston’s case, directly) exposing white “norms” as a source of oppression for African Americans.

My conclusion returns to the question of how we construct the black women’s literary tradition. I examine Kenneth Warren’s book more fully, contrasting it with the texts I discuss on this project. In light of Warren’s argument, I consider the importance of recovery, and ultimately conclude that recovering authors is a necessary enterprise with significant implications for how we define black women’s literature for a future generation of readers and scholars.

I

Representing the Folk in African American Women's Writing of the 1890s

The 1890s saw a proliferation of writing by black women. Spurred by a social and political climate that would cause Rayford Logan to label the period from 1877-1915 the “nadir” of African American history, black women took up their pens in order to fight racial, gender, and sexual oppression (Logan). Some, such as Ida B. Wells, were more radical in their approach, boldly speaking out against lynching and sexual violence while others were more conservative. Victoria Earle Matthews, another “race woman” who supported Wells’s anti-lynching campaign, referenced the valuable work of these women in a speech she made at the First Congress of Colored Women in Boston in 1895, proclaiming that they were “shrinking at no lofty theme, shirking no serious duty, aiming at every possible excellence, and determined to do their part in the future uplifting of the race” (Matthews and Miller 183). Matthews’s emphasis on loftiness, “duty,” and “the future uplifting of the race” is itself quite telling, characteristic as it is of the discourse at the time, and is the kind of rhetoric I will be examining in this chapter. To gain a better understanding of the various approaches these “race women” took, I will be looking closely at the fiction and non-fiction of several prominent African American writers at the turn of the century and their negotiation of what it meant to be a black woman in such a turbulent political, social, and literary climate. What concerns were foremost in the minds of these writers and what obstacles did they face in producing and publishing their work? What kind of work did they want their writing to do—how did they want to represent themselves to black and white audiences alike, and what political, social, and cultural changes did they hope their representations would bring about? How did their writing represent—and reproduce—class and gender relations? The writers I examine in this chapter are dedicated to laying bare the legacies

of slavery, especially for black women. The women I discuss in this chapter—and their approach of foregrounding racial politics in fiction—have become representative of the black women’s literary tradition at the turn of the century. Nevertheless, their adherence to uplift ideology complicates their political activism, as it was an ideology that favored middle-class African Americans. An examination of the politics of race women in the 1890s, of uplift ideology and New Negro Womanhood, is necessary to set the stage for my later discussion of Alice Dunbar-Nelson—an outlier in the black women’s literary tradition—and how she and other writers such as Zora Neale Hurston responded to and revised the approaches of the women I discuss in this chapter.

A contradiction between activism on behalf of the race and self-help ideology shows up repeatedly in these writers’ articles, speeches, and novels. Victoria Earle Matthews is one woman who embodied many of these contradictions. She was born into slavery in Georgia in 1861. Her mother took her to New York in 1872, where she worked as a domestic servant. She was largely self-taught and began making a name for herself by writing and editing household columns for African American journals. She became well known as a political journalist and had prominent roles in several African American women’s organizations. In Matthews’ 1895 address, entitled, “The Value of Race Literature,” she makes a case for the importance of literature written by African Americans given the abundance of racist and demeaning portrayals of African Americans in white-authored texts. Her speech places the blame for the negative state of affairs on “oppressive legislation and grossly inhuman conditions,” but mostly on “the Prejudice of Color” (Matthews and Miller 171). Matthews vehemently denies any other popular explanation for the perceived lack of improvement by African Americans, stating, “Not condition, not character, not capacity for artistic development, not the possibility of emerging from savagery

into Christianity, not these, but the 'Prejudice of Color'" is responsible for the status of African Americans at the turn of the century (Matthews and Miller 171). Matthews is simultaneously denouncing two popular explanations for the supposed inferiority of African Americans. One was based in Darwinian social science and claimed that African Americans were biologically inferior, while another drew from the logic of cultural evolutionism, which argued that African Americans did not yet have the character or maturity for self-governance. According to this logic, slavery was a stagnant period in African Americans' cultural development—one from which many assumed they would never recover. By pointing to both culture as well as an inherent "capacity" or "possibility" for progress as false explanations for racial inequality, Matthews denies both claims and reverses the blame, making dominant white society the actual cause of the faults that they were so quick to lay on African Americans.

While Matthews's position was revolutionary, she nevertheless recommended certain behavioral modifications and cultural assimilation, especially for Southern black women. She was renowned as a journalist and activist, but Matthews was most well known for her work at the White Rose Mission, a settlement house in New York City for young girls who had newly arrived from the South. The primary goal of the house was to save young black women from being tricked into prostitution by criminal organizations disguised as employment agencies. However, it also had the purpose of training the women for domestic service by teaching them practical skills such as millinery, cooking, and sewing. In a letter to Booker T. Washington, who inspired her work on the project, she said that she wanted these Southern girls to be "looked after by respectable women until they make association of a proper and wholesome nature" (qtd. in Harlan 362). In a follow-up letter, she told Washington that she wanted "to plant a 'miniature Tuskegee' in 97th St" (qtd. in Harlan 364). Matthews was undoubtedly aware of the conditions

that led to disparities in economic and social conditions, but her prescription for solving these issues was based in uplift philosophy and Victorian codes of morality—ideologies that were complicit with cultural evolutionism and suggested that African American women needed to improve themselves before they could earn the respect of society. As a result, though her mission was an important one, she and other middle-class African Americans tended to make poor black Southern women responsible for their own degradation, and for lifting themselves free from it.¹ At the 1898 Hampton Negro Conference, Matthews exhorted, “Let women and girls become enlightened, let them begin to think, and stop placing themselves voluntarily in the power of strangers” while simultaneously calling them the “long-suffering, cruelly wronged, sadly unprotected daughters of the entire South” (qtd. in Kramer 243). Matthews’s comments were in keeping with the Hampton Institute’s mission of moralizing through industrial education and the instilment of a Protestant work ethic in rural African Americans. She recognized the systematic racism and sexism behind the treatment of young black women, and even took some responsibility for it upon herself and her fellow conference attendees, but her rhetoric suggests that Southern black women are just as responsible for their own suffering as are the “strangers” who exploit them. Nevertheless, her implication that black women are partially responsible for their own degradation may have been made only to appeal to a mixed race Hampton audience.

¹ The very name, “The White Rose Mission” was meant to invoke morality, purity, and self-help. Speaking of her reason behind choosing the name, Matthews said, “Let us call it White Rose...and I shall always feel that the girls will think of the meaning—purity, goodness and virtue and strive to live up to our beautiful name” (Matthews and Miller 189).

Matthews's uneasy relationship with lower classes of Southern African Americans is apparent in her essay on race literature as well. While she critiques stereotypical portrayals of African Americans by white authors and calls for black men and women to write their own literature as an "outlet for the unnaturally suppressed inner lives which our people have been compelled to lead," she still recommends that a more civilized, middle-class lifestyle be portrayed (Matthews and Miller 173). She has no patience for stories that have ambiguous portrayals of African American folk characters, fearing that whenever a reader is left to his or her own interpretation, that reader, particularly if he or she is white, will "infer whatever his or her predilection will incline to accept" (Matthews and Miller 174). Rather, she calls for a distinctive kind of race literature, one that faithfully represents a "high-type Negro" (Matthews and Miller 174). She claims that "such a literature" will "be a revelation to our people, and it will enlarge our scope, make us better known wherever real lasting culture exists, will undermine and utterly drive out the traditional Negro in dialect—the subordinate, the servant as the type representing a race whose numbers are now far into the millions" (Matthews and Miller 173). Matthews's argument is that the black population had grown in number, and also in its diversity, so the "traditional Negro in dialect" detracted from the agenda of representing the "high-type Negro" that Matthews and others wished to see in print. While Matthews's primary goal may have been to provide readers with a representation of African Americans that countered the damaging portrayals of authors such as William Dean Howells, Thomas Nelson Page, and Joel Chandler Harris, another essential goal of hers was to provide a "proper" guide for African Americans to model themselves after so the race might be uplifted—something that necessitated that certain types of African Americans were better off not being represented, so as to avoid any misinterpretations.

Matthews's call for an unambiguously positive and normative portrayal of a certain type of African American appears to have been answered by the women I will discuss in this chapter. Each of them to some extent questions what becomes of people who wholeheartedly adhere to the social requirements of dominant white bourgeois ideology, suggesting that these people are judgmental and dangerously out of touch with those whom they claim to be uplifting. At the same time, each of them adheres to some aspects of uplift ideology. Their reasons for doing so are certainly warranted. As Ta-Nehisi Coates has recently stated, "disembodiment"—not just the loss of ones' actual identity in the face of overwhelming stereotypes, but the very real fear of violence against the black body—has long dictated the behavior of African Americans. In the case of the era and women I will be discussing in this chapter, he writes, "Disembodiment. The demon that pushed the black middle-class survivors into aggressive passivity, our conversation restrained in public quarters, our best manners on display, our hands never out of pockets, our whole manner ordered as if to say 'I make no sudden moves'" (Coates 114). This very "aggressive passivity" is what I will be examining in this chapter. It is important to examine the reasons for—and implications of—advancing uplift ideology which often replicated racist and sexist attitudes of the white majority, even if it was done inadvertently. While it is necessary to acknowledge and study the incredible work these women did toward expanding the opportunities and possibilities for black women, it is equally important to recognize the pervasiveness of dominant norms as well as class tensions among African Americans at the turn of the century. Studying these moments provides us with an understanding of the ways that racism, sexism, and classism perpetuate themselves, and a more nuanced understanding of how African Americans negotiated what it meant to be black in the turbulent years of the post-bellum, pre-Harlem era.

"Uplift" and "Race Progress" in the Novels of Harper and Hopkins

“Uplift” took on a specific meaning around the time of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. While the term itself indicates social, political, and economic advancement, the question of responsibility—who is uplifting whom—is not exactly clear. During the Reconstruction era, uplift maintained a broad sense of racial solidarity and social improvement for all African Americans, having just come out of the struggle for freedom. Uplift was done collectively, through political agitation. As whites became increasingly threatened by the economic success of African Americans, they instituted Jim Crow regimes. Having been relegated to second-class status as citizens, many African Americans sought to prove themselves full citizens by distinguishing themselves from the masses of impoverished blacks in the South. Uplift changed from something that was done collectively to something that middle-class African Americans felt compelled to do for Southern black Americans, whom they saw as less fortunate, and/or less motivated. It is for this reason that Matthews says in her speech at the 1898 Hampton Negro Conference that it was “our ignorance, our sinful negligence in watching over and protecting our struggling working class” which was responsible for the degradation of so many Southern women once they came north (qtd. in Kramer 243). Thus while their motivation was noble, middle-class African Americans set up a hierarchical, paternalistic relationship between themselves and Southern black Americans, one that was exacerbated by uplift’s focus on self-help.

Kevin Gaines observes, "Amidst legal and extralegal 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'" (2). So while middle-class African Americans sometimes took the responsibility for uplifting the “struggling working class” upon themselves, they also depended on class differentiation to

define their own “race progress.” Uneducated, Southern rural African Americans were remnants of the slave past while middle-class African Americans had improved their situations through hard work, thrift, and solid morals; they were breaking away from their pasts and served as shining examples of the possibilities of the future. As a result, many African Americans attempted to relegate their experiences in slavery to a long-forgotten past that had been replaced by white, bourgeois cultural norms. This narrative conveniently forgot, or ignored, the fact that social mobility was deeply conditional and often dependent on factors such as class, gender, skin color and geography, as well as the fact that it was heavily implicated within the histories of slavery, racism, and sexism.

So why specifically the turn to uplift ideology and self-help rhetoric and the turn away from collective action? Many white Americans used the logic of biological racial inferiority and the discourse of blood to justify their claims of superiority. As such, any “African blood” was enough to designate a person as a member of the “lesser race” and associate them with all of the cultural signifiers of blackness. So closely tied were the notions of blood and culture that many whites believed that they would be able to recognize even the most light-skinned black person through their actions; in other words, “the blood will tell.” As Shirley Moody-Turner notes, many whites believed that the supposedly different behaviors (i.e., folk customs) of blacks “were so ingrained that they had become ‘spontaneous’ and ‘natural’” (41). This belief was perpetuated by frequently-circulated images of African Americans as primitive and happy plantation slaves in various mediums such as plantation fiction and blackface minstrelsy. In the eyes of white America, blacks were a monolithic group, biologically and culturally destined to inferiority; they were not capable of self-governance. As a result, many African Americans attempted to combat this notion of biological racial inferiority by proving themselves capable of cultural assimilation.

This also led to an emphasis, for better or for worse, on their intraracial differences, which were often focused on such overlapping factors as skin color, region, and class. As Gaines points out in his study of uplift ideology, arguing for equality and citizenship on the grounds of culture made those rights conditional—if one did not assimilate to cultural norms, it was his or her own fault for not doing so and choosing to remain in ignorance and immorality.

One novel that advocates race progress, and particularly moral uplift, while still retaining some elements of older forms of collective uplift is Frances Harper's 1892 novel *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted*. *Iola Leroy* has garnered more disparate criticism than perhaps any other African American woman's novel of the 1890s. A number of critics have accused Harper of trying too hard to appeal to her white audience through her depiction of the physical appearance and genteel deportment of her title character.² Harper's choice to make Iola a beautiful, fair woman who was not aware of her African American background until she was sold into slavery has been heavily criticized by modern readers. Some have risen to Harper's defense, however. The most common counter-argument is that Harper's novel is actually highly inclusive of all African Americans, regardless of class or education. These critics argue that *Iola Leroy* demands the activism of the full African American community in the work of post-Emancipation uplift, and even presents a kind of model for how this community might work together.³ The novel

² Most notable among these readings is Houston Baker's, who claimed that the novel was "an essentially conservative appeal to white public opinion" (32). See also Vashti Lewis and Elizabeth Young's articles on Harper's "near-white" heroine.

³ See especially Lauren Berlant's and Michael Borgstrom's articles for re-imaginings of Harper's novel.

follows slaves who deserted their masters to fight in the Civil War, their struggles against racism during and after the war, their reunion with their families, and their fight for political equality post-Emancipation. Harper portrays a range of African American characters of varying skin colors and backgrounds, from the illiterate yet business-savvy Aunt Linda, to the intelligent and personable soldier, Robert Johnson, to Iola herself. Some critics have also noted that Harper is actually more likely to avoid describing her characters' physical appearance at all, preferring to focus on their values and commitment to the race.⁴ Harper makes it clear that there is a place for all of these people in the post-Emancipation black community, but their centrality to the future of the race is not as straightforward. Harper's novel argues that skin color, culture, and income do not dictate success or one's value to the future of the race; at the same time, it argues that Christian respectability, morality, and dignity were accessible to all and were all that separated some members of the community from the disreputable rest. Thus while Harper's novel appears to advocate classlessness, it fails to recognize the ways that culture and "respectability" were in fact closely tied with class-status. It is for this reason that, at the end of the novel, it feels as though the future belongs mainly to characters like Iola and her light-skinned husband, Dr. Latimer, and not Aunt Linda or even Robert Johnson. Ultimately, Harper rejects traditional forms of Western progress, but remains bound to some of its ideologies.

Harper was a prolific speaker, essayist, poet, and advocate for temperance and education. She was born to free black parents in 1825 in Baltimore and attended school at the Academy for Negro Youth, run by her civil rights activist uncle. She later moved to Ohio and began her career as a teacher and abolitionist, both of which carried over into her later work. As Gaines notes, her

⁴ See especially Geoffrey Sanborn's article.

writing maintained a sense of an older form of uplift, focused on racial solidarity and political agitation, which is unsurprising given her former work as an abolitionist (36). The necessary involvement of the entire African American community is evident in *Iola Leroy*. The first several chapters of the novel are focused not on Iola herself, but on a community of slaves and their strategies for defying their masters and exchanging information. Even this early in the novel, Harper establishes that slaves were a diverse group with differences in speech and opinion. Robert Johnson acts as an informant, as his mistress taught him to read; he reads the papers for news of the war, and passes it on to his fellow slaves through coded language. While Robert's role is essential in the community, the narrator also notes that he was "a little vain of his superior knowledge" (Harper 14). His method of gathering information is depicted as nearly equivalent to that of Aunt Linda's, who is illiterate. When Robert tells her of a Union victory he read about, Linda matter-of-factly brushes off his "news," saying, "Oh, sho, chile...I can't read de newspapers, but ole Missus' face is newspaper nuff for me" (Harper 9). Significantly, Harper begins her novel by placing common forms of knowledge on the same level as more formal education. While most of the slaves are excited about the prospect of abandoning their masters to fight for the Union army, there are still those who desire to stay behind out of a sense of loyalty and obligation, such as Uncle Daniel. The novel critiques his choice when other slaves object to his decision, but still significantly gives his opinion voice, showing that intraracial conflict had long existed in the black community. In this way, Harper is fighting notions that African Americans were ever a monolithic group, either in slavery or as free citizens.

Harper's novel then shifts focus to Iola, a young woman whose father married his slave, but died of yellow fever, thus leaving his wife to be remanded to slavery and his children to discover their true heritage and sad fate. The middle sections of the novel recount Iola's family

history, which is nearly repeated when she is proposed to by a white doctor. In this sense, the novel depicts a unique kind of progress in that Iola chooses not to repeat her mother's fate when she rejects Dr. Gresham's proposal in favor of loyalty to her race. This proposal also allows Iola to have a debate with Dr. Gresham about civilization and racial progress. Dr. Gresham warns Iola that African Americans have a great deal to live up to and that they must prove themselves to the Anglo-Saxon race, which he says is "proud, domineering, aggressive, and impatient of a rival, and...has more capacity for dragging down a weaker race than uplifting it...They have manifested the traits of a character which have developed by success and victory" (Harper 89). While Dr. Gresham seems to think such characteristics are admirable, if intimidating, Iola believes that "dominant" does not mean "righteous," but is instead greedy and oppressive. She replies, saying, "I believe the time will come when the civilization of the negro will assume a better phase than you Anglo-Saxons possess. You will prove unworthy of your high vantage ground if you only use your superior ability to victimize feebler races and minister to a selfish greed of gold and a love of domination" (Harper 89). In a common, but strategic and successful move of the time, Iola reverses the hierarchy, though she is not as explicit here as to what qualities make African Americans the superior race.

These qualities, or at least what Harper thinks is necessary to make a superior civilization, become clear later. During the *conversazione* near the novel's end, Iola declares, "We must instill into our young people that the true strength of a race means purity in women and uprightness in men...And where this is wanting neither wealth nor culture can make up the deficiency" (Harper 193). Rather than aggression and domination, Harper defines "true strength" as moral strength. This allows her to critique capitalist imperialism as well as the kind of cultural evolutionism that relegated African Americans to the status of an "undeveloped," and therefore

inferior, civilization. As Andrea Williams argues, "By deconstructing turn-of-the-century classifications that privileged wealth or genealogy, Harper posits an alternative taxonomy in which moral respectability—enacted through temperance, sexual purity, thrift, modesty, work ethic, polite manners, and other attributes—is the non-pecuniary basis of status" (26). Harper argues that in post-Emancipation America, all are capable of moral respectability, even though they may not be capable of attaining great wealth or a quality education. This is reflected in her treatment of some of her lower-class characters. Rather than abandoning Aunt Linda and Uncle Daniel to the first half of the novel, symbolically leaving them in slavery, Harper brings them back in the second half of the novel. She continues to show intraracial differences; for example, Aunt Linda has never learned to read, and does not wish to either. Nevertheless, Harper still shows her to be a successful and "pure" woman. She and her husband own their own property, and she refutes a negative stereotype of Southern African Americans, telling Robert, "I'se pore, but I'se clean" (Harper 120). Iola's remark that black women need only be pure takes on a meaning other than the obvious sexual purity, reminding readers that purity also extends to physical cleanliness of one's body and home. Aunt Linda goes on to distinguish herself from those Southern blacks who drink and sell their votes, saying, "I thinks some niggers is mighty big fools" (Harper 122). Robert chastises her for criticizing her own race, but it is significant that Aunt Linda insists on making the distinction between herself and those she sees as immoral and therefore of a lower status than herself. Iola, her brother Harry, and Robert all get along well with characters such as Aunt Linda despite their more "refined" appearance. Harry even marries a dark-skinned, well-educated black woman named Miss Lucille Delany. Several critics have pointed to her as being a prime example of Harper's vision of the future of the race, and have

used Miss Delany to refute arguments that Harper privileged her near-white heroine.⁵ Hazel Carby notes that Miss Delany, unlike Iola, is college-educated and is Harper's attempt to show "more than positive images of the race" (*Reconstructing* 92). For these reasons, many have pointed to Harper's text as being revolutionary.

While Harper's paradigm for success is inclusive of frequently disregarded members of the black community, Harper's new measure of culture nevertheless adhered to white, bourgeois norms. For instance, while her characters (and other characters in black women's fiction from the 1890s) may not have the same middle-class incomes or employment opportunities as whites, her more refined characters do tend to have better professions and education. Furthermore, while characters in sentimental domestic novels may not be capable of affording the nicest commodities, they practice or have a "natural" knack for fine aesthetics and manners, practicing cleanliness and pleasing decoration in their homes. Harper maintains a focus on progress and bourgeois refinement, which inevitably suggests that some African Americans are more well-suited to her vision of the future than others. One obvious marker of social status in the novel is dialect. Harper uses dialect more sensitively than many writers of her time did. James Christmann argues that Harper even uses dialect to "coupl[e] black progress with traditional black culture," to ground the future of the race in a "folk ethos" (6,9). He claims that the character who best bridges the gap between the folk and the upper class black communities is Robert. Robert begins the novel speaking a more "standard" form of English than his fellow slaves, but still with some folk expressions infused in his speech. For instance, he warns his

⁵ See especially Foreman (96-102). Also see Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* (88-92) and Cutter (142-45).

friends not to sing too loudly at a prayer meeting, telling them “‘fore you know, the patrollers will be on your track and break up your meetin’ in a mighty big hurry, before you can say ‘Jack Robinson’” (Harper 11). These subtle slips into dialect disappear as the novel goes on, as Robert’s speech becomes more “standardized.” Christmann notes that Robert eventually goes silent at the end of the novel, most notably during the *conversazione*. He states, "As black characters put slavery further behind them and as they rise socially and economically into the middle class, their voices become more powerful, more 'refined,' and less identifiably 'black'" (Christmann 11). It is also important to note that though Robert does not participate in the *conversazione*, he and his mother comment on it as they are leaving. Robert notes the “well-lighted, beautifully furnished rooms,” saying that they are “wonderful changes” from the prayer meetings they used to have in swamps (Harper 198). Though part of Robert’s satisfaction with the evening comes from the fact that they could now share their opinions and desires in freedom, his awe of the bourgeois setting stands out most. Though he and his mother, Marie, say they want to host the next meeting, indicating their continued participation, Marie is careful to note, “such meetings would be so helpful to our young people” (Harper 198). Marie’s statement, which is focused on the future of younger African Americans, and Robert’s position as an outsider in the “beautifully furnished rooms” make it clear that the future being discussed in the *conversazione* is not entirely for her or Robert.

While novels such as *Iola Leroy* were somewhat subtler in their shift from collective to individual uplift, novels that came later in the decade featured sharper class distinctions between characters with a clearer sense of who was doing the uplifting and who was being lifted. One such novel is Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of North and South*, published in 1900. Like Harper, Hopkins situates her novel as an intervention in dominant

narratives regarding African Americans supposedly inferior culture and position in society. To do so, Hopkins's novel inserts itself into, and revises, several genres. It is most commonly placed in the sentimental domestic novel tradition, though it has also been discussed as an intervention into the self-help tradition.⁶ As suggested by the title, Hopkins also saw herself writing in the historical romance genre. In *Contending Forces*, Hopkins writes in response to the typical ideological premise of that genre: "primitive" peoples are pitted against civilized society, backwardness against progress, until the forces of progress inevitably win, thereby reinforcing a linear, teleological history. Carla Peterson summarizes the purpose of the historical romance in the national narrative, saying, "Its ultimate mission is to promote social cohesiveness and a (re)definition of nationalist consciousness and cultural identity in the emerging or evolving nation state" (179). Notably, it is a history only of Western white culture. The "other," strange, or threatening population is contained, or in the case of popular Native American historical romances, they vanish. It is this literary tradition in which Hopkins situates her intervention.

In the preface to the novel, Hopkins outlines her goals: "Fiction is of a great value to many people as a preserver of manners and customs – religious, political and social. It is a record of growth and development from generation to generation. *No one will do this for us; we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history*, and, as yet, unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race" (Hopkins 13-14). In this passage, Hopkins seems to be answering the call of early black feminists and race leaders such as Matthews or

⁶ See Alisha Knight's book, *Pauline Hopkins and the American Dream: An African American Writer's (Re)Visionary Gospel of Success*.

Anna Julia Cooper who insisted that “the brush of the colored man himself” portray the black race in literature (*Voice* 223). Hopkins’ goal is not only to correct the damaging representations of African Americans that were prevalent in post-Reconstruction fiction and culture, but also to plead for the value of fiction itself as an important aspect of African American history. She equates fiction with a historical “record,” placing both on the same plane of importance. Furthermore, she does not see herself as creating that history, but rather she sees her novel as faithfully portraying a history that is and always has been in existence, but is merely “dormant” because it has been as yet “unrecognized” by white society. While this is a noble goal, and depicting such an alternative history was essential, Hopkins does not abandon one of the central premises of the genre, namely, its focus on progress and development. She copies the linear, teleological outline of history, writing black America’s parallel “record of growth and development from generation to generation.” It is a history that challenges a white Western version of history, but prescribes that a certain kind of African American be represented in order to pose an adequate challenge.

While Hopkins is, on the one hand, interested in representing a more accurate history, she is, on the other hand, highly interested in tracing the genealogy and blood origins of the black middle class, which is less historical and more reminiscent of racist pseudoscience at the turn of the century. Critics such as Shawn Michelle Smith have countered arguments that Hopkins’ writings give credence to pseudoscientific racist theories, claiming instead that her insistence on one common bloodline and her romantic storylines involving lost family connections transcend race. However, several other critics have noted, often with a tone of disappointment, that Hopkins finds truth in social Darwinist arguments and links blood, race, and class with

character.⁷ In the middle of introducing the main characters, the Smith family, the narrative breaks off for two pages in which the narrator speculates how African Americans have advanced so far since slavery. Immediately, progress is measured in terms of white Western civilization when the narrator lists “a few of the refinements of living – such as cultivating a musical talent, gratifying a penchant for languages, or for carving, or for any of the arts of a higher civilization, so common among the whites, but supposed to be beyond the reach of a race just released from a degrading bondage” (Hopkins 86). The narrator argues, essentially, for cultural assimilation and the ability of African Americans to achieve a white standard of “higher civilization.” The narrator goes on to defend the race’s fortitude and work ethic, but finishes the section, saying, “Then again, we do not allow for the infusion of white blood, which became pretty generally distributed in the inferior black race during the existence of slavery. Some of this blood, too, was the best in the country... Surely the Negro race must be productive of some valuable specimens, if only from the infusion which amalgamation with a superior race must eventually bring” (Hopkins 87). In this somewhat disturbing and often-debated passage, Hopkins concedes to eugenicist science and claims that white blood was biologically superior and directly connected to character.⁸ Part of Hopkins’ motivation might have been to counter the stereotype that mixed-

⁷ See Andréa Williams, especially chapter 4. See also Martin Japtok’s article on Hopkins’ relationship to social Darwinism.

⁸ Several critics have defended Hopkins in this passage. In *Blood Talk: American Race Melodrama and the Culture of the Occult*, Susan Gillman argues in one of the most thorough readings of the passage that Hopkins highlights the multiple and “excessive meanings” of blood in this passage, which show its many contradictions in the discourse of the day (69). Others have

race people were inferior, an opinion that is expressed by a woman in the novel's sewing-circle chapter, who calls mixed-race people "a mongrel mixture which combined the worst elements of two races" (150). Hopkins allows Dora Smith to counter this notion verbally while she also uses her character, Sappho, to counter the stigma of shame associated with being mixed-race as a result of rape. Nevertheless, Hopkins' association of white blood with superiority is difficult to dismiss.

The notion that "blood" is connected to character is evident in Hopkins' description of several characters in *Contending Forces*. Mrs. Willis, a prominent, if flawed, "race woman" and community leader in Hopkins' novel, is a good example of this philosophy in practice in the novel. She is one of the more successful members of the Boston elite, and Hopkins gives a reason for this. The narrator explains that some African Americans had a greater advantage because they were not entirely ignorant upon emancipation; some, the narrator explains, were free-born while others, "the energetic slaves of the South," had simply worked harder during slavery and bought their own freedom (Hopkins 145). The narrator explains that Mrs. Willis was from one of these groups, and then adds that though "the history of her descent could not be traced... somewhere, somehow, a strain of white blood had filtered through the African stream"

claimed that Hopkins has a sarcastic tone in this passage: see Richard Yarborough's introduction to the 1988 publication of *Contending Forces*. Others have read this passage as less than positive, like myself. In "Eugenics and the Fiction of Pauline Hopkins," John Nickel uses this passage to argue that Hopkins thought (similar to Charles Chesnut) that amalgamation of the races was inevitable and desirable. Vashti Lewis sees the passage as conciliatory to racist social science.

(Hopkins 145). Though the narrator offers no explanation as to what exactly this strain of white blood did, it appears from the context of the paragraph and from the narrator's earlier claim for white blood that it contributed to her vivacity and determination. Hopkins is careful to note how blood has mixed with class, though for her, blood tends to win out. For another character, "low class" white blood causes his ambitions to cross the line from potentially beneficial to dangerously selfish. John Langley, Will Smith's friend and Dora Smith's fiancé, is described as "a descendant of slaves and Southern 'crackers,'" a combination the narrator calls "a bad mixture—the combination of the worst features of a dominant race with an enslaved race" (Hopkins 91). Langley is unable to overcome his unfortunate genetics. We eventually find out that Langley is the descendant of Anson Pollock, an evil white man who ruined the lives of the Smith family's ancestors by attempting to seduce one of them, a woman named Grace Montfort, and then enslaving her and her family when she refused his advances. As his ancestor did, Langley tries seduction and backhanded methods to achieve his goals; he tries to seduce Sappho, the novel's beautiful and mysterious female protagonist, away from Will Smith by using his knowledge of her secret past as a rape victim and mother to blackmail her into becoming his mistress. Like Mrs. Willis, he too is capable of performing middle-class respectability, but succumbs to his particularly "inferior" genetic inheritance.

Both Harper's and Hopkins's novels are largely aligned with uplift ideology. While *Iola Leroy* maintains somewhat of an older sense of collective uplift, it nevertheless insists that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own morality and their own choices. Harper's novel distinguishes morality from economic means or social position, implying that all are capable of doing well in a post-slavery era so long as they are hard-working, respectable Christians. *Contending Forces* adheres to the same notion that the race had progressed since

slavery and would continue to do so, as is evidenced by characters such as the Smith family who had achieved middle-class respectability and refinement. Even more controversially, Hopkins' novel suggests that progress might be dependent on amalgamation, insinuating that "African blood," though pure and innocent, was inferior to "white blood," which appeared to imbue one with a more ambitious character, for better or worse. Such moves were typical of Post-Reconstruction era fiction and were important for countering white narratives of black cultural and political stagnancy and backwardness, even as they replicate white, bourgeois, Judeo-Christian values.

Folk Culture and the South in Writing of the 1890s

Because uplift ideology had permeated thought and culture, black writers in the 1890s and early years of the twentieth century had a complicated relationship to concepts such as progress and civilization. As a result, they also had a complex relationship to Southern folk culture. As Claudia Tate observes in her study of the domestic novel, "With emancipation, African Americans marginalized slave culture with the adoption of dominant values, as schools and churches taught them that the survival codes of slavery and strategies for racial advancement often stood in mutual opposition" (56). Along with pseudoscientific racism, the field of folk studies was still in its infancy and was dominated, at least officially, by white folklorists who held that Western culture was the height of so-called "civilization," while folk culture was its opposite—evidence of primitive thought and evolutionary stagnancy.

As a transitional novel, Harper's *Iola Leroy* again demonstrates a more complex relationship toward the South and folk culture. A great deal of the novel is set in the South, as the characters travel there to reunite with lost family after the Civil War. As mentioned previously, Harper does imagine a future for her folk characters, though it is dependent on their strong

morals, and it is not quite the same future as she gives to characters of a higher class status. Additionally, as I argue above, though Harper uses dialect sensitively, she does use it to signify differences in status and success among her characters. Even more obvious than the use of dialect in establishing a clear difference from the slave past and the “civilized” future are several of the statements made by the characters concerning the “undeveloped” and “savage” African culture from which they rose. Dr. Gresham and Iola meet again near the end of the novel, and he makes a disturbing argument, saying that the reason white men lynch African Americans is because savage aspects of African culture rubbed off on them in their dealings with slaves. He says, “The negro came here from the heathenism of Africa; but the young colonies could not take into their early civilization a stream of barbaric blood without being affected by its influence, and the negro, poor and despised as he is, has laid his hands on our Southern civilization and helped mould its character” (Harper 165). While this might seem like a statement that Harper and Iola would reject outright, especially given Iola’s earlier critique of Western imperialist violence, Iola replies, “Yes...the colored nurse could not nestle her master’s child in her arms...without leaving upon him the impress of her hand” (Harper 165). While both ultimately blame the institution of slavery for social ills, their agreement concerning the heathenism of Africa is troubling, though not necessarily surprising, given Harper’s Christian perspective.

Notably, these arguments are repeated, and by Lucille Delany, whom many critics have defended as a rare favorable depiction of a dark-skinned woman in a domestic novel. While she may be a positive figure, her political positions undercut the notion of equality within the African American community. Christmann notes that Lucille does speak at the *conversazione*, unlike Robert or his mother, and is likely allowed to do so because of her “refined” voice. Furthermore, she makes several statements that are heavily critical of folk values. At one point, she reads a

poem, written by another woman, but which nonetheless “enter[s] her soul” as she reads it to the company. The first stanza is, “Oh, children of the tropics, / Amid our pain and wrong / Have you no other mission / Than music, dance, and song?” (Harper 191). The poem as a whole encourages African Americans, who it stereotypically depicts as carefree and singing heathens, to embrace Christ and the search for justice. As “children of the tropics,” they appear to have biologically inherited these cultural tendencies toward frivolity. Folk art and traditions are not valuable aspects of black culture, passed down from ancestors and modified in their American environment; they are not sources of resistance or empowerment in a racist culture—rather, they are distractions from “true” resistance, which, according to the poem, is embracing a Christian work ethic and morality. As an educated woman of the North, Harper, like her heroine Iola, advocates going among Southern African Americans, learning from them and educating them in turn, but in all of their work, a separation remains between these classes of African Americans.

While Harper’s depiction of folk characters is, for the most part, respectful and her indication that they do not belong to the future of the race is subtle, Pauline Hopkins is considerably clearer in representing and endorsing class divisions. The Smith family, though by no means wealthy, represents the best of Boston’s black middle-class. Mrs. Smith’s boarding house is characterized as one of the most prestigious in the neighborhood and only accepting of a certain kind of tenant. The narrator describes Mrs. Smith’s process, saying, “Mrs. Smith, after many trials, found that her house contained respectable though unlettered people, who possessed kindly hearts and honesty of purpose in a greater degree than one generally finds in a lodging house” (Hopkins 102). This passage suggests that Mrs. Smith had previously struggled with finding tenants who were “respectable” enough. The narrator elaborates on her process of elimination and coercion, saying that she and Dora began holding “musical evenings” for the

boarders so that they might meet one another and have a mutually beneficial effect on one another: “She argued, logically enough, that those who were inclined to stray from right paths would be influenced either in favor of upright conduct or else shamed into an acceptance of the right” (Hopkins 102). While Hopkins’ novel finds trouble with shaming in some circumstances, namely when black women shame one another for a lack of sexual purity, shaming is acceptable when it is done to put one on a “right” moral path. Similar to Harper, maintaining a strong Christian ethic is central to Hopkins’ novel. Because of Ma Smith’s policies, neighbors “whispered that to enjoy these privileges one must be ‘pretty nice,’ or as some expressed it: ‘You’ve got to be high-toned to get in there’” (Hopkins 103). Here, Hopkins acknowledges intraracial class distinctions as well as the ways in which they tended to coincide with differences in color. While this might be taken as a criticism of the Smiths, the narrator ultimately concedes, “The result, however, justified Ma Smith’s judgment” (Hopkins 103).

The suggestion that the Smiths are a family to be emulated is further reinforced by Hopkins’s comparison between them and their lodgers. In the preface to the novel, Hopkins introduces these characters, saying, “I have introduced enough of the exquisitely droll humor peculiar to the Negro (a work like this would not be complete without it) to give a bright touch to an otherwise gruesome subject” (16). Unfortunately, Hopkins’s “bright touch” risks essentializing lower-class or less educated African Americans and using stereotypes as humorous relief. Two of these characters are Mrs. Ophelia Davis and Mrs. Sarah Anne White. The women are former slaves, “both born in far-away Louisiana,” (Hopkins 104) and run their own laundry service, which they have named “The First-class New Orleans Laundry” (Hopkins 106). They chose to move into Mrs. Smith’s house because of its rumored respectability, “and because they could there come in contact with brighter intellects than their own,” and as the narrator adds, “it

is a very hopeless case when a colored man or woman does not respect intelligence and good position” (Hopkins 105). Both of the women speak in dialect, which is contrasted with the Smith’s decorous and “proper” English. Throughout the novel, both women attempt to approximate bourgeois gentility, but fall far short of it. This can, for instance, be seen in their rather deliberate naming of their laundry as “First-class.”

When we are first introduced to them at one of the Smith’s musical evenings, Dora, Will and Sappho are all singing hymns and operas when Mrs. Davis interrupts to sing “Suwanee River,” announcing, “None o’ yer high-falutin’ things can tech that song” (Hopkins 108-09). Given that the song, more commonly known as “Old Folks at Home,” celebrates slavery and plantation life and was often sung by white musicians in blackface, Mrs. Davis’ choice is highly questionable. As she sings it, Mrs. Davis makes “ambitious attempts to imitate an operatic artist singing that good old-time song. With much wheezing and puffing—for the singer was neither slender nor young—and many would-be-fascinating jumps and groans, presumed to be trills and runs, she finished, to the relief of the company” (Hopkins 109). Mrs. Davis’s performance is made out to be excessive as well as an embarrassing attempt to imitate the more “accomplished” singers who preceded her. To reinforce their cluelessness, Mrs. White applauds the performance, and relates a story of how Mrs. Davis gave a similarly impressive performance in church when she was unable to read the hymns. Hopkins draws from several realities of life for former slaves in writing Mrs. Davis and Mrs. White—they moved North in search of greater opportunity after the war and are illiterate. Rather than using these aspects of their character for a favorable or sympathetic portrayal, she uses these facts to signify their distance from the members of the elite black community; Mrs. Davis and Mrs. White, as reminders of slavery, are based more in stereotype than actual memory and are meant to make characters such as the Smiths look more

refined in contrast. Mrs. Davis and Mrs. White are distinctly different than characters of similar status in *Iola Leroy*. While Aunt Linda is contrasted with more bourgeois characters such as Iola, it is done more to show the diversity of the black community post-Emancipation, while also highlighting their similar goals. Mrs. Davis and Mrs. White are clearly meant to be humorous relief—unfortunately, the reason they incite laughter is because of their inability to fit in to a community that is beyond their reach.

In another more frequently discussed scene toward the end of the novel, Mrs. Davis asks Mrs. Smith if she can take over management of the house once Mrs. Smith goes to live with her children. Here, evidence of Mrs. Davis being “shamed into acceptance of the right” is on display. Mrs. Smith’s house is described as being decorated with “general good taste, even elegance,” which is enough to impress even her “cultured” British relative who wonders “By what art of necromancy had such a distinguished woman been evolved from among the brutalized aftermath of slavery?” (Hopkins 371). As Mrs. Davis sits with Mrs. Smith, preparing herself to ask if she can take over the boarding house, she gets excited while talking and stops to smooth her apron and “murmur[s] to herself, ‘Phelia, whar is you?’” (Hopkins 363). Mrs. Davis recognizes that her exuberance is quite literally “out of place” in a refined bourgeois household, though she still has problems containing it. While some critics have noted that Mrs. Davis’s take-over of the building signals impressive ambition and an acknowledgment of the equality of the women, Andrea Williams’s analysis more accurately represents the events of the text. She observes, “the physical space of the building as well as the social space as community leader is made available to Mrs. Davis only when vacated by those atop the social ladder” (Williams 121). In other words, the hierarchy is maintained. I would also add that in order to procure the building, Mrs. Davis must marry first, news that she shares with Mrs. Smith in this same conversation. Just as the

physical domestic space reminds Mrs. Davis to approximate bourgeois manners, so also does her taking over the community leadership role require that she accede to another social norm, namely, the institution of marriage. Significantly, Mrs. White, who disapproves of the marriage, is unceremoniously shuffled out of the text.

It is also significant that though Mrs. Davis attempts to adhere to these social norms, she again fails. The man she marries, Mr. Jeemes, is thirty years her junior, so Mrs. Davis lies about her age to make the match appear less unusual. Though she is at least fifty, she insists she is thirty-five, which pokes fun at her lack of education as well as her poor attempt at ladylike discretion. Furthermore, the narrator is careful to note that she loses her cool and calm demeanor again while talking about him as her “words flowed in a torrent” (Hopkins 366). Mrs. Davis ends her conversation with Mrs. Smith by relating a story of a bike ride she took with Mr. Jeemes. While some critics such as Carol Allen have tried to rescue this scene, arguing that it is an unusual and refreshing depiction of black lovers enjoying themselves, it is difficult to read this scene without acknowledging the mockery that is made of the couple. Allen is right that bicycles were symbolic of a kind of “erotic play” in the 1890s; they were associated with the New Woman, symbolizing equality of women, expansion of movement, and freedom from Victorian constrictions (Allen 37). They created greater visibility for women, in terms of their presence in public as well as their dress—bicycling required women to wear more form-fitting attire, thus turning bicycling into a moral issue. Given that most black women were attempting to deter any questioning of their morality, they typically avoided any activities associated with New Womanhood. Mrs. Davis’s bicycling adventure then becomes not a romantic scene, but an embarrassment. Mrs. Davis unabashedly notes, “Everybody was a-lookin’ an’ a-gappin’ at us. Sarah Ann says it was ‘cause we looked like a couple o’ jay birds stuffed” (Hopkins 367). The

adventure ends unsuccessfully as both fall off their bikes and into a sand pile. Though Mr. Jeemes is, as Mrs. Davis says, “purty black,” the sand turns his face white in a kind of reverse minstrel performance (Hopkins 367). To emphasize their inability to perform white bourgeois gentility, Mrs. Davis’s girth busts her corset and the fall causes her to lose her gloves, fake teeth and bangs, “all the external accouterments of the style she naturally lacks” (Williams 121). For characters like Mrs. Davis and Mrs. White, they try and continually fail to “assimilate the tenets of bourgeois individualism,” causing the reader to question the ability of women like them to actually do so (Williams 121). While Sandra Gunning and others have argued that Mrs. Davis and Mrs. White are representative of different aspirations among black women and are Hopkins’s attempt to show different classes of black women of varying skin colors, I agree more with Williams who argues that it is important to examine the way Hopkins is representing those different classes. In the case of Mrs. Davis and Mrs. White, Hopkins appears to be reinforcing the notion that cultural characteristics were not only biological fact, but also hierarchically ranked.

Overall, Hopkins’s depiction of various classes of African Americans has the effect of putting those classes inevitably in comparison with one another. Throughout the novel, Hopkins combines Darwinist social science with bourgeois individualism and self-help to motivate African Americans to achieve “race progress.” This motivation depends upon a depiction of “social betters”—of a class to aspire to—but it also unfortunately requires a depiction of an inferior class. As Gaines argues, “the middle-class character of the emphasis on positive representations of educated, assimilated blacks of sterling character was interdependent on the image of the so-called primitive, morally deficient lower classes” (75). Though many recent critics have attempted to show how Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* actually challenges the

ideology of uplift through strong, well-educated, and outspoken female characters, the novel itself is complicit with the notion that racial progress through uplift will lead to citizenship. For instance, at one point in *Contending Forces*, Will Smith, the novel's hero, is at a men's club meeting where a white Southerner is spouting black stereotypes. Will diplomatically replies that he doubts the truth of the stereotypes, but if any of them are true, they are the result of a lack of education:

These faults you speak of are but the remnants of an old irresponsible life. The majority of our race has turned aside forever from the old beaten paths of slavery into the undiscovered realms of free thought and free action. Some of the race may abuse the newly acquired liberty by petty pilfering or an overflow of religious enthusiasm, but the Negro has *changed*, whether you realize it or not; *times* have changed, and the Negro with them... No race is hopelessly lost to the world of progress that produces such manly specimens within fifty years of emancipation. (Hopkins 293-94, 296)

For Will, whose arguments the narrator seems to mostly agree with, African American progress since emancipation was evidence of their worthiness of equal rights and full citizenship.

Unfortunately, one of the means by which he does this is to distinguish himself and black elites from presumably undeveloped slave culture as well as the majority of African Americans living in the South. As Gaines has noted, arguing for citizenship on grounds of cultural differences made rights conditional and ended up replicating racist and sexist attitudes that were "deeply embedded" in bourgeois morality (4). Furthermore, as Will's singling out of impressive "manly specimens" suggests, progress and uplift was often gendered. Intellectual and professional achievements as well as the heroic deeds of black men were often praised in discourse of the

time, but black women were most progressive when they proved themselves virtuous members of patriarchal black families.

One could argue that Hopkins answered Victoria Matthews's call to represent a "high-type Negro," of both genders, and to make a clear distinction between these African Americans and the folk characters that Matthews was skeptical of seeing in print. While Hopkins's later fiction would attempt to validate black folk culture (though still without entirely abandoning a hierarchical, progressive view of civilization), in *Contending Forces*, she follows uplift's tendency to argue for the civilization and progress of African Americans by distinguishing them from the "undeveloped" black masses, trapped forever in a past that many African Americans were trying to forget.

New Negro Womanhood

Logics of progress and civilization intersected with ideologies of gender and sexuality, so that racial uplift took on different meanings for black women as compared to black men. While black men were often praised for individual acts of achievement or heroism in black magazines at the turn of the century, black women were more likely to be considered collectively.⁹ Middle-

⁹ One representative example is the "Famous Men of the Negro Race" series, written by Pauline Hopkins, and run in *The Colored American Magazine* from November 1900 to October 1901. This series features short biographies of famous African American men such as Toussaint L'Overture, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington. Each issue featured one man and his life. Following on the success of this series, Hopkins' later series, "Famous Women of the Negro Race" tended to focus on groups of women, such as "Phenomenal Vocalists" and "Educators."

class black women were thought to contribute most to the project of uplift as wives, mothers, and educators. So while middle-class white women were exploring their newfound identities as “New Women,” celebrating their increased mobility, and greater sexual, political, and financial freedom, black women did not dare to take on such a risky identity. For women stereotyped as lascivious Jezebels or asexual Mammies, and for whom work outside of the home was a necessity and not a choice, black women were eager to establish themselves first as stable and competent managers of their own homes and families. In this way, black women at the turn of the century aspired more to Victorian ideals of womanhood than “New” or modern manifestations of the ideal. The term, the “New Negro Woman” most accurately describes this ideal for black women, and was thought to be first used by Margaret Murray Washington, the wife of Booker T. Washington, in 1895. According to Washington, black women would combat popular notions of African Americans as primitive and therefore uncompetitive in the modern age by creating homes that would reflect the moral, cultural, and economic progress of the race. In language that echoes cult of domesticity advocates such as Catherine Beecher, Washington predicts that black women skilled at the art of home-making would “raise the standard of the home, and thus from the home will come stronger men to execute the nation’s plan” (qtd. in M. Patterson 58). As Martha Patterson notes, “Indeed, Margaret Murray Washington’s work suggests that as black women perform dominant middle-class identities—becoming New Negro Women—they not only inspire their mates to embrace a bourgeois production ethic, but they inspire white Americans to recognize their fitness for inclusion in...national rhetorics of progress” (51). According to Washington’s logic, black women were markers of civilization, and thus were responsible for carrying the race forward and proving the race equal in terms of evolutionary progress.

While Margaret Murray Washington believed that the role of black women was to contribute to the uplift mission from her position in the home, other writers had a more conflicted view of the role of black women. Anna Julia Cooper is a prime example of a turn-of-the-century black feminist who held contradictory views and spoke in sometimes conflicting voices. She was born into slavery in North Carolina in 1858. At age nine, she attended St. Augustine's Normal School and Collegiate Institute, where she began advocating for equal education for women at a young age. She protested against the school's policy, which did not allow girls to study theology or the classics. She carried this spirit of protest to Oberlin College which similarly steered women toward taking the "Ladies Course" track. Cooper, of course, chose the more challenging "Gentleman's Course" and completed her M.A. in Mathematics in 1887. As one of the few black women with a graduate degree, she was recruited to teach at the prestigious M Street High School. She would even go on to complete her Ph.D. at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1925, becoming the fourth African American woman ever to receive the degree. As a highly-educated, middle-class teacher from the South, she was the perfect representative of "progress" for black women. At the same time, her high level of education distinguished her from the typical "New Negro Woman" who was defined more by her dedication to her husband, family, and the race than her education. Advocating for equal education opportunities was more typical of white "New Women" than New Negro Women. Negotiating her unique position while trying to advocate for *all* black women in the midst of racism from whites and sexism from her black male peers defined the career of Anna Julia Cooper.

Cooper's now famous defense of black womanhood in her 1892 publication, *A Voice from the South*, has been singled out by critics as one of the earliest articulations of black feminist theory. In the book's preface, which Cooper entitled, "Our Raison d'Être," she observes

that the voice of black women had not yet been heard in the political discourse of the 1890s, a voice which she carefully distinguishes from that of black men, and later in the book, from white women. In the preface, she offers up her own voice as one that had been most silent, the “Voice by a Black Woman of the South” (*Voice* 52). While most have praised her work as being bold and remarkably sophisticated in its rhetoric, many critics have also noted her distance from those she claimed to represent.¹⁰ The fault most commonly found with Cooper is that she could not entirely separate herself from the ideology of Victorian womanhood, particularly its emphasis on domesticity and Christian morals. Mary Helen Washington, for instance, praises her book as “the most precise, forceful, well-argued statement of black feminist thought to come out of the nineteenth century,” but Washington’s central argument is that “while [Cooper] speaks *for* ordinary black women, she rarely, if ever, speaks *to* them” (265). Cooper argues for the unique opportunity for black women to effect social and political change, but does so by essentially advocating as Margaret Murray Washington did that they work from the domestic home space, using their feminine instincts of compassion and morality to quietly influence the men in their lives.

Some scholars, such as Claudia Tate and Hazel Carby, have argued that Cooper uses the language of Victorian womanhood strategically, either to appeal to an audience of middle-class black and white women, or more subversively, to perform the role of a New Negro Woman while undermining its core ideology. Indeed, by presenting herself simultaneously as a genteel Victorian lady and a “Black Woman of the South,” she was defying the very definition of what it

¹⁰ For critiques of Cooper’s positioning, see especially Mary Helen Washington’s, “Anna Julia Cooper: A Voice from the South,” and Kevin Gaines’s *Uplifting the Race*.

meant to be a “true woman” in the eyes of white Americans. While Cooper certainly challenged and revised this ideology that had excluded women such as herself and been the means of justifying violence and oppression against African Americans in general, the majority of her work concedes to the dictates of uplift. As Mary Helen Washington notes, "To counteract the prevailing assumptions about black women as immoral and ignorant, Cooper had to construct a narrator who was aware of the plight of uneducated women but was clearly set apart from them in refinement, intelligence, and training (251). Cooper’s tone was a necessary one. She most likely saw herself as speaking for women who did not have her access to education and publishing. Speaking from the position that she does, however, her solutions for ordinary Southern black women are undeniably out of touch with the reality of life for most of those women. Washington’s claim that “Her voice is not radical, and she writes with little sense of community with a black and female past" is certainly true of Cooper’s work in *A Voice from the South* (252). Nevertheless, her work elsewhere suggests that Cooper did attempt to articulate a way for African Americans to make their own voices heard, no matter their background or social standing. Taken together, Cooper’s writings and speeches demonstrate the prevalence of uplift ideology at the turn of the century while simultaneously illustrating the precarious position of black women uplift leaders as they navigated their newly self-appointed positions as representatives of black womanhood.

Like Victoria Earle Matthews, Cooper supported the industrial model of education while also advocating for the higher education of women.¹¹ As Gaines notes, this kind of “ideological

¹¹ Even though Matthews’s primary purpose for the White Rose Mission was a domestic, practical education for her young Southern boarders, she also amassed a large collection of

diversity” was common among black intellectuals prior to the rise of Booker T. Washington (130). At the 1894 Hampton Conference, Cooper firmly stated, “I believe in industrial education with all my heart. We can’t all be professional people. We must have a back bone to the race” (“Second” 126). This was a stance she held until becoming principal of M Street High School in 1901, where many of her students went on to prestigious universities. Because of her success with these students, Cooper’s opinions on education began to shift, favoring a higher education model, as many African Americans did after W. E. B. Du Bois rose in popularity. Because of ideological conflicts with administrators who advocated for manual training only, she was fired from her position as principal in 1905.

Cooper is best known for her strong stance in favor of building new opportunities for the education of black women. In her 1891 essay, “The Higher Education of Women,” she argued, “it is the prevalence of the Higher Education among women...that has given symmetry and completeness to the world’s agencies” (*Voice* 76). For Cooper, educating women was necessary to combat masculine greed and impulses toward domination and imperialism. Similar to Iola Leroy in Harper’s novel, Cooper significantly overturns accepted Western understandings of “civilization” and “progress,” pointing out how they were fueled by patriarchal domination and racial oppression. She questions,

Whence came this apotheosis of greed and cruelty?...Whence the self-congratulation of ‘dominant’ races, as if ‘dominant’ meant ‘righteous’ and carried with it a title to inherit the earth? Whence the scorn of so-called weak or

works written by African American authors, and offered literature courses (some of them taught by Alice Ruth Moore) in an effort to instill race pride.

unwarlike races and individuals, and the very comfortable assurance that it is their manifest destiny to be wiped out as vermin before this advancing civilization?

(Voice 73)

Cooper's answer is that because the focus has been on the education of men, they have largely had the run of the world, which has only led to violent imperialism. Her argument, while it falls back on gender essentialism, nevertheless calls for the education of women, who she claims will bring to the world "the great mother heart to teach it to be pitiful, to love mercy, to succor the weak and care for the lowly" (*Voice 73*). Cooper uses powerful, even sensual, language to argue for the personal fulfillment that education will bring women, in addition to the good it would do for the world. She argues, "Neither is she compelled to look to sexual love as the one sensation capable of giving tone and relish, movement and vim to the life she leads. Her horizon is extended. Her sympathies are broadened and deepened and multiplied" (*Voice 82*). For Cooper, intellectual development could even replace the need for sexual relationships.

Cooper's argument for the personal fulfillment that education would bring women is compelling and even surprising given her audience, but unfortunately the vigor and "vim" she imagines for women does not extend much beyond their domestic spheres. She initially responds to critics successfully—near the end of her essay, she addresses those who claim that education makes women unfit for marriage, stating that it "unsexed" them. She responds strategically, and cleverly, with sarcasm, saying, "I have been told that strong-minded women could be, when they thought it worth their while, quite enduring, and judging from the number of female names I find in college catalogues among the alumnae with double patronymics, I surmise that quite a number of men are willing to put up with them" (*Voice 84*). This response tears down her critics' false assumptions about proper gender roles within marriage. However, she ends her essay by

suggesting that it is only from within those circumscribed gender roles that women could or should make their voices heard. She states, “The earnest well trained Christian young woman, as a teacher, as a home-maker, as wife, mother, or silent influence even, is as potent a missionary agency among our people as is the theologian; and I claim that at the present stage of our development in the South she is ever more important and necessary” (*Voice* 87). For Cooper, Southern women held an important position, and needed higher education, but she imagined them using that education to be subtle and “silent influences” on their male relations rather than taking positions of leadership themselves. She argues something similar in an earlier essay where she claims that “the position of woman in society determines the vital elements of its regeneration and progress...And this is not because woman is better or stronger or wiser than man, but from the nature of the case, because it is she who must first form the man by directing the earliest impulses of his character” (*Voice* 59). Again, Cooper argues that women’s presence and recognition is of utmost importance in combatting masculine imperialism and domination, but, as Ann duCille has noted, “she never quite managed to fully extricate her own mind from the tenets of true womanhood” (52). Cooper’s voice sounds remarkably like Margaret Murray Washington’s in moments such as these.

Just as Cooper clearly struggled with certain aspects of New Negro Womanhood, so too did writers such as Hopkins. Like Cooper, Hopkins spent a great deal of her life and work arguing against the dangers of masculine imperialism; also like Cooper, she was unable to move past the notion that black women best served the race as helpmates and domestic partners to black men. The New Negro Woman was a controversial figure in fiction as well as political spheres. Margaret Murray Washington’s definition of it is still useful in analyzing race and gender relations at the turn of the century, particularly as they are depicted in fiction. Cherene

Sherrard-Johnson has more recently defined the New Negro Woman as “an ambiguously raced woman who appeared to emulate Victorian femininity,” a woman who was “more sentimental than modern, more Victorian than New Negro. She is beautiful, educated, middle-class, and usually engaged in a charitable, conscientious trade” (xix, 10). For instance, several of Hopkins’ characters embody this ideal, while also drawing attention to its flaws. While Harper’s *Iola Leroy* advocates for moral respectability as a marker of superiority and progress, Hopkins recognized that moral respectability was often used in service of both inter- and intraracial oppression to shame black women and make them responsible for their own sexual exploitation. In *Contending Forces*, one of Hopkins’ most important moves is to critique the standard of Victorian Womanhood on which New Negro Womanhood was modeled. For instance, she begins her novel with the beautiful, stately, and aptly named Grace Montfort, the wife of a Bermuda plantation owner who moves to North Carolina so he can gradually free his slaves. Anson Pollock, the Montfort’s neighbor, begins to conspire against the family because he desires Grace for himself and is threatened by Mr. Montfort’s plans to free his slaves. He encourages rumors that she is actually black and has Grace’s husband killed and Grace herself whipped in a scene that has received a great deal of critical attention. Hopkins graphically depicts the symbolic rape of Grace by two overseers as the “two strong, savage men” repeatedly whip her “tender, white back” until they have “satiated [their] vengeful thirst” (Hopkins 69). Hopkins repeatedly describes Grace with all of the markers of true and virtuous Southern white womanhood, and this scene reveals her reasons for doing so. The scene critiques the discourse of Victorian womanhood, since Grace, the very symbol of the ideology, is not safe from the system that claims to protect women such as her.

Once the narrative moves forward to the 1890s, Hopkins continues to critique Victorian womanhood through her character, Sappho, a light-skinned black woman from New Orleans with an initially mysterious past. She is, like Grace, a woman who appears on the surface to be a paragon of Southern virtue and genteel manners. However, we discover that Sappho was raped by her rich and powerful white uncle and had his child, whom she gave to her aunt to raise in secret. Such sexual exploitation was sadly typical for black women at the turn of the century. By making her heroine a victim of violent sexual assault, yet still in manner and morals a Victorian, or New Negro Woman, Hopkins argues not simply for the recognition of women such as Sappho as deserving of the status, but she also critiques the boundaries of the ideology. Proper, moral, and “true” Victorian womanhood was thought to belong exclusively to white women—the maintenance of it as an identity depended upon the exclusion of black women, excusing and even necessitating their subsequent oppression and exploitation. Furthermore, because so many black women had been sexually exploited, Hopkins demonstrates how New Negro Womanhood, with its emphasis on purity and family values, may exclude and shame many black women. Hopkins is, at the very least, arguing for a revision of the category. Furthermore, while Grace and Sappho share a similar history of rape, there is an important difference (and progression) in Sappho’s story. Grace kills herself, thus abandoning her two children to Anson Pollock and slavery. Significantly, Sappho reclaims her child, thus suggesting that suicide is not the only available option for “ruined” women, which was typical of many sentimental or melodramatic novels of the time. As Julie Nerad argues, "But even while claiming for all women access to a sexual morality consistent with the doctrine of ‘true womanhood,’ the novel also simultaneously critiques the doctrine's tenet that it was better for a woman to die than to live after suffering, such sexual and moral ‘outrage’” (367). At the end of the novel, the upright and noble Will accepts

Sappho as his wife without hesitation, even after learning her past history involving incestuous rape and an illegitimate child.

The novel is a notable example of what Claudia Tate meant when she said “black women writers of the post-Reconstruction era reaffirmed in novels their belief that virtuous women like themselves could reform their society by domesticating it” (*Domestic* 19). Hopkins’s female characters remain largely tied to the home-space, and so in many ways, fulfill Cooper’s and Washington’s recommendation for women—that they serve their community best from the hearthside. For instance, Sappho’s healing and acceptance of her past is dependent on her acknowledgment of her child. The narrator even goes so far as to say that the redemptive power of her “mother-love chased out all the anguish that she had felt over his birth” (Hopkins 346). Sappho’s ultimate redemption through motherhood suggests that Hopkins’s best solution to the problem of continuing racism and sexual violence against black women is to commit oneself to domestic life. This approach is not necessarily in conflict with racial protest; she is performing civility and morality according to gendered standards and is politically engaged in a way that is proper for an African American woman intent on racial progress. Sappho is not the only character who illustrates this; all of the women characters in the novel are safely situated in the home. Though it was far more common for black women at the turn of the century to work outside of the home, Hopkins combines work and home life for her characters. For instance, the Montfort’s descendants, the Smith family, run a boardinghouse in Boston, thus allowing Mrs. Smith and her daughter Dora to work while remaining in a domestic space.¹² Hopkins is able to

¹² While Hopkins upholds the home space, she also is careful to note that, as a boardinghouse, it is a home space that African Americans do not have the means to own due to the history of

show some of the difficulties faced by black women in the North through her choice for Sappho's career. Like Hopkins herself, Sappho works from her apartment in the boardinghouse as a stenographer because the other clerks refused to work with a black woman, and with other jobs she had attempted, men assumed "insulting familiarity" (Hopkins 128). However, Hopkins still turns Sappho's apartment into a charming and perfectly decorated space for her and Dora to have conversations regarding "women's issues" such as embroidery and marriage. Early on in the novel, Hopkins stages a Du Bois/Washington debate between Sappho and Dora in Sappho's apartment; while it is notable that two women are having such a politically engaged conversation, it is equally notable that Hopkins reserves public platforms for her male characters.

While Hopkins's domestic solution may be disappointing for modern readers, she does critique the African American middle-class's insistence on making only proper and pure women their societal representatives. Hopkins demonstrates that this practice led to a tendency to shame those who fell short of such standards, which was often inevitable given the history of sexual violence that haunted these women. She suggests that other options are and should be available for these women and that sexual violence against them should not be secreted away, but that the "inmost thoughts and feelings" of African Americans needed to be brought to light (Hopkins 14). Hopkins's critique is most evident in her portrayal of the aforementioned Mrs. Willis, who the narrator describes as "one of the many possibilities which the future will develop from among the colored women of New England" (Hopkins 144). She is the quintessential "race woman" in

racism and slavery. Furthermore, the boardinghouse setting emphasizes the communal aspect of African American home life over familial/blood relations, which were often disrupted and fraught relationships due to racial violence.

that she leads various committees and has committed her life's work to the "Woman Question" as it pertained to African Americans. She is depicted as being determined and ambitious and incredibly skilled at manipulating her image to accomplish her goals. With men, she makes use of her "apparent womanly weakness and charming simplicity" to best them in business matters. She makes herself appear elegant, though she has "little money" (Hopkins 144). Finally, she attempts to be up-to-date on current events and literature so she "impressed one as having been liberally educated and polished by travel" though she had only a high school education (Hopkins 144). The narrator says that she hoped her pursuit of the question of how to advance African American women would "float her upon its tide into the prosperity she desired" and that though her plans were "conceived in selfishness, they yet bore glorious fruit in the formation of clubs of colored women" (Hopkins 147). Hopkins' portrayal is simultaneously appreciative of Mrs. Willis's skill and drive, and distrustful of her manipulation of masks for personal ambition, extending her critique to all such race women who manipulate the image of the New Negro Woman for personal gain.

Hopkins is particularly critical of Mrs. Willis' false sincerity toward Sappho. In the scene in which we meet Mrs. Willis, she is running a sewing circle and leading the women in a conversation on "The place which the virtuous woman occupies in upbuilding a race" (Hopkins 148). Lois Lamphere Brown points out how militaristic Mrs. Willis's organization of the sewing circle is. She minutely manages their activities, the timing of those activities, and the topics to be discussed, which she had "tabulated upon a blackboard" and placed in a "conspicuous position in the room" (Hopkins 143). She contrasts this environment with Sappho, a character who she has already imbued with a great deal of mystery. Lamphere Brown argues, "Indeed, the nineteenth-century African American female culture that Hopkins displays prides itself on its order and

controlled uniformity. Hopkins appears to ask how such an arena could accommodate the level of independence, emotional chaos, and imprinted difference that Sappho represents" (61).

Sappho is forced to live with the psychological trauma of her rape and the threat it poses to her future as well as the restrictive and condemnatory attitudes that live on in the black community and among black women regarding sexuality. Sappho's desire to reach out to the women, and her simultaneous fear of rejection, becomes evident from the leading questions she poses at the meeting. Mrs. Willis makes the case that black women are naturally virtuous, but have been forced or compelled into immoral acts against their will. After the general conversation, Sappho nearly confides in Mrs. Willis with the story of her personal history; Mrs. Willis, who senses Sappho is troubled, gushes, "I am *so* sorry; tell me, my love, what it is all about" (Hopkins 155). Sappho nearly submits, but is hit with "a wave of repulsion toward this woman and her effusiveness, so forced and insincere" (Hopkins 155). As a result, she tells Mrs. Willis a "hypothetical" story of a woman who kept a sordid past from the man she was about to marry and asks if it was right of her to do so. Mrs. Willis responds that the hypothetical woman "did her duty" by keeping it secret and that Sappho's true duty is "to be happy and bright for the good of those about you. Just blossom like the flowers, have faith and *trust*" (Hopkins 156-57).

Sappho's repulsion toward Mrs. Willis and Will's ultimate acceptance of Sappho's past suggests that Mrs. Willis's solution is the wrong one. Hopkins is condemnatory of the pressure that the standard of New Negro Womanhood placed on black women, silencing those who were in need of genuine communal support (Adams 415). She is distrustful of women such as Mrs. Willis who encourage individual achievement at the expense of communal acceptance and healing, and of the brand of uplift based solely in individual progress.

As numerous critics have argued, Hopkins shows Victorian womanhood to be a performable identity that is not exclusive to white women. She encourages black women to perform it so that they can achieve the same level of citizenship as white women. Additionally, because Victorian womanhood is performable, it is also subject to manipulation. Through Mrs. Willis, Hopkins demonstrates that there are alternatives to New Negro Womanhood. Black women could perform a womanhood such as Mrs. Willis', which is more closely modeled on white women's, in that it is focused on outward propriety and class-status. Hopkins clearly favors the kind of womanhood portrayed by Sappho, who has remained inwardly pure and values interpersonal connection over personal ambition. Nevertheless, some critics have questioned the extent to which Sappho's model of New Negro Womanhood could actually be lived up to by other black women. For instance, by the end of the novel, the Smith family finds out the truth of their relation to the Montforts, and in so doing, discovers that they are connected with an English family of great wealth. Sappho is saved from her past through marriage into this aristocratic family, and as Lamphere Brown points out, she, Will, and her son, Alphonse, quite closely resemble the Holy Family by the novel's end as they sail off to England together. The extraordinary circumstances of Sappho and Will's courtship are even described by one character as "a fairy tale of love and chivalry such as we read of only in books" (Hopkins 398). Significantly, this same character follows this description of Sappho and Will's courtship with his own "interesting tales of slave life and its complications" (Hopkins 398). For Hopkins, slavery and suffering are a kind of crucible—in a romance of upward mobility such as hers, the more trying the circumstances, the more impressive the climb. Lamphere Brown argues convincingly that "Because of the extreme circumstances of her past and present, Sappho is that much more inaccessible to those among whom she lives" (63).

As Cooper's and Hopkins' writing demonstrates, New Negro Womanhood proved to be a difficult image to navigate. As women of refined manners and usually middle-class status, the standard was not easy to live up to for many black women. Furthermore, even while black women activists and writers spoke of uplift as a potentially transformative action, implying that all blacks could attain a higher status, women who possessed the attributes of New Negro Womanhood were more often than not depicted as naturally possessing such attributes. So while Cooper advocates for fulfillment through higher education, she also relies on gender essentialism or insists that women could do their best activism from the comfort of their homes. In Hopkins' novel, Sappho's refinement and taste appears natural and effortless, while it is difficult to imagine other women in the novel, such as Mrs. Davis and Mrs. White, ever achieving the same standard. At the same time, by depicting black women as more successful and considerate Victorian women than most white women, Cooper and Hopkins are making a quite radical political statement. For each of these women and for other black women activists at the turn of the century, the decision for how best to represent black women in a racist, sexist, classist society was an undoubtedly challenging one.

Conclusion

Both Harper and Hopkins critique white, bourgeois standards of womanhood when women in their novels who are refined and even white in appearance are assaulted and violated simply because men believe them to be black. Both then create black heroines who are in every way capable of the virtue and morality thought only to be achievable by white women. However, both also ultimately uphold bourgeois morality as the standard that must be aspired to in order to uplift the race. In order to solidify this standard, they show folk characters who do not live up to it, whether because of their "bad blood" or their inability to assimilate to a culture that is too far

removed from their simple backgrounds, thereby insinuating that some cultures are too ingrained or “other” to ever adapt to the norm. As previously mentioned, Hopkins’ later work, particularly her novel, *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self*, is considerably more favorable in its attitude toward folk culture. For instance, in *Of One Blood*, Reuel Briggs recovers his African historical lineage during a trip to Ethiopia. As Moody-Turner argues, “conjure and mysticism are treated as embarrassing relics of a superstitious past in Hopkins’s earlier works,” in contrast with this novel, which privileges African American folk music and spiritualism (207).

Hopkins’ later work appears to answer a call that Anna Julia Cooper made for African Americans to turn to their own culture in their writings. Throughout *A Voice from the South*, Cooper speaks, as many uplift advocates did, of the need for progress and the advancement of the “civilization” of African Americans since slavery. Elsewhere, however, she argues strongly that folk culture was not a remnant to be left behind, but rather a powerful source of alternative knowledge. At the 1894 Hampton Folklore Conference, she was invited to make an address along with William Wells Newell, the co-founder of the American Folklore Society, and an advocate for an “objective” approach to collecting folklore. Newell’s scientific method was based in the notion that cultures could evolve into higher forms, thereby achieving “civilization.” He saw white Western culture as being synonymous with civilization while folklore was a remnant of the past, living on in the present. Cultures that still practiced these customs were, to him and many other folklorists of the time, evidence of their un-evolved state. His speech emphasizes the importance of gathering folk culture for preserving what he deems “valuable” contributions (namely, black music), but also for distinguishing them from primitive or “false and absurd” customs, such as voodoo and religious “superstitions” (Newell 132). Newell’s eventual hope was that African Americans would not only learn about their African origins, but

transmit what they learned back to Africa so they could be “no more ashamed of the continent of [their] origin” (132). For Newell, the “plantation Negro” stereotype was a very real person who needed to recover his past in order to progress beyond it: “For the sake of the honor of his race, he should have a clear picture of the mental condition out of which he has emerged... We must know the truth about the plantation Negro in order to deal with the plantation Negro” (Newell 132). Newell’s speech represents a common opinion among folklorists of the 1890s as well as advocates of racial uplift, white or black.

Cooper’s address, which immediately followed Newell’s, is all the more striking for its progressive views because of the contrast between the two speeches. Cooper begins by outlining her own version of history, which starts with Phoenicians and Egyptians and moves forward to Anglo-Saxons, who she says borrowed first from African cultures. By doing so, she shifts the popular understanding of Western culture as self-originating, solely white, and inherently superior. Then she moves on to lament the fact that African Americans are left to admire and imitate white “civilization,” which she associates with imperialism and violence, stating, “To write as a white man, to sing as a white man, to swagger as a white man, to bully as a white man—this is achievement, this is success” (“Paper” 133). Instead, she calls for African Americans to remember “the sanctity of his homely inheritance,” to turn to their own culture and break free from the Western model (“Paper” 133). She states, “His songs, superstitions, customs, tales, are the legacy left from the imagery of the past. These must catch and hold and work up into the pictures he paints” (“Paper” 133). In contrast to Newell who only desired to study folklore for the purpose of gaining knowledge from it and advancing beyond a primitive past,

Cooper saw black culture as belonging to people and communities, and as necessary for challenging false histories as well as present and future oppressions.¹³

Cooper's speech certainly romanticizes folklore in much the same way that she romanticized and essentialized women's domestic influence, calling folklore "the untaught, spontaneous lisplings of the child heart that are fullest of poetry and mystery" ("Paper" 133). Both call for a purer and gentler, because more childlike, influence on masculine, Western culture. Nevertheless, it is significant that Cooper was attempting to revive the artistic use of folk materials in 1894, whereas most scholars believe that African American women did not do this until Zora Neale Hurston.¹⁴

¹³ For a fuller reading of Cooper's speech, see Shirley Moody-Turner, *Black Folklore and the Politics of Racial Representation*.

¹⁴ Notably, several prominent African American men were also trying to negotiate this same terrain during the 1890s, many of them belonging to the American Negro Academy. Their members included Alexander Crummell, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Du Bois most famously advocated for the uplifting of the masses through education, delivered by the "Talented Tenth" who had themselves reached this higher level of "civilization." Critics such as Hazel Carby have noted the complexities and contradictions in Du Bois's position, which she argues he tied in with notions of a more "authentic" masculinity and a higher class status (see *Race Men*). While Du Bois was somewhat complicit with discourses of civilization, he also critiqued Western civilization's emphasis on capitalist expansion and located Africa as a seat of civilization, as did Cooper, and later, Hopkins.

Each of the women discussed in this chapter were activists as well as writers, and as such faced a problem of representation. They were attempting to prove their worth as a race to white Americans, whose own success depended on their subjugation. So, on the one hand, they pointed directly to this prejudice, or pointed to the flaws in the ideologies that were used against them; they wanted African Americans to enjoy all of the freedoms that they had so long been denied—access to education, comfortable homes, and stable family structures. On the other hand, they felt the pressure to represent the race in such a way that would actually give them political power and citizenship, which meant sometimes conceding to representations that were complicit with racism and sexism. Each of these women was successful and educated, and while all of them spoke of the need to reach out to lower class African Americans in the South, they struggled with how to imagine, navigate, and maintain those relationships. While each of these women held a somewhat uncomfortable relationship with the folk, exacerbated by their choice of genre, Cooper's call to "break free from the Western model" also characterizes their work. Examining each writer's relationship to lower class African Americans, to Southern folk and a culture they imagined as remnants of slavery reveals a great deal about how issues of racial and gender equality and citizenship were debated in the Post-Reconstruction era. While pride in all aspects of black culture was fraught with challenges in the early years of the post-Reconstruction era, in later years, an inclusion of folklore in fiction and a shift away from uplift from a supposedly shameful past and culture became more common. Numerous writers—some of them black women—began to use folklore to challenge and invert dominant power structures and popular cultural representations of African Americans.

II

Revising Regionalism and Resisting Uplift in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's Short Fiction

While writers and orators such as Frances Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Anna Julia Cooper, and Victoria Earle Matthews were encouraging black women of the 1890s to uplift themselves and others, an aspiring young writer and activist, no doubt inspired by these predecessors, was beginning to make her own mark on the literary scene. Alice Dunbar-Nelson published a collection of sketches, stories, poetry, and nonfiction in *Violets and Other Tales* in 1895, and a collection of regional stories of New Orleans life titled *The Goodness of St. Rocque* in 1898. While her contemporaries were writing sentimental domestic novels, Dunbar-Nelson was writing regional short stories, a genre much more common among white women than black women—arguably, Dunbar-Nelson was the first black woman to write in this genre. The domestic genre that Harper and Hopkins wrote in was didactic, and modeled for black women what respectful and empowered, yet proper, New Negro women should—or could—be. On the contrary, Dunbar-Nelson's fiction avoided such overt portrayals. As a result, Dunbar-Nelson is often considered separately from her literary peers. Because early critics saw her writing as quaint, and not properly weighty or overtly political like the writing of Harper and Hopkins, Dunbar-Nelson has often been left out of the black women's literary tradition—she is seen as an odd outsider more concerned with pretty imagery, flowery diction and appealing to a white audience than a proper black writer/activist should be. However, I argue that it is necessary to examine why Dunbar-Nelson's writing *is* so different from her contemporaries. I see her as writing in direct response to these earlier writers, but more particularly, to the constraints of Victorian social conventions typical of genteel domestic race fiction. I argue that Dunbar-Nelson uses the genre of local color, or regional, fiction to critique narratives of progress as well as traditional gender

and sexual conventions, which she unmasks as damaging ideologies with dangerous and even violent consequences. Unlike writers such as Hopkins and Harper, Dunbar-Nelson does not focus her writing firmly on “race progress,” a move that often required distancing African Americans from the lower-class black majority in the South and from black folk culture; rather, her New Orleans setting connects herself and her readers more strongly with her racial and cultural inheritance in her regional fiction.

As I argued in my introduction, Gloria Hull’s recovery of Dunbar-Nelson, though invaluable, set the tone of later criticism by removing her from the black women’s literary tradition. Instead, Hull argues that Dunbar-Nelson was a pioneer of the black short story, and so was more limited in her choices (*Color* 53). Most short stories at the time that featured black characters depicted them as happy plantation slaves, tragic mulattoes, or minstrel stereotypes,¹ so Hull argues that Dunbar-Nelson attempted to avoid these denigrating characterizations altogether by “eschew[ing] black characters and culture...to write, instead, charming, aracial, Creole sketches that solidified her in the then-popular, ‘female-suitable’ local color mode” (“Introduction” xxxii). Hull’s controversial introduction strongly impacted much of the later criticism of Dunbar-Nelson’s works. For some critics, and for many modern readers of her stories, Dunbar-Nelson is just another of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “damned mob of scribbling women,” and her New Orleans stories are little more than quaint and apolitical sketches of Louisiana Creole society.

¹ A notable exception to these problematic representations is the short fiction by Charles Chesnutt. These characterizations are largely true for short fiction by white authors, particularly in the “plantation fiction” genre.

Most critics have since reacted strongly to Hull's controversial claim that Dunbar-Nelson was not at all concerned with representing black culture in her fiction. In *Conflicting Stories*, for example, Elizabeth Ammons agrees with Hull that Dunbar-Nelson separated her writing from her race. However, she sees this as a calculated political move on Dunbar-Nelson's part, rather than a symptom of weak talent or conformity. According to Ammons, Dunbar-Nelson resisted the pressure that black writers felt to defend their race in their art, and she "conceived of 'real art' as freedom from race prescriptions" (60). In her study of the Dunbar's infamous marriage, Eleanor Alexander also largely agrees with Hull and Ammons that Dunbar-Nelson sought to write nonracial fiction and avoid stereotypes; however, she argues that this desire arises from a deep-seated racial self-hatred, color prejudice, and a love for "a specific elite identity, a high-status lifestyle, and a propensity for social niceties" (56). As a result, Alexander claims that Dunbar-Nelson chose to identify as Creole and to populate her stories with Creoles, a group which Ammons says Dunbar-Nelson saw as aracial because they existed outside of the black/white dichotomy of the time.

More recently, critics have rejected Hull's somewhat unfavorable portrayal of Dunbar-Nelson and have attempted to rescue her reputation as a serious black woman writer. Beginning with Kristina Brooks's 1998 article, "Alice Dunbar-Nelson's Local Colors of Ethnicity, Class, and Place," the trend in criticism has been to identify ways in which Dunbar-Nelson was deeply concerned with representing racial ambiguity and identity formation in Creole Louisiana at the turn of the century. Brooks and others have argued that one needs insider knowledge of late nineteenth-century New Orleans history and social stratification in order to pick up on hidden or masked racial cues in her stories, such as passing mention of a character's "small brown hands." According to Brooks, "By forcing the reader to recognize his or her complicity with maintaining

or respecting boundaries based on ethnic, racial, class, and regional identity, Dunbar-Nelson points the way toward demythologizing the natural status of any such identity category" (3-4). She ultimately argues that Dunbar-Nelson is forcing readers to turn the gaze back on themselves and their own desire to fix racial identities. Other critics have since made similar arguments, namely that Dunbar-Nelson's stories embrace racial ambiguity and celebrate the creative possibilities of creolization.²

Interpretations of Dunbar-Nelson's fiction since Hull's are all generally preoccupied with demonstrating that her writing was, in fact, concerned with racial issues. She is sometimes placed in conversation with other local colorists, such as Kate Chopin or George Washington Cable to show how her representation of black or female characters differed in relation to theirs, but Dunbar-Nelson is rarely compared to other African-American women writers.³ In his recent book, *Upon Provincialism*, Bill Hardwig offers a thorough analysis of Dunbar-Nelson in relation to Grace King, arguing that it is actually unproductive to compare Dunbar-Nelson to other black women writers. My argument here contrasts Hardwig's. He argues that critics like Brooks have

² For more discussion of hidden racial cues in the stories, see Jurgen Grandt, Pamela Menke, and Thomas Strychacz. For an alternate view of creolization in Dunbar-Nelson's stories, see Jordan Stouck's "Identities in Crisis: Alice Dunbar-Nelson's New Orleans Fiction," in which she argues that creolization in the stories does not signal creative possibility so much as Dunbar-Nelson uses it to critique the violence that occurs when racial boundaries are crossed.

³ Pamela Menke provides the most extended discussion of how Alice Dunbar-Nelson compares to other Southern regional writers, including Ruth McEnery Stuart, Kate Chopin, George Washington Cable, and even Dunbar-Nelson's husband, Paul Laurence Dunbar.

tried too hard to “place this fiction in the very racialized categories she struggled so hard to avoid” (Hardwig 135). He claims that placing Dunbar-Nelson alongside black writers like Hopkins and Harper merely because Dunbar-Nelson was black has “limited value,” which I agree with to a certain extent (Hardwig 141). He claims instead that we need to put writers like Dunbar-Nelson and Grace King⁴ together because of their differing attitudes toward similar themes, and that such cross-racial conversations are more productive. I agree that these conversations are productive, and there is certainly more work to be done in this area. However, he assumes that Dunbar-Nelson’s relationship to Hopkins and Harper has been thoroughly examined, but, in fact, this is a discussion that has been avoided, as I argue in this chapter. Critics take issue with Hull’s claim that Dunbar-Nelson’s stories are aracial and so attempt to prove that they are concerned with racial matters, thereby securing Dunbar-Nelson’s place in the black women’s literary tradition. However, none explicitly take up Hull’s claim that Dunbar-Nelson’s writing did not belong in a black literary tradition and “especially not a black female

⁴ Grace King was a late nineteenth-century author of Louisiana fiction. Her most well-known stories are collected in *Balcony Stories* (1893). She is sometimes placed in conversation with Dunbar-Nelson given their similar setting and subject matter. In addition to Bill Hardwig, see Pamela Menke’s “Behind the 'White Veil: Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Creole Color, and The Goodness of St. Rocque.” Her stories are fairly typical of popular plantation fiction of the time, particularly in her stereotypical depiction of African American characters. In her story, “A Crippled Hope,” for instance, she creates nostalgia for a non-existent past by depicting a black nurse named “Little Mammy” who is devastated by freedom and longs to serve a white master again.

tradition” (*Color* 53). Arguing that she writes about race seems enough to cement her as a member of this tradition, but her place within it is never interrogated.

African American literary scholarship has set up the expectation that black writers should feature black protagonists struggling against racism; Hopkins and Harper fit neatly into this paradigm while Dunbar-Nelson does not. Writers such as Dunbar-Nelson who break this mold are not seen as doing effective “race work,” or even as writing black literature. Limiting our understanding of what kind of literature black writers can or should write narrows our understanding of literature in unprofitable ways. Recovering Dunbar-Nelson and others like her is essential for troubling our understanding and our critical formation of the black women’s literary tradition by shifting our understanding of racial “authenticity.” It is necessary to situate Dunbar-Nelson within the context of sentimental domestic fiction because this kind of overtly political and powerful work has become the standard text of the black women’s literary tradition in the Post-Reconstruction period—it is difficult to know where to situate anything that does not conform to the boundaries of the genre. While domestic fiction offered black women a political platform, it also partly conformed to patriarchal gender roles and the tenets of bourgeois individualism because of its association with uplift ideology. Situating Dunbar-Nelson’s writing in the context of this popular genre allows us to see that her fiction was not lacking by comparison in its social or political importance; rather, it invites us to see how her fiction actually responds to the constraints of Victorian social conventions that were often typical of genteel domestic race fiction. In order to reclaim her as an important figure in the black women’s literary tradition, we must go beyond merely proving that her fiction is concerned with race. Instead, we need to examine not only how Dunbar-Nelson fits within and was shaped by the

black female literary tradition, but also how and why her writing in turn had (or did not have) an effect upon its formation.

Region and Place

Alice Dunbar-Nelson is best known for her New Orleans regionalist fiction. Her first book, *Violets and Other Tales*, contains a few of these stories, though they are mixed in among other stories focused on gender issues (such as stories of unfaithful men or treatises on New Womanhood) along with poems, stream-of-consciousness sketches, and reviews. Most of the regionalist stories featured in *Violets* are repeated in her second collection, *The Goodness of St. Rocque*. This volume is set entirely in and around New Orleans, allowing Dunbar-Nelson to depict this much-loved city of her youth. She did not entirely leave regionalist fiction behind once she moved north, however. Dunbar-Nelson continued writing fiction focused on a specific location and community, though little of her later work was published.⁵ Two stories, “The Pearl

⁵ The reasons that Dunbar-Nelson never published any other collections or a novel are numerous and debatable. Her diary, *Give Us Each Day*, also edited by Gloria Hull, provides the best insight into the reasons for this. In it, Dunbar-Nelson frequently blames her own laziness as a reason for not producing writing, all while giving a never-ending and exhausting record of the intensity of her editing and committee work. In fact, Dunbar-Nelson’s own heavily inflicted self-criticism probably has a great deal to do with her lack of publications. When deciding to write *Uplift*, a novella she eventually destroyed because of her dissatisfaction with it, she expresses initial hope for it, then says, “That is, if I ever get to it. But go, go, go—so busy, so futilely busy” (*Give* 369). When she later read her second chapter to a friend, she says she “burned with mortification. Such inane, sophomoric, amateurish puerility—! I could not sleep at night for being ashamed of it”

in the Oyster,” published in *The Southern Workman* in 1900 and the unpublished “Stones of the Village” are her most explicit treatments of black Creole life in New Orleans. In other stories that are arguably more gritty and realistic, Dunbar-Nelson shifts her attention away from New Orleans to New York City’s East side tenements. These “Steenth Street stories” are likely based on her work for the White Rose Mission and her teaching in New York City’s public schools, and allow her to reflect, in fiction, on many of the issues she fought for so passionately in her community work. Though she would continue to write poetry and even ventured into other genres such as detective fiction, Dunbar-Nelson’s most lasting and fully realized work remains her careful depictions of place in her regionalist fiction.

“Regionalism” is a much-debated literary term. Broadly speaking, it is a genre that runs parallel to realism and naturalism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

(Give 374-75). She also speaks of attempts to turn some of her work into longer projects, such as “The Stones of the Village,” but was turned down by publishers. In the case of “Stones,” her project was rejected because she was told by *The Atlantic Monthly* that “at present the American public had a ‘dislike’ for treatment of ‘the color-line’” (qtd. in Hull “Introduction” xxxvi). Her race and gender certainly had a great deal to do with this lack of publications, because as Hull notes, Dunbar-Nelson sent a “steady stream” of work to Paul Reynolds, the literary agent she shared with Paul Laurence Dunbar, but most of it was returned (Hull “Introduction” xxxvi). Copies of many of these rejections are saved in her records, particularly for her later (and lengthy) novel, *This Lofty Oak*. She did continue to successfully publish the occasional poem or short story in literary magazines in her later years, but much of her time was spent with committee work and speaking engagements.

Traditionally, it has been associated with nostalgia and anti-modernism; it is also often mistakenly thought of as literature that offers a snapshot of a particular (usually rural) location and its distinctive locals. The genre supposedly represented region as a place that was contrary to the nation—a bastion of old, dying values or peculiar, provincial inhabitants against which outsiders could measure their own progress. As Sandra Zagarell notes in her definition of the term, “region,” “historical processes of modernization have created “places” that then appear to preexist or be peripheral to the modern.” For this reason, and also because women wrote in this genre more frequently, regionalism has often been disparaged as merely quaint “local color” tales—a kind of lesser branch of realism. Over the past two decades, literary critics have attempted to rescue both those writers designated as regionalists as well as the category itself from their unfavorable associations and marginalized status. For example, Judith Fetterly and Marjorie Pryse have redefined regionalism as a site of discourse rather than a strictly defined literary category. For them, regionalism does not so much indicate literature that is tied to a specific place, as a strategy to work against nationalist imperatives, a counternarrative to hierarchies of gender, race, and class. They state, “Writers of and from regions who locate fictions as points of resistance rather than as commodified ‘local coloring’ offer a set of textual sites where the process of ‘fracturing unities and effecting regroupings’ is given place, character, and regional voice” (7). In other words, the regional setting provides these writers with a specific location and voice from which to launch their critique.

More recently, the emphasis on the permeability of a region’s borders and the region as a site of political resistance has expanded along with the transnational turn in American studies. Scholars of American literary regionalism no longer view regions as sites located within their own unique time or as an isolated and marginalized site from which to debate and challenge

national structures. They are more interested in “examining the ways region functioned as a sort of open cell, a cultural landscape shot through with links to external histories” (Irwin-Mulcahy 122). The region has been redefined as a place in a constant dialectical process of becoming, and its interpretation an opportunity to examine how the local mediates and is shaped by global movements and histories.

While regionalism provided some African American writers with the opportunity to interrogate and critique the nation from which they were excluded, for most, it was too great a risk. As Fetterly and Pryse point out, “African American writers would have found it difficult to adapt the conventions of local color to their purposes, given its reliance on racialist distinctions for its meaning...and given its equal reliance on dialect, often racially coded, as a source of humor at the expense of those speaking it” (27). While some African American writers such as Charles Chesnutt successfully made use of regionalism’s transgressive potential, most found the risk of reinforcing negative stereotypes too great. Regionalism is a genre that readers as well as critics associate with nostalgia and “backwards” inhabitants. As I argued in the previous chapter, many African Americans adhered to uplift ideology to counteract the association of blackness with cultural and biological inferiority. Associations with primitiveness of any kind were dangerous for black women as white newspapers, literature, and general discourse regularly threatened them with images of unrestrained black female sexuality. As a result, black women felt a dual pressure to depict the race favorably and to adhere to expectations of “proper” womanhood. For most African American women writers, it was far safer to write in a decidedly “feminine” genre with unmistakable racial politics, such as the sentimental domestic novel. Not only did this genre allow them to avoid stereotypical associations, but it created an opportunity for them to prove themselves to be valuable members of the nation. As Claudia Tate has argued,

“the novels inscribe not merely artificial discursive conventions for depicting an idealized courtship story but strategies for enlarging the social roles for black women and for defining as well as regulating their citizenship as gendered civil performance” (*Domestic* 66). Novels such as Hopkins’ and Harper’s showed black women leading “civilized” lives while also fighting for social justice. It is understandable that many would avoid the “local color” genre, which was not so easily adapted for their purposes. Writing regionalist fiction might cause them to be associated with quaintness and not seriousness, with region and not nation, with the past and not the future.

While Dunbar-Nelson’s writing appears quaint and apolitical on the surface, she revised features of regionalist texts to interrogate social categories and national structures, thereby critiquing the approach that many white authors had taken with their portrayals of the South in general and New Orleans in particular. Just as Hopkins and Harper revised the sentimental domestic novel to suit their own purposes in their fight for racial equality, so too did Dunbar-Nelson revise the “local color” short story to fit her own aesthetic and political intentions. Pamela Menke states that Dunbar-Nelson “subtly, but dramatically, alters the face of Southern local color, a popular and lucrative genre that filled millions of magazine pages in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. She carefully lifts aside the 'white' authorial 'veil' from the racially and culturally complex Louisiana that she knew intimately” (77). Dunbar-Nelson’s short stories respond to and complicate the simplistic and damaging portrayals of African Americans in most Southern local color stories. As Fetterly and Pryse also argue, she was one of the rare black women writers to pull off regional fiction successfully, using it to problematize issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality at the turn of the twentieth century (27). She was able to locate the local, black community as a potential site of strength and critique. By focusing on the region, Dunbar-Nelson was able to show the permeability of those regions and how race and the

formation of identity and other social categories were in fact shifting, fluid and dependent on place and movement.⁶

As such, Dunbar-Nelson's writing not only responds to white writers of the time, but it also challenges the typical mode of writing for black women. By choosing to write regionalist fiction, Dunbar-Nelson avoids the kind of outright moralizing and adherence to white middle class notions of progress that often characterized black women's fiction of the 1890s. Furthermore, it resists the unstated imperative that progress and "civilization" required a separation from traditional forms of black cultural expression that were often thought to be "undeveloped" and incompatible with a bourgeois lifestyle.

Dunbar-Nelson's regionalism works to broaden readers' understandings and expectations of what black culture entailed. As Judith Irwin-Mulcahy notes, Dunbar-Nelson was unlike black male writers of the time, such as Charles Chesnut, in that she "did not draw upon the rural South's plantation idiom, something linked to stasis and slave-based epistemologies" (122). It would seem, then, that her approach to regionalist writing was to avoid black culture and black life entirely—that her response to writers such as Grace King or Thomas Nelson Page was to

⁶ Earlier critics of Dunbar-Nelson's work take a more traditional approach. Fetterly and Pryse along with Kristina Brooks and Pamela Menke note how Dunbar-Nelson uses the New Orleans region to disrupt national narratives of race and gender. Menke and Brooks both argue that Dunbar-Nelson disguises her critiques in the seemingly innocent packaging of local color fiction. More recent critics such as Judith Irwin-Mulcahy take a more transnational approach, by examining how Dunbar-Nelson's local stories revealed the New Orleans region to be impacted by global movements.

write about Creole life in New Orleans while avoiding any representation of African American life and culture so as to avoid stereotypes. It should be noted, however, that just because Dunbar-Nelson does not write about slavery does not mean she avoids black culture entirely. On the contrary, her stories often show how traditional aspects of black folk culture and history have been blended and merged with more modern forms and “creolized.” Dunbar-Nelson does not see race or racial relations in such stark terms as did other local color writers of plantation fiction. She plays with our expectations of race by depicting the New Orleans region as it really was—a hybrid blending of people and cultures. Fetterly and Pryse correctly state,

Indeed, while Dunbar-Nelson embeds issues of race in her fiction to a far greater extent than do white writers of regionalist fiction, she does so with an indirection and subtlety that distinguishes her work from that of writers such as Frances Harper or Pauline Hopkins who are her contemporaries...However, though she may have viewed regionalist fiction as a space in which she was free to write about subjects other than race and to write about race indirectly, Dunbar-Nelson nevertheless uses regionalist fiction to do the work of racial analysis and to encode her own sympathies. (283)

Dunbar-Nelson’s regional portrayals of past histories differ from the portrayals of the past we see not just in works by white authors, but black ones as well. We must explore “the work of racial analysis” her stories do and what this tells us about attitudes toward progress, uplift, race, class, and gender, at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly within the black community.

Progress and Nation

Unlike Harper’s and Hopkins’s focus on uplift and progress, many of Dunbar-Nelson’s short stories are not at all concerned with stressing the advancement of African American society

since slavery, or on progress and “civilization” as the keys to equality. On the contrary, Dunbar-Nelson’s deliberate decision to publish a collection of “local color” stories, a genre often associated with nostalgia and anti-modernism, suggests that she took issue with the implications of uplift ideology and its emphasis on progress. Rather than emphasizing the provincialism of the region or providing outside readers with a snippet of someplace stuck in the past so they could be reassured of their own forward progress, Dunbar-Nelson portrays New Orleans as a place that blends past and present, where Creole characters and traditions are presented as occasionally flawed, but necessary, to the fabric of a society that is gradually phasing them out. While the writing of her contemporaries tended to associate the bourgeois middle class and its values with progress both racial and otherwise, Dunbar-Nelson uses regionalism’s association with nostalgia to interrogate modernity, particularly its racialist, masculinist tendencies.

One of the ways that Dunbar-Nelson complicates her reader’s understanding of race is by writing about Creole society at the turn of the twentieth century. One of the most common early criticisms of Dunbar-Nelson was that she does not feature strong black women as main characters in her stories. Gloria Hull, for example, laments the fact that none of Dunbar-Nelson’s characters resemble Dunbar-Nelson herself—none are well-educated, politically active, black women (“Introduction” xlvi). Hull’s criticism is ultimately based in a circumscribed understanding of blackness. For Hull and numerous other critics of African American women’s literature, blackness is defined by a certain level of political activity or other markers such as language, class, or the shade of one’s skin. Definitions such as these are of the sort that kept Iola Leroy (sometimes disparaged as “too light-skinned”) and Helga Crane (“too middle-class”) from being “proper” black heroines. One of the reasons that Dunbar-Nelson’s work has been discredited by modern readers and critics is because of these implicit comparisons with Harper

and Hopkins that judge Dunbar-Nelson's work inferior because it is less overtly political, featuring characters who fall outside our modern notions of blackness. Because her fiction is not focused on uplift or race progress as Hopkins and Harper have helped to define them, Dunbar-Nelson appears to be a rogue outlier who is at best, apolitical, and at worst, a self-hating black woman. It is necessary for us to restructure our understanding of race at the turn of the century to realize how Dunbar-Nelson was engaging in, and not avoiding, fraught conversations about racial identity and progress at the turn of the century.

Many of her stories, especially those in *Goodness of St. Rocque*, examine men and women of varying social status within Creole society. The title story, for example, features two Creole women, one "blonde and petite," the other with "dark eyes," fighting over the affection of a man. Other stories such as "Sister Josepha" and "Mr. Baptiste" deal with the danger and violence faced by Creoles of color. In many of these stories, Dunbar-Nelson associates Creole identity with the past and tradition. Furthermore, she resists simple nostalgic portrayals of Creoleness as an old or backward culture. Rather, she maintains its original sense of anti-Americanness in order to critique the kinds of "progress" the nation had supposedly made. Prior to the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, "Creole" meant "native born" or "locally produced." It was a designation given to those born in colonial Louisiana to French or Spanish parents. The meaning of the name changed as a result of various political and historical movements. After the Louisiana purchase, "Creole" became a politically guarded identity, used to justify land rights on the basis of nativity. Those who were native-born wished to distinguish themselves from a recent influx of "foreign" French immigrants from St. Domingue (present-day Haiti) and other European immigrants and Anglo-Americans. It was at this time that Creoles began to identify as simultaneously higher class and distinct from other Americans, many of whom they believed to

be inferior. As Kristina Brooks notes, “Although outsiders often associated Creole identity with racial mixture, Creoles themselves were primarily concerned with differentiating themselves from Americans—up until the Civil War” (5). At that time, the meaning of the term changed again. Whereas previously “Creole” signified a kind of favored class status and ancestral family history, it took on greater racial significance. With the end of slavery, white supremacy was threatened, and so more strongly reinforced. As white supremacist organizations and segregation expanded in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Creole identity also began to split along racial lines, while it was previously a category of indeterminate race.

In her 1916 essay, “People of Color in Louisiana,” Dunbar-Nelson highlights the fact that race was contested within the definition of “Creole.” She notes the conflicted history of the term before giving her own definition of this troubled category, saying,

to a Caucasian, a Creole is a native of the lower parishes of Louisiana, in whose veins some traces of Spanish, West Indian or French blood runs. The Caucasian will shudder with horror at the idea of including a person of color in the definition, and the person of color will retort with his definition that a Creole is a native of Louisiana, in whose blood runs mixed strains of everything un-American, with the African strain slightly apparent. The true Creole is like the famous gumbo of the state, a little bit of everything, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive, and wholly unique. (“People” 367)

According to Dunbar-Nelson, “Creole” is a contested and therefore indefinable, yet distinct, category. She notes that white Creoles refuse to include people of color in their definition, while Creoles of color emphasize the anti-Americanness of Creole identity and choose to make an African background a determining feature of Creole identity. Dunbar-Nelson favors a more

inclusive definition herself, noting that the “true Creole” is unique to Louisiana, yet it is not a fixed category. “Creoleness” is defined by its very openness and inclusiveness as a racially and ethnically mixed category. As several critics have more recently noted, Dunbar-Nelson’s stories often feature racially ambiguous characters, not because she wished to avoid representations of race, but rather to emphasize the constructedness of race, that it is something “embedded into narratives of place,” just as the definition of Creole is (Irwin-Mulcahy 131).

The ambiguity of many of Dunbar-Nelson’s characters is especially significant given that she was writing just after *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 when segregation laws demanded that race be fixed. Homer Plessy himself was a Creole of color who had been working with the Comité des Citoyens of New Orleans to fight segregation laws. The Supreme Court decision sealed the “Americanization of the city’s race relations” and Creoles went from being a privileged social group to one divided along the same racial lines as the rest of the nation (qtd. in Grandt 52). As Jurgen Grandt states, “The multi-ethnic quilt of New Orleans was pressed into a stringent social system that knew only the binary categories of black and white” (52). Grandt argues that “a large number of Dunbar-Nelson’s early short stories, regardless of their subject matter, are suffused with a mournful protest, a melodramatic sense of loss and futility for which the Americanization of the Crescent City provides the subtext” (Grandt 52). Rather than being uncritically nostalgic, many of her stories are skeptical of the kind of “national progress” that had given birth to Jim Crow.

For instance, one of the stories that has received greater attention recently is “Mr. Baptiste.” The story features a poor old Creole man who is described at several different points in the story as “Latinised,” a “Frinchman” and “brown,” though his exact status as either a white Creole or a Creole of color is never stated. Mr. Baptiste makes a small, but happy, living off of

the leavings of the United Fruit Company when they leave baskets of too-ripe fruit at the levee that have recently arrived from Central and South America. Perhaps because of his indeterminate racial identity as a Creole, he gets along with everyone, including the Irish dockworkers, who are on strike because they refuse to work with black dockworkers. Mr. Baptiste's livelihood is threatened by this strike of cotton union members. All work on the levee comes to a halt, so the fruit ships cannot land to be unloaded. Mr. Baptiste's resourceful use of the system (or tenuous allegiance with the corporation, depending on one's reading) backfires when he cannot receive his fruit, and his livelihood is threatened. Mr. Baptiste proves no match for corporate interests that are all too willing to take advantage of racial strife for profit. The United Fruit Company hires black strikebreakers who are willing to work for lower wages, thereby angering the Irish dockworkers, who take out their frustration on the strikebreakers rather than the corporation. The white dockworkers destroy the black worker's tools, which starts a riot. Mr. Baptiste's "mournful protest...[is] lost in the roar of the men," and their shouts of "Niggers!" and "Scabs!" (*Works* 119; vol. 1). From the safety of a bread stall, Mr. Baptiste "weakly cheer[s]" the black stevedores on—if they continue loading ships, his fruit shipment can come through. Upon seeing this, an Irishman named Finnegan flings a brickbat at Mr. Baptiste for "cheerin' the niggers," and he is killed instantly (*Works* 122; vol. 1).

This story as a whole is a "mournful protest" against the narrowing racial definitions that were happening at the turn of the twentieth century (*Works* 119; vol. 1). As a Creole, Mr. Baptiste is in the middle of the fight between white and black, literally and metaphorically. In that sense, the story is mourning the loss of a culture and a group of people who could no longer define themselves as a group in a nation that was divided along such strict racial lines. Furthermore, the story is protesting the arbitrariness of racial divisions and the inequality that

that accompanied segregation just as Homer Plessy and the Comite des Citoyens had attempted to do when they staged Plessy's arrest on a white railway car. For Mr. Baptiste, and for Dunbar-Nelson, race is not nearly as important as survival, yet it has deadly consequences. Mr. Baptiste cares only about getting fruit so he can eat, yet he is prevented from doing so by trade organizations which manipulate regional and national race conflicts for greater productivity. He, the intermediary, a "concrete bit of helpless humanity," dies when he is forced by arbitrarily enforced racial boundaries to choose a side (*Works* 123; vol. 1). The story is not entirely without hope, however. As soon as Mr. Baptiste is struck, the bread-woman as well as a crowd of fisherman and vegetable merchants come to his aid because, the narrator tells us, "The individual...had more interest for them than the vast, vague fighting mob beyond" (*Works* 123; vol. 1). Those like Baptiste, the people of New Orleans, ultimately care more for the one Creole man caught up in a national (even global) conflict playing out on a local scale. The starkly defined groups of Irishmen and black stevedores turn into a "vast, vague fighting mob" when placed next to a Creole man who dies for the sake of this pointless war. Ultimately, their sympathy is not enough in the face of expanding corporatism and national race conflicts, since the story ends with Mr. Baptiste being dumped unnamed in Potter's Field, forgotten by his neighbors and by history. The story itself reclaims the historical narrative of an actual 1894 dockworker's strike,⁷ and through a fictional retelling, did what the crowd of merchants ultimately did not—it refocuses our attention on what is lost in a "progressing" nation. Whether or not readers were aware of the strike, Dunbar-Nelson's fictionalized account of this strike

⁷ See Jurgen Grandt's "Rewriting the Final Adjustment of Affairs: Culture, Race, and Politics in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's New Orleans" for a thorough history of this strike.

would have resonated with them given that it was published just three years after segregation became national law.

As Hardwig notes in his study on Southern regionalism, New Orleans writers did often “present the city as one whose best times have already passed,” but they did not “attempt to codify a romanticized past” (142). Rather, they engaged with present sources of decline and critiqued them in their fiction while memorializing their community (Hardwig 142). In Dunbar-Nelson’s fiction, “progress” and the values associated with it are questioned. Though not all of her stories are explicit about the main character’s race, it is clear that Dunbar-Nelson is skeptical of progress and bourgeois individualism as the basis of an argument for equal rights. Though Irwin-Mulcahy argues that “region’s value in [her] literature was less connected to its nostalgic containment of older orders,” I argue that Dunbar-Nelson uses regionalism’s association with nostalgia strategically (122). In distinct contrast to her contemporaries, who strongly associated the bourgeois middle class and its values with progress both racial and otherwise, Dunbar-Nelson makes use of regionalism’s association with nostalgia. Without falling into the trap of simple nostalgic longing, she uses tradition and the folk in her stories to critique modernity and particularly its racist, masculinist, and classist tendencies. In other words, Dunbar-Nelson comes much closer to Anna Julia Cooper’s wish for folk literature’s potential than any of her contemporaries. In this way, Dunbar-Nelson is presenting her readers with a contrasting voice that reminds them of what gets left behind in the push toward uplift and progress.

Dunbar-Nelson’s story, “M’sieu Fortier’s Violin,” appeared for the first time in *Goodness of St. Rocque* and is pointedly critical of modern values. The story centers around an older Creole gentleman named M’sieu Fortier who is depicted as a sympathetic stronghold of tradition. The story’s opening imparts a sense of loss as it depicts the lights going out in the French Opera after

a night's performance. Only one light remains and "makes a halo" around the head of the story's protagonist, M'sieu Fortier, signaling him as a dim and flickering, though angelic source of hope. Fortier is immediately associated more closely with the past and with tradition, which is also notably associated with a lower-class status, as is also the case in "Mr. Baptiste." In this story, as in many of Dunbar-Nelson's others, higher-class status is associated not with progress, but with moral decline. While others are taking carriages or cars home, Fortier walks. Furthermore, he studies music constantly and dislikes modern dance music which he sees as being "frivolous, frothy...trivial, easy, uninteresting" in comparison with opera (*Works* 70; vol. 1).

On his way home he runs into two men, Courcey and his friend, Martel. Courcey has been trying to buy Fortier's violin from him for some time. Martel admonishes Courcey for desiring the violin, telling him, "You are like the rest of these nineteenth-century vandals, you can see nothing picturesque that you do not wish to deface for a souvenir; you cannot even let simple happiness alone, but must needs destroy it in a vain attempt to make it your own or parade it as an advertisement" (*Works* 74; vol. 1). Courcey does not see the violin as Fortier does—as a means of expression and a tool of his livelihood. Instead, he sees it as an ancient curiosity, a commodity. To Courcey, the violin (and Fortier) is merely "picturesque," and something he can purchase for a cheap "souvenir" as a tourist would to signal his own status as a well-traveled and cultured man. He collects and appropriates culture, which Dunbar-Nelson shows to be a far more serious violation than one typically imagines when one thinks of purchasing souvenirs. Here, Dunbar-Nelson uses Martel's critique to point to the kind of nostalgic commodification that she saw as being problematic in modernity and in regionalist fiction in particular. Robert Clark argues that Dunbar-Nelson uses Fortier as an example of how the folk were often stereotyped and exploited in local color literature as quaint and charming

entertainment rather than regarded as people. Clark's point is further supported by Courcey's commodification of Fortier. In fact, he treats Fortier much the same as he does the violin, telling Martel of Fortier, "We are good friends. Picked him up in my French-town rambles" (73; vol. 1). For Courcey, Fortier is little more than a token that he can collect and show off to his high-society friends, increasing his own cultural capital in the process.

Shortly after this encounter, Fortier loses his position as violinist in the New Orleans Opera when it is sold to an American syndicate. The new manager is described as a "most talented, progressive, energetic young man," which immediately worries Fortier, whose "heart sank at the word 'progressive.' He was anything but that. The New Orleans Creole blood flowed too sluggishly in his old veins" (*Works* 76; vol. 1). Here, Dunbar-Nelson links Creole identity with tradition and skepticism of progress, but not for the purpose of making him seem merely simple-minded or quaint. On the contrary, Fortier is the victim of the expansion of corporations and monopolies that came along with other forms of national "progress" at the turn of the century. As Grandt says of this scene, "What the city's ruling classes would deem progress in the economy—the American syndicate—and culture—the new technique of violin playing preferred by the young musicians—deprives Fortier of his livelihood and causes him to become, at least economically, yet another Creole victim of the city's Americanization" (53). The narrator's voice merges with Fortier's to critique this change, saying, "Bah! These English-speaking people could do nothing unless there was a trust, a syndicate, a company immense and dishonest" (*Works* 76; vol. 1). Notably, Dunbar-Nelson interjects a "Bah!" which Fortier himself would use, but then switches into the standard English of her narrator rather than the Creole dialect of Fortier to criticize the capitalist exploitation done by "English-speaking people." This use of free-indirect discourse—the mixing of Creole dialect with standard American English—validates Fortier's

plight as well as his evaluation of American corporatism. Fortier loses his position in the orchestra as a result of this corporate buyout, and is forced to sell his violin to Courcey. He manages for a few weeks, but finds he cannot live without the violin and tries to buy it back. Courcey has a change of heart, returns the violin, and lets Fortier keep the money. In a story with a relatively happy ending for Dunbar-Nelson, she does not seek to distance herself from the poor or unfortunate members of society, nor does she compare modern society with an “uncivilized” past. Rather, she asks what we stand to lose when cultural production is deemed less important than capital.

In another story in the collection, “When the Bayou Overflows,” Dunbar-Nelson examines the frequent associations of the North with freedom and possibility, and instead associates the South with life and home, past and future. In this way, Dunbar-Nelson can be seen as returning to the emphasis on the importance of the South that was seen in Harper’s writing. However, in Dunbar-Nelson’s story, the South is not a region in need of uplifting. In this way, she is forecasting the root black identification in Southern culture that was already present in Chesnut and Dunbar’s writings and would come to fuller fruition in Hurston’s. In this story, the Cajun Sylves’ decides to leave his Bayou home and New Orleans for Chicago and the cigar-making season. Sylves’ is in search of adventure and money to support his mother, Ma’am Mouton, and his fiancée, a Creole of color, Louissette. He succeeds in his mission, but his final letter to his family tells them that he is coming home because he has not been feeling well and his doctor recommended that he return south. Ma’am Mouton and Louissette anxiously prepare for his arrival, but are greeted instead by several men carrying Sylves’s body. The porter tells them that he died en route because “It was too cold for him...he took the consumption. He thought he could get well when he come home” (*Works* 107; vol 1).

Many of Dunbar-Nelson's contemporaries set their novels in the North. There are several reasons for this. Perhaps most importantly, it depicts the reality of life for many African Americans at the time, particularly their target audience as literacy rates were considerably higher in the North. Additionally, it also allows these writers to show their readers this reality because they were so often fed images of African Americans living happily as slaves in fantasies of the pre-war South. As I argued in the first chapter, characters in novels by Dunbar-Nelson's contemporaries who have a stronger connection to the South are often depicted as almost minstrel-like remnants of the old plantation days who try but cannot quite fit in to the urban North. Their characters who have been raised in the North look refined in contrast. While writers such as Hopkins also depict the North as a dangerous place for African Americans, with obstacles not so dissimilar to the ones that they faced in the South, their novels often end with the implication that there is no place of refuge in America for African Americans, least of all the South.

In Dunbar-Nelson's "When the Bayou Overflows," the South is home. For Dunbar-Nelson, the South is a place of challenges—her characters are poor and have little option to survive other than to go north in search of greater opportunity—but this does not necessarily make the North a promised land in comparison. Her story is not fleshed out enough to show the real challenges of racism in the North; instead, she relies on a more common platitude—the North is too cold—to drive home the point that the South is where Sylves' belongs. Though there is opportunity, adventure, and money available to Sylves' in the North, these are nothing compared to the strength of the relationships shared by him, Louisette, and Ma'am Mouton, giving readers the impression that neither the South nor its people are in need of uplifting. Dunbar-Nelson's miniature allegory delivers in short the same message that later black Great

Migration novels have done: a connection to Southern black folk culture is necessary for African Americans' survival in the nation. Similar to her contemporaries, Dunbar-Nelson problematizes life in the North, but she resists minstrelizing her Southern characters, which her contemporaries came dangerously close to doing. In several of her stories, she has an older character who proclaims fears about progress that may date them or make them sound paranoid, but she always, at least partially, validates those concerns. In "Cupid and the Phonograph," for example, it is the intimidating matriarch, Ma'am Giteau who repeatedly proclaims that street cars are "devil-cars" that have been known to cut off the legs of their passengers (*Works* 93; vol. 3). The claim seems ridiculous until the car breaks down while she is on it, stranding her and her daughter in a thunderstorm. In "When the Bayou Overflows," Ma'am Mouton believes Chicago to be a "mistily wicked city," which seems overblown, until the city and its weather are responsible for her son's death (*Works* 101; vol.1). Unlike Mrs. Davis and Mrs. White, Ma'am Mouton generates sympathy instead of laughter.

Furthermore, Ma'am Mouton is balanced out by Sylves' fiancée, Louise. She is first introduced while she is offering to help Ma'am Mouton with the laundry and is described as "petite and plump and black haired... Ma'am Mouton's face relaxed as the small brown hands relieved hers of their burden" (*Works* 96; vol. 1). She is set up in contrast to Northern girls, but in such a way as to generate sympathy for Louise and to make her appear the superior woman. After receiving Sylves's first letter, "Louise caught herself looking critically at her slender brown fingers and blushed furiously" (102; vol. 1). The reason why can be surmised, but does not become clear until the end of the story when Louise is getting ready for Sylves' to come home, and we are told that she "had looked her dainty little dress over and over to be sure that there was not a flaw to be found wherein Sylves' could compare her unfavourably to the stylish

Chicago girls” (*Works* 105-06; vol. 1). It becomes clear that Louissette is ashamed of her blackness as well as her self-perceived homeliness. Notably, Dunbar-Nelson relies on the “angel of the house” myth to make Louissette appear superior to the Northern girls—she is helpful with domestic chores and she blushes when anyone mentions her trousseau. She is not “stylish,” as the Northern girls are, but she is still “dainty.” Nevertheless, it is significant that Dunbar-Nelson is depicting a poor black Creole girl from the bayou in this way, as this is something her contemporaries would rarely, if ever, do. In this story, “progress,” symbolized by Northward movement, is synonymous with vacuousness and even death while the South signifies a return home, and not to some embarrassing, or better-forgotten past.

Just as Louissette is at once poor, black, Southern and genteel, Dunbar-Nelson shows in other stories that distinguishing “progressive,” modern cultures from “older” or less “evolved” cultures is a futile endeavor. Rather than emphasize the evolution of black culture as her contemporaries did in order to prove their ability to assimilate to national, white norms, Dunbar-Nelson uses her New Orleans setting to show how cultures are inherently hybrid, ethnically ambiguous, and a continually changing blend of tradition and innovation. Furthermore, she emphasizes the extent to which Creole society cared little for distinguishing between more traditional and modern cultural forms. For instance, *St. Rocque*’s title story features Voodoo, itself a creolization of African animistic beliefs and Catholicism. Whereas prominent white folklorists of the time such as William Wells Newell believed Voodoo to be a dangerous heathen practice, Dunbar-Nelson validates it. “The Goodness of St. Rocque” begins with a proud Creole girl named Manuela walking through the streets of New Orleans on her way to visit a Voodoo queen known in the story as the “Wizened One.” The home of the Wizened One is itself a testament to the syncretism of cultures and religions. Her steps are yellow-washed, which was a

practice brought over from Saint-Domingue by West African slaves and was meant to promote luck and ward off evil (Irwin-Mulcahy 127). On the inside of the house, the Wizeded One has an altar in the corner with “a cheap print of St. Joseph and a brazen crucifix” which catches Manuela’s eye before she sits down for a séance (*Works* 7; vol. 1). Manuela is visiting the Wizeded One because her lover’s attentions have strayed to the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Claralie. In order to win Theophile back, the Wizeded One gives Manuela a charm to wear around her waist and tells her to pray at St. Rocque Cathedral and burn a candle.

To an outsider, the Wizeded One’s decorations and practices may seem contradictory, but mixing Catholicism with African spiritual practices was one of the defining features of New Orleans Voodoo, and Dunbar-Nelson is careful to note this mixing. New Orleans was predominantly Catholic, and Catholicism served as a framework for Voodoo, given the openness of African beliefs, the presence of saint figures in both religions, and the fact that Marie Laveau, New Orleans’ most famous Voodoo Queen (and likely the queen upon whom the Wizeded One is modeled) was Catholic. This blending of cultures and religious practices explains the Wizeded One’s instructions to both wear a charm (known as a “gris-gris” in New Orleans Voodoo) and to pray at the cathedral. Manuela’s goal is more personal than spiritual, but she evokes both Catholic and Voodoo practices to regain the attentions of her lover and to get revenge on Claralie. The Wizeded One tells Manuela, “She ees ‘fraid, she will work, mais you’ charm, h’it weel beat her” (*Works* 12; vol. 1). Notably, Manuela turns to Voodoo after prayers at the cathedral alone fail her. In this way, Dunbar-Nelson is demonstrating not only the blending of cultures, but also the fact that women were the ones who often resorted to Voodoo as it provided them with an alternative source of power in a world where they had little of their own. Notably, at the end of the story, the Wizeded One’s predictions appear to come true. Theophile

immediately switches his attention back to Manuela and they are married by the end of the story. In the story's final lines, the narrator speculates how this happened. The characters deny any intervention, but the narrator ends the story with the lines, "If you had asked the Wizeden One, she would have offered you a charm. But St. Rocque knows, for he is a good saint, and if you believe in him and are true and good, and make your nouvenas with a clean heart, he will grant your wish" (*Works* 16; vol. 1). The narrator appears to give the most credit to St. Rocque, though the story implies that more is at work. After all, Claralie started making nouvenas at St. Rocque to win over Theophile in the first place, but the story implies that it was the combination of the Wizeden One's charm with the nouvenas that finally succeeded in manipulating Theophile's emotions. The narrator's open-ended speculation at the end of the story signifies to the reader that there is no one correct answer, and any attempt to parse out Catholicism, Voodoo, prayers, or personal desires is pointless. Ultimately, the story is about more than a love triangle and a Voodoo queen. It demonstrates the coexistence of these two religious and cultural practices, the persistence of African culture in a new environment, and the ways that the region was shaped by these cultures and histories. In this story, Dunbar-Nelson maintains a connection to black cultural and spiritual practices, validates them, and demonstrates that "progress" does not always mean an adherence to patriarchal, bourgeois values; she essentially redefines cultural progress for her readers.

Dialect

A defining, and controversial, aspect of local color fiction is dialect. Dunbar-Nelson had a fraught relationship with dialect in fiction, which is perhaps unsurprising given that her first husband's use of dialect has been discussed more than anything else in his writing. In Paul Laurence Dunbar's first letter to Dunbar-Nelson (then Alice Ruth Moore), he asks her opinion

concerning dialect in fiction. He writes, “I want to know whether or not you believe in preserving by Afro-American—I don’t like the word—writers those quaint old tales and songs of our fathers which have made the fame of Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, Ruth McEnery Stuart and others: or whether you like so many others think we should ignore the past and all its capital literary materials” (qtd. in Metcalf 34). Several weeks later, Alice finally responded, saying,

You ask my opinion about Negro dialect in literature. Well, I frankly believe in everyone following his bent. If it be so that one has a special aptitude for dialect work, why it is only right that dialect work should be made a specialty. But if one should be like me—absolutely devoid of the ability to manage dialect—I don’t see the necessity of cramming and forcing oneself into that plane because one is a Negro or a Southerner. Don’t you think so?...I hope I’m not treading on your corns. (qtd. in Metcalf 37-38)

Despite Dunbar-Nelson’s insistence that she had no talent for writing dialect and so chose not to do it, she frequently uses variations of Creole dialect throughout *The Goodness of St. Rocque*. Perhaps she was thinking only of the plantation dialect because of the writers Paul cited in his question, or perhaps her opinions on race and literature were combining with her tendency toward self-deprecation in this passage. Regardless, Dunbar-Nelson did use dialect in many of her stories. As Caroline Gebhard has argued, writing in dialect was a particularly dangerous strategy for black women writers. She states that “Black women writers—perhaps until Zora Neale Hurston—felt more constrained than men in the way they could develop their linguistic inheritance—their ‘cultural capital’ from slavery. As partners in racial uplift, black women could ill afford to dispense with the prerogatives of genteel femininity. For black women, so often

caricatured as hypersexual and ignorant, language associated with a lack of proper decorum or education carried a double-risk" (172).⁸ Gebhard notes that Dunbar-Nelson avoided this risk by writing in Creole dialects, thereby demonstrating that black linguistic inheritance included more than just the standard black vernacular and American English. In this way, she was able to respond in a manner that was genre-specific and subtle, yet still meaningful, to those readers who were tempted to reduce people and languages into black and white categories. Instead, she was able to illustrate the cultural and ethnic diversity of the region through her use of dialect. Furthermore, just as Zora Neale Hurston would do several decades later, Dunbar-Nelson combines American English (and even what some critics have seen as overwrought diction) with dialect, demonstrating to her readers that African American writers are more than capable of mastering multiple forms of language.

For instance, the story most often cited in arguments about Dunbar-Nelson's innovative use of dialect is "The Praline Woman." It is a sketch, spoken by a praline vendor, Tante Marie. There is no intervention from the narrator with the exception of the first sentence, written in standard American English, to set the scene, and one sentence mid-sketch to describe church-bells ringing. The rest of the story is a free-flowing sales-pitch told entirely in the praline vendor's voice. These vendors were traditionally free women of color, and in this story, Tante Marie speaks "true Creole, a blend of Black English and Gallic speech patterns" (Gebhard 173).

⁸ Gebhard's point is certainly valid—that black women's use of dialect would automatically make them appear vulgar or ignorant. However, this is not to say that black men could use dialect in their writing without consequence. The misunderstanding of, and controversy surrounding, Paul Laurence Dunbar's own work is a case in point.

Even her wares are creolized. Pralines originated as sugar-coated almonds from France, but were turned into pecan-filled sweets when African American cooks used the more readily available pecans and added sugar and milk to the recipe. African American women sold them on New Orleans streets to support their families, and so these women became a common sight in the city. As Chandra Nunez notes, “These were a means of entrepreneurship and economic freedom for black women, though these women were frequently disparaged by white customers who called them mammies and belittled the profession while enjoying the sweets” (5). Pecan vendors were hard-working, economically disadvantaged though resourceful, women. Nevertheless, they became a kind of stereotype to their customers. Dunbar-Nelson’s story brings attention to the plight of these women in a significant way.

At the beginning of the sketch, the reader is removed from the vendor, both by her dialect and by her status as a saleswoman. The reader is led into the story with the sentence, “The praline woman sits by the side of the Archbishop’s quaint little old chapel on Royal Street, and slowly waves her latanier fan over the pink and brown wares” (*Works* 175; vol. 1). Readers are immediately jolted by the dialect in the following sentence, “Pralines, praline. Ah, ma’amzelle, you buy? S’il vous plait, ma’mzelle, ces pralines, dey be fine, ver’ fresh” (*Works* 175; vol. 1). We are introduced to her almost as potential customers, wary of her pitch. In her first appeal to a customer, she mentions her own child, who has “hans’ so small, ma’mzelle, lak you’s, mais brune,” which many customers recognize as a common sales strategy—casually mentioning a child in need of support—that is not to be trusted. Furthermore, this sentence racially marks both Tante Marie’s child (and the reader assumes, Tante Marie) and the customer. She is pointing out their similarity despite their racial difference, but it is the difference that stands out most this early in the interaction with Tante Marie. As the sketch continues, we find out more and more

about Tante Marie's personal life, including her name. As she sells pralines to mothers and fathers who have lost children, the reader learns that Tante Marie has lost two children and adopted another, which is the child she mentioned at the beginning of the story. She tells one woman, "You' lil' boy daid?...I had one lil' boy once, he jes' grow 'twell he's big lak' dis, den one day he tak' sick an' die...Madame, you tak' one. Non, non, no l'argent, you tak' one fo' my lil' boy's sake" (*Works* 177; vol. 1). As Tante Marie expresses empathy for her customers, and we learn more about her own hardships, our empathy for her grows, which is a strategy Fetterly and Pryse identify in Dunbar-Nelson's stories. Regionalist texts like Dunbar-Nelson's create shifts in perspective, causing readers to look out through the eyes of those who are typically gazed upon; these shifts of perception shift our empathy, and thus become potentially disruptive to the social fabric and dominant narratives (Fetterly and Pryse 124-25). In this story, a saleswoman becomes human instead of being seen by visitors and New Orleans natives alike as merely a "praline mammy."

Notably, an earlier draft of the story began much differently than the published version. In one of Dunbar-Nelson's notebooks in which she handwrote drafts of her stories, essays, and poems, an early version of "The Praline Woman" appears, dated May 2, 1897, approximately one year before a revised version was published in *The Goodness of St. Rocque*. In this early draft, Dunbar-Nelson begins the story with more context than the final version. She writes, "Pralines are dainty, toothsome delicacies made of cocoa-nuts or pecans and sugar. They are usually sold by picturesque old Creole women in New Orleans; dark-hued, beautiful but fast dying out in the advancing march of time and civilization" ("Praline"). From this point, the story continues as it was published. We can only speculate as to why Dunbar-Nelson eventually cut these two opening lines. The fact that she chose to cut a line associating dark skin with beauty

may be disappointing to modern readers, and can be used to support arguments by critics such as Hull or Eleanor Alexander who read Dunbar-Nelson as desirous of avoiding race in her stories. However, Dunbar-Nelson's decision aligns quite well with her often-stated dislike of moralizing in fiction. Though subtle, the second line paints the "march of...civilization" in a negative light, telling the readers at the story's outset how to feel about a poor black woman and an institution of New Orleans society. Rather than priming her readers to feel sympathy, Dunbar-Nelson creates sympathy through the story's unfolding, allowing them to feel for a woman with a voice likely far different than their own, through no other means but that woman's voice.

Tante Marie even defends her dialect, pointing out that everyone has a way of speech that seems natural to him or her. She relates a story of an Irishman asking her why she speaks the way she does. She replies, "an I jes' say back, 'What fo' you say 'Faith an' be jabbers'?" Non, I don' lake I'ishman, me!" (*Works* 179; vol. 1). Tante Marie's customers and Dunbar-Nelson's readers may find her dialect initially off-putting or strange, as the Irishman did, but, as Tante Marie points out, dialect is simply a part of one's cultural background. Languages, like religion in "The Goodness of St. Rocque," are inherited, yet dynamic and constantly changing. As Fetterly and Pryse point out, Tante Marie is herself guilty of racist attitudes in her hatred of Irishmen and her comments on an "Indien squaw" who she declares is "lazy" behind her back before "politely" asking how her business is going; in this regard, she is as wrapped up in dominant ideology as anyone else, including the readers (*Works* 176; vol. 1). Nevertheless, Dunbar-Nelson uses this seemingly substanceless dialect sketch of a New Orleans street scene to make several complex points about how we perceive other people on the basis of their region, race, class, or gender. By slowly revealing the sad and difficult life of Tante Marie to her readers,

Dunbar-Nelson shows the ways that we are quick to judge others through the lens of cultural stereotypes and perceptions of dominant “norms.”

Dunbar-Nelson uses a similar strategy in “Little Miss Sophie.” In this story, the central character is a “poor little Creole old maid” who works as a seamstress from her squalid, dirty rented room in New Orleans’ Third District. Similar to the praline woman, seamstresses such as Sophie are merely part of the background of the city, a sad fact of life that is easy to ignore. As Sophie travels to deliver her finished clothes, the narrator says, “No one noticed her in the car. Passengers on the Claiborne line are too much accustomed to frail little black-robed women with big, black bundles; it is one of the city’s most pitiful sights” (*Works* 143; vol. 1). As in the “The Praline Woman,” Dunbar-Nelson slowly reveals more about this character’s past life to her readers to generate sympathy for one of these overlooked women. We find out that she had an affair with a wealthy white man named Neale who was recently married to a white woman. Sophie overhears two men on the Claiborne car talking about Neale’s “little Creole love-affair” with his “dusky-eyed fiancée” (*Works* 145; vol. 1). He had given a family ring to Sophie, promising to marry her, but left Sophie to marry the white woman and needs the ring back in order to claim his inheritance. As numerous critics have pointed out, Sophie appears to be a victim of the *plaçage* system, wherein wealthy white men would keep quadroon mistresses, support them financially and then leave them once they made a socially acceptable marriage with a white woman.

What is significant in this story in terms of dialect is that while some characters, like Sophie’s landlady, speak in a Creole dialect, Sophie does not. At the end of the story, Sophie demonstrates her ability to shift between multiple languages, notably a high form of English and French. She speaks to the ring, saying,

Ah, dear ring...once you were his, and you shall be his again. You shall be on his finger and perhaps touch his heart. Dear ring, ma chère petite de ma coeur, chérie de ma coeur. Je t'aime, je t'aime, oui, oui. You are his; you were mine once too. Tonight, just one night, I'll keep you—then to-morrow, you shall go where you can save him. (*Works* 150-51; vol. 1)

Sophie's code-switching ability likely comes from the kind of training needed to be a contender at the quadrone balls, but by placing this language in the mouth of a character whom readers might not expect to be able to speak this way, Dunbar-Nelson overturns these expectations of class and race. Jordan Stouck claims, "In refusing to stigmatize her protagonist through the use of dialect, Dunbar-Nelson emphasizes the permeability of racial boundaries. Portraying a character who is marked as mixed race but speaks as white, the text proliferates questions about what distinguishes and defines identity" (277). In "The Praline Woman," Dunbar-Nelson showed that languages are learned and are formed by various cultural factors such as region and class. However, in "Little Miss Sophie," Dunbar-Nelson shows that cultural and linguistic boundaries can be crossed—that they are not necessarily particular to races or classes, and so one's intellectual or moral capacity cannot be judged on these grounds.

In these stories, dialect is shown to be a mix of speech patterns that is particular to a person's region and cultural background; they also show that cultures are never as clearly defined as we tend to think they are. In other stories, Dunbar-Nelson shows how language can even be a comfort, signifying a connection to past and home. In her short story, "The Pearl in the Oyster," Dunbar-Nelson shows how languages can be manipulated, for better or worse. She also shows how they can be a connection to a past, though that past is susceptible to being lost if one lets it go. In this story, Auguste Picou is constantly in search of his own "pearl," believing his

college commencement speaker when he said “the world was their oyster.” Auguste is a young Creole of color, white enough to pass, but with a free black grandfather and a proud Creole family who initially scoff at his decision to attend a black college which to them is “too American.” They are nevertheless proud upon his graduation and are even proud when he gets a job at a billiard hall with the help of Frank, one of his darker-skinned black friends. When one of the white hall patrons suggests Auguste should go in for politics, he begins to regret his black connections and background and rejects Frank. He uses twisted reasoning, evident by his defensive language, saying, “Now, I’m not a bit prejudiced against dark people; why, my grandfather was a dark man, but if you’re going to get on, you just have to be careful” (*Works* 55; vol. 3). He moves uptown with his wife Laura, herself a fair Creole, further separating himself and Laura from their old family connections. The story follows the municipal and national elections of 1892. Auguste becomes a Democrat, and though they win the municipal election, Auguste does not do well in the mainly Irish Democratic party. When he fails in politics, he suggests to Laura that they move back downtown, and in response, “Laura clasped her hands eagerly and murmured a few caressing words in the forbidden patois they had used as children” (*Works* 59; vol. 3). Eager to return home, Laura immediately slips into her Creole dialect that signifies belonging and community for her but was socially unacceptable in their new life uptown. Notably, Dunbar-Nelson does not actually write any dialogue with Auguste and Laura speaking in this “forbidden patois.” This does not mean that she is avoiding writing in dialect, because Auguste and Laura’s older relatives speak in Creole dialect throughout the story and are portrayed sympathetically. The only time when they are not is when they object to Auguste attending a black university, or, as his Creole relatives call them, “dose American schools” (*Works* 52; vol. 3). Here, Dunbar-Nelson uses their dialect to show the distinctions

many Creoles made between themselves and Americans, black or white. She shows later in the story how these social categories intersected, and how language even contributed to this blending.

Though Laura is eager to reunite with family and friends, Auguste attempts to profit politically from his ancestry, thereby exposing one of the many problems inherent in ignoring cultural histories and narrowing racial definitions. Auguste realizes that Creoles could no longer distinguish themselves as a separate ethnic category, so he attempts to take advantage of his status as a Creole of color when he fails at passing. Unable to fit in with white upper-class society, he decides it would be more politically effective to be black—a choice made all the more problematic by the fact that, as a Creole of color, he and his family enjoyed privileges in New Orleans that were denied other people of African descent. He decides to become a Republican in time for the national election, saying, “It is true...that none of my family ever were slaves, but since I am of the race that was in bondage, I think it but right that I should throw my fortunes politically with the party that freed us” (*Works* 60; vol. 3). He acknowledges that none of his family were slaves, but immediately, and falsely, claims a shared past by saying that the party “freed us.” His casual use of “throw” also suggests his lack of true allegiance to the party and to his fellow black Americans. The narrator mocks Auguste’s ambitions, showing some sympathy for his disadvantaged position in society, but criticizing his attempts to capitalize on one aspect of his identity at the expense of the others and the expense of his family and friends.

Dunbar-Nelson’s criticism of upper-class black politicians and Talented Tenth types is clear in this story. In order to become a “successful” politician, Auguste begins “practicing a bombastic, high-flown style of utterance,” which is in contrast to the language of his youth, his

family, and the preferred language of his wife (*Works* 60; vol. 3). Here, Dunbar-Nelson appears to be targeting the language used by bourgeois proponents of uplift in order to win over the masses. The fact that he uses this language, despite never having had to “lift up” himself as he was never of that class of African Americans points to the hypocrisy and elitism that was often embedded in the language. While many African Americans certainly did do much to improve their own lives and the lives of those in their communities (work Dunbar-Nelson participated in herself), Dunbar-Nelson is pointing out the disconnect that often occurred between uplift proponents and those they were trying to help, particularly when that aid became more self-serving than community-oriented. Furthermore, Auguste surmises that one of the reasons he did not do well in the Democratic party was that it was too large in New Orleans; among the Republicans, he believed that “any man with a reasonable amount of intellect might shine among them,” saying, “Better to be a king among dogs than a dog among kings” (*Works* 60-61; vol. 3). Dunbar-Nelson’s critique of the tendency of the black middle-class to compare themselves favorably to the black majority is especially pointed. Rather than poking fun at the black majority, as Hopkins did in *Contending Forces*, Dunbar-Nelson criticizes one of the members of the middle-class, showing him to be little more than a politician acting on his own ambitions. Auguste’s political run fails, and he is rejected by everyone, including Frank, who no doubt knew his old friend’s true motivations. Notably, at the end of the story, Auguste is “bowed and broken,” and it is Laura who suggests they leave, saying, “this isn’t home any longer” (*Works* 64; vol. 3). The couple resolves to stick to an identity, white or black, in a new place, yet the story is more than just a typical passing narrative. While Dunbar-Nelson shows that identities can be manipulated and crossed, she emphasizes the difficulty of maintaining a complex identity in a city that was being forced into a black/white dichotomy. More importantly, however, she

shows the dangers of attempting to ally oneself with dominant values for the sake of gaining political power, a tendency she doubtless noted among the burgeoning black middle-class and supporters of uplift. In this way, Dunbar-Nelson can be seen as continuing and expanding on the work of Hopkins and Harper, both of whom were heavily critical of opportunistic individualism. In many ways, her critique of Auguste is reminiscent of Hopkins' treatment of Mrs. Willis; however, the solution in Dunbar-Nelson's story—an identification with Creole roots and family—departs more fully from the uplift narrative than *Contending Forces*. One of the key ways in which people maintain their identities in her stories is through their use of language. It ties people to their historical, cultural, and familial pasts and gives them a sense of belonging to a community, as is the case with Laura. However, those languages and those connections can also be lost or abandoned, forcibly or willfully, as is the case with Auguste and in what is perhaps Dunbar-Nelson's most powerful passing story, "The Stones of the Village."

In "The Stones of the Village," an unpublished manuscript, a lack of language is synonymous with loss of identity and even death. In this story, Victor Grabért is raised by his West Indian grandmother, Grandmère Grabért. When we are first introduced to Victor, he is a young boy who is being picked on by the other boys in his neighborhood. His problems begin when Grandmère Grabért catches him playing with several black Creole boys and scolds him, saying, "What you mean playin' in de strit wid dose niggers?" (*Works* 5; vol. 3). Insulted, the boys' parents forbid them from playing with Victor, but when he seeks out the friendship of the white boys, he is rejected from them as well because of his racial background. Still, this is not what is most difficult for Victor. "Hardest of all, though," the narrator says, "was when Grandmère sternly bade him cease speaking the soft, Creole patois that they chattered together, and forced him to learn English. The result was a confused jumble which was no language at all;

that when he spoke it in the streets or in the school, all the boys, white and black and yellow hooted at him and called him ‘White nigger! White nigger!’” (*Works* 5; vol. 3). Losing his language means losing his connection to his family and his home. Caught between languages, he is voiceless and without an identity—the boys in the neighborhood create an insult for him that signifies his abjection and his liminal status.

Grandmère pushes him away from any association with blackness in the hope that he will rise above his circumstances, but she does not anticipate that he will have to reject her in the process. Grandmère sends Victor away to New Orleans where he finds work in a bookstore and eventually passes for white so he can study at Tulane to become a lawyer. He grows into a successful man, marries a white woman, and continues to pass, though his conscience tortures him every time he sees an act of racial injustice. Nevertheless, he entrenches himself in white patriarchal power, espousing racist attitudes and upholding Jim Crow in his new career as a judge in order to overcompensate for his guilt and solidify his position. He does not even return to his village home when Grandmère dies, thinking such a trip would be “useless, sentimental folly” (*Works* 12; vol. 3). As Stouck notes of this story, “Passing, here, not only displays the arbitrary, specularly performative nature of racial boundaries but also reveals the way in which white masculinity and its primary subject position within American society is authenticated through the subordination and abjection of women and people of colour” (280). When Victor rejects his racial background and upholds racist laws and attitudes in an attempt to solidify a white subjectivity, he simultaneously rejects his grandmother.

Victor is particularly bothered by Pavageau, a black lawyer who is not as successful as he is, but is someone whom Victor respects. Pavageau dedicates his legal practice to fighting Jim Crow cases, and so signifies who Victor might have become, and could still become, if he did

not deny his background. Pavageau discovers Victor's secret and asks that Pavageau treat him fairly in court, otherwise he will reveal Victor's true identity. Simultaneously fearing and hoping for discovery, Victor fantasizes about revealing his race to his colleagues at a banquet in his honor where his prospects to become a District Judge are celebrated. He dreams of revealing himself as a successful imposter, thereby shattering their illusions of strictly defined racial boundaries. Just before giving his speech, he ultimately decides his fantasy is impossible because of the consequences it would have for his wife and son. His fantasy, sense of duty, and guilt are all clearly unresolved, however, because as he begins to address the chairman, he sees Grandmère in his place, and "[s]he was looking at him sternly and bidding him give an account of his life" (*Works* 32; vol. 3). He imagines himself sitting alone with her on their porch, and begins saying to the chairman, "Grandmère...you don't understand—" but then, "the other words would not come" (*Works* 32; vol. 3). Though he imagines himself alone with his grandmother, he cannot recall the language of his youth, which she herself had forbidden him to speak. Faced with this image, and with the racial turmoil he has been forced into, he once again loses any concrete subjectivity. Straddling the imaginary boundaries of black and white, just as he did when he was a boy, his language again becomes "a confused jumble which was no language at all" (*Works* 5; vol. 3) All of his guilt manifests itself in the black maternal image of his grandmother whom he rejected in order to solidify his whiteness. He imagines her as a source of comfort at this moment and the men at the banquet as the "boys with stones to pelt him because he wanted to play with them" (*Works* 32; vol. 3). Nevertheless, he cannot get back home to the arms of his grandmother, literally of course, or symbolically. In constructing an identity for himself as a powerful (and racist) white lawyer, he has destroyed the connections he had with his former identity. He beats away the men while shrieking "desperately with furious curses that

came from his blackened lips,” falls across the threshold in an attempt to get to Grandmère, and dies (*Works* 32; vol. 3). In his final moments, Victor regresses into the boy he was in his youth—he is emasculated and voiceless. He again sees himself as racially marked when his performance fails in the midst of his psychological turmoil (Stouck 286). Victor dies, literally and figuratively, on a threshold. While the narrative reveals identities to be socially constructed fictions, subject to manipulation, it also shows the very real consequences of belonging to or denying those identities.

At a time when any use of dialect was dangerous for a black writer, Dunbar-Nelson’s strategic language choices are particularly remarkable. Her own husband experienced first-hand the pressure from white and black editors and audiences as well as the pain that writing in dialect could bring. It is no wonder that Dunbar-Nelson reacted as strongly as she did to Paul’s first letter, and it is no wonder that so many of her women contemporaries avoided dialect. Dunbar-Nelson, however, was able to make use of the conventions of the local-color genre and the Creole dialects around which she grew up. In her fiction, language can maintain one’s connection to one’s home, community, and culture. Her stories also illustrate how those connections can be lost when one tries to assimilate into white bourgeois society. In doing so, she critiques bourgeois black culture, as well, and the equivalence of standard American English with intellect, decorum, or moral character. Finally, she shows that languages can be learned and manipulated, and do not necessarily reflect perceived class or racial boundaries as is the case with Sister Josepha and with Dunbar-Nelson herself. Languages and dialect can separate us from one another, but in her stories, those rifts can be overcome. Dunbar-Nelson’s clever use of dialect anticipates the kind of work Hurston would do with it in her fiction. Dunbar-Nelson did something very similar to Hurston decades earlier in that she made it so that a character’s dialect

could signify a connection to tradition and a community of black folk instead of turning them into comedic relief or quaint remnants of a past that African Americans had moved beyond.

Racial and Gendered Violence

In this last section, I will explore Dunbar-Nelson's relationship with issues of gender and sexuality in her fiction. In her first major published work, *Violets and Other Tales*, Dunbar-Nelson situates herself within and against the works of fiction that had been recently published by her contemporaries. The very first line of her introduction to the book states, "In this day when the world is fairly teeming with books—good books, books written with a motive, books inculcating morals, books teaching lessons,—it seems almost a piece of presumption too great for endurance to foist another upon the market" (*Works*; vol. 1). While this opening line might seem to imply that her book will be just another of the same kind—a book "inculcating morals"—Dunbar-Nelson makes it clear in her introduction that her foray into the literary world will be nothing of the kind. She goes on to situate herself within the genre of women's fiction, and repeatedly uses self-deprecating language, calling her book a "maiden effort" twice, a "little thing with absolutely nothing to commend it," and a "collection of idle thoughts" (*Works*; vol. 1). While she considers her book to be a work of women's fiction, she emphasizes that it is in no way meant to be didactic. She states that her collection "seeks to do nothing more than amuse" and that she will be satisfied if her book offers the reader a light distraction (*Works*; vol. 1). This stated intent for her collection, minimized though it is, is notably different than her earlier list of what she sees the majority of books on the market doing. Suddenly, her earlier repetitive list seems vaguely critical, as if she is saying that the market is overrun with books that have motives, morals, and lessons, thus making them ineffective, or as if this should not be literature's primary function. This is not to say that Dunbar-Nelson's stories are solely entertaining and not

in any way critical of social structures and categories. However, it is clear that even a twenty year-old Dunbar-Nelson was attempting to distinguish herself from the writing put out by her slightly older contemporaries.

Thus, Dunbar-Nelson establishes herself as a writer of “women’s fiction,” but of a different sort. Nevertheless, Dunbar-Nelson would retain a fraught relationship with issues surrounding gender equality—her self-deprecation and insistence on belittling her efforts in her first book, all while using very gendered terms, are indicative of this tension. Her early work reflects adherence to gender norms; nevertheless, she attempted to set herself apart from the New Negro Woman image popular among her contemporaries and create a reputation instead as a New Woman. This is most evident in her short essay, “The Woman,” which appears in *Violets*. In this essay, Dunbar-Nelson wonders why a well-salaried working woman should marry at all. She makes the case that these women benefit from greater freedom and independence and have the opportunity to broaden their minds through travel. She critiques marriage, but does not wholly condemn the institution; she instead urges women to wait, claiming that most women rush into marriage to conform to social expectations and also display “a certain delicate shrinking from the work of the world—laziness is a good name for it” (*Works* 26; vol. 1). She calls marriage “a serfdom, sweet sometimes, it is true, but which often becomes galling and unendurable” (*Works* 25; vol. 1). Notably, Dunbar-Nelson does not liken marriage to slavery, a common, and problematic, trope of the time. She does not compare the two institutions as many of her white women contemporaries did, but instead refers to it as a serfdom, likely in an attempt to maintain the point that women are essentially of a lower class without creating a false equation with slavery. This does not mean that her argument is without problems. Her argument is entirely for women who are capable of entering into employment; she does not take into consideration

women born into a lower class or the unique circumstances faced by women of color. She assumes that women with extra income will spend it on “a dress, a book, a bit of music, a bunch of flowers, or a bit of furniture” or that “she is free to go where she pleases—provided it be in a moral atmosphere—without comment” (*Works* 23; vol. 1). While she recognizes the restrictions still placed on women, such as their inability to go anywhere with a questionable “atmosphere,” she does not exactly object to them either. Instead, she assumes fairly stereotypically bourgeois feminine goals on the part of her audience. Her ultimate argument is that a woman should establish some independence for herself and become more well-rounded and accomplished through work so she can afford her own niceties. That way, if she does marry, she will be a happier wife because of her period of self-exploration. Granted, Dunbar-Nelson was most certainly writing with a middle-class and/or white audience in mind, and with her own perspective as a middle-class society woman in mind as well. And she does overtly critique the ideal of Victorian Womanhood, making the case that it is natural for women to pursue their own careers and passions *and* still maintain a traditional sense of femininity. However, it is clear that she does not want to stray too far from gender norms, or class and racial expectations. In her fiction, her critique of these norms is more urgent.

As I argued in my first chapter, most black women writing in the 1890s conformed to the gender and sexual expectations of Victorian womanhood in their novels so as to refute damaging stereotypes of black women in particular and to argue for African American social advancement. They manipulated sentimental conventions, such as the idealized courtship story, to depict racial progress as something worked for and fully realized by the eventual union and partnership of black couples (Tate *Domestic*). In Dunbar-Nelson’s stories, however, courtships are anything but ideal. While many of Dunbar-Nelson’s contemporaries such as Harper and Hopkins were

attempting to write themselves into the nation, presenting their black women readers with a model for proper citizenship, Dunbar-Nelson was challenging the assumptions behind that performance. Very few of the stories end on a positive note—in most, the woman either dies, is abandoned by her lover, is symbolically trapped behind the closed door of a convent or her father’s house, or some combination of the above. While Gloria Hull thought it was “distressing to see so many protagonists in these stories sink and succumb,” these tragic endings are typically the result of constraining gender roles and racist and/or sexist abuse by white males (*Color* 52). One might surmise from some of her other stories, such as “When the Bayou Overflows,” that Dunbar-Nelson avoided any real depictions of racial or gendered violence. On the contrary, the majority of her stories end in tragedy, but it is often a tragedy that results from her characters trying and failing to fit expectations of gender, race, or class. Furthermore, since many of the women in these tragic stories are lower-class or doubly marginalized low-class Creoles of color, Dunbar-Nelson is suggesting that the role of the “true woman” to which they aspire is damaging for these women. As she did with her passing narratives and depictions of Jim Crow, Dunbar-Nelson is sensitive to how state institutions and laws shape and impinge on identities, and marriage is certainly one of those institutions. While Harper and Hopkins upheld the heteronormative bourgeois family structure as an ideal to which African Americans were capable of aspiring, Dunbar-Nelson shows how legal institutions, including marriage, only protect certain members of the nation. Instead of depicting characters who successfully adhere to proper gender roles and expectations of Victorian womanhood, Dunbar-Nelson’s seemingly quaint local color stories are in fact masked critiques of the racial and gendered violence that results from adopting or imposing dominant social norms.

For example, in the story “Tony’s Wife,” a German woman, referred to in the story simply as “Tony’s wife,” lives with an abusive Italian man and “meekly” does his bidding while letting out “stifled” sighs and sobs (*Works* 19; vol. 1). They own a run-down shop in a semi-fashionable part of New Orleans and are “tolerated” by their upper-middle class neighbors (*Works* 22; vol. 1). The narrator is careful to point out that Tony is out of place in this environment as a “black-bearded, hoarse-voiced, six-foot specimen of Italian humanity,” though she also notes that his English is “unaccented” and he avoids telling anyone his last name (*Works* 22; vol. 1). Assimilation and performance are central to Tony’s identity—he seems particularly concerned about performing the role of the patriarchal white male, as he spends most of his day berating and beating his German “wife.” She quietly submits and performs her role as a shopkeeper and wife dutifully, though her “dull cold eyes hurt you, because you knew they were trying to mirror sorrow, and could not because of their expressionless quality” (*Works* 23; vol. 1). The German woman’s role as an obedient wife has become her “mask,” though a break in the mask is finally seen when Tony becomes deathly ill. The doctor tells the woman that “he is completely burned out inside. Empty as a shell, madam, empty as a shell” (*Works* 28; vol. 1). Tony’s entire identity has been built around the subjugation of those around him, particularly his “wife.” He has no real self of his own to speak of, causing him to be “empty as a shell” while the German woman has been freed by the realization that his power was relational, and not inherent. Upon hearing the doctor’s diagnosis, she “laughed with a hearty joyousness that lifted the film from the dull eyes and disclosed a sparkle beneath” (*Works* 28; vol. 1). Unfortunately, her joy and realization of a sense of self do not last. The narrator reveals that Tony’s wife is not, in fact, his wife at all. As he is lying on his deathbed, she reminds him of her loyalty and asks him to

make her “a good woman once, a real-for-true married woman” (*Works* 31; vol. 1). Tony refuses, leaving his money to his brother, and his “wife” is turned out on the streets.

This story in particular demonstrates that identities are socially performed and constructed—our performances of them make them seem real. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (33). Just as Tony shored up his own identity as a white American patriarchal head of house by changing his accent and abusing his wife, so his German mistress also acted according to established gender norms. By performing the role that she knew wives were “supposed” to perform, she thought she could actually become Tony’s wife. Unfortunately for her, her status only ever remained a performance. Without the actual legal protection, the woman’s domestic performance is meaningless. This is a significant departure from Harper’s fiction, which emphasizes moral character above all, and from Hopkins’s depiction of Victorian Womanhood as well. While Sappho upholds the standards of Victorian (or in her case, New Negro) Womanhood outside of marriage, thereby signaling to the reader that she is an upstanding woman, worthy of marriage to a man such as Will, Dunbar-Nelson is not so romantic about the notion that domestic performance and solid morals will eventually bring happiness. For years, “Tony’s wife” performed the role of the dutiful wife so that everyone from the neighborhood kids to the reader believed her to be so—even the story’s title declares it. But performing an identity comes with real consequences. Tony’s performance of white masculinity turns him into an “empty shell” and his live-in mistress into an oppressed and damaged woman. The wife’s performance of “true womanhood” becomes an inseparable part of her identity, and really, her only identity as she is not even given a name in the story. She is left wringing her

hands on the street in the story's closing image, thus showing in a Butlerian way that gender is not something so simple as a mask that one can put on or take off at will to reveal a "sparkling" identity beneath. In this story, Dunbar-Nelson offers a strong critique of the very real limitations faced by women—limitations that are only exacerbated by the expectations of Victorian womanhood. "True womanhood," when performed outside the legal institutions that usually regulate its rewards, is useless at best and oppressive, life-altering, and even deadly at worst.

In the story, "Sister Josepha," Dunbar-Nelson again depicts the dangers faced by a penniless, identity-less woman, but speaks to how this situation was especially difficult for a Creole woman of color. Having spent much of her time working with young women arriving on their own from the South at the White Rose Institution in New York, Dunbar-Nelson probably wanted to portray a more realistic image of the fears and dangers experienced by black women without families. Sister Josepha comes to a New Orleans convent as Camille, a three year-old Creole orphan with "black eyes" (*Works* 157; vol. 1) and "small brown hands" (*Works* 156; vol. 1). She grows into a startlingly beautiful young woman—so beautiful, in fact, that she attracts unwanted attention from an English-speaking couple that wishes to adopt her. Camille has no problem with the woman, but her intuition warns her against her potential future father. The narrator says, "Untutored in worldly knowledge, she could not divine the meaning of the pronounced leers and admiration of her physical charms which gleamed in the man's face, but she knew it made her feel creepy, and stoutly refused to go" (*Works* 159; vol. 1). Here, Dunbar-Nelson is again pointing to the legacy of *plaçage*, but also is critiquing one of the specific dangers that existed for a young woman of color without family or identity in New Orleans, namely the trope of the "exotic tropical beauty." As Hardwig argues, Dunbar-Nelson "presents the effect of this 'tropical beauty' from the point of view of the colonized Creole subject" (136).

Camille's feeling of violation from this man's gaze causes her to decide to stay in the convent, take her vows, and become Sister Josepha. Dunbar-Nelson notes that even within the walls of the convent, Sister Josepha is not entirely safe from the kind of sexual objectification so often experienced by women of color. The narrator notes that "[e]ven Father Ray lingered longer in his blessing when his hands pressed her silky black hair" (*Works* 160; vol. 1). The priest's inappropriate attentions to Sister Josepha are a cause of jealousy, not concern, among the other women. Sister Josepha dreams of leaving, and even concocts a plan, but realizes that outside the walls of the convent, she would lack all protection from men like the one who wanted to adopt her. The narrator describes this realization: "No name but Camille, that was true; no nationality, for she could never tell from whom or whence she came; no friends, and a beauty that not even an ungainly bonnet and shaven head could hide. In a flash she realised the deception of the life she would lead, and the cruel self-torture of wonder at her own identity" (*Works* 171; vol. 1). Ultimately, Sister Josepha decides to shut herself in behind the "heavy door" of the convent.

With this story, Dunbar-Nelson is pointing to the fact that for many young black women, being chaste and refined isn't necessarily an option within their control. In this way, Dunbar-Nelson is making a similar move as Hopkins did in *Contending Forces* with Sappho who was raped by her white uncle. In Sister Josepha's case, she faces racial and sexual objectification and the possibility of violence both outside the convent and within it, from men and women. However, as Elizabeth West has noted, Dunbar-Nelson is critical of Christianity in a way that her contemporaries were not by "overtly reject [ing] sentimental paradigms that seat womanhood in Christian virtue" (6). This is a significant departure from Sappho. While Sappho also uses the convent as a sanctuary after being propositioned by John Langley, in her case, it is a true safe space. Furthermore, Sappho is eventually rescued from a life behind convent walls by Will

Smith, whom she later marries. Dunbar-Nelson's story shows what the situation would have realistically been for a poor young woman of color in New Orleans.

Dunbar-Nelson's work at the White Rose Mission and life in New York appears to have had a definite influence on her writing about gender issues. Her earlier writing, such as "The Woman," and even some of her short stories in *Violets* are more sentimental and restrained in their critiques. Her later writing became bolder. She is more intense in her questioning of issues surrounding gender and sexuality in her aptly titled, unpublished collection *Women and Men*, which was to be published around 1902. Some of her most powerful critiques of poverty and gendered violence appear in her unpublished collection, *The Annals of 'Steenth Street*, which she likely wrote between 1900 and 1910. These stories fall more closely into the genre of urban naturalism as they primarily feature Irish ghetto youth in New York City, though the race of many characters is still indeterminate. The dangers of performing gendered roles is a continuing feature of these stories.

In "Witness for the Defense," for instance, a woman murders her abusive alcoholic husband in an act of self-defense. All of 'Steenth Street is proud of the wife, Belle, because, "for so long had the survival of the strongest been the implacable law that now when one woman had broken the bonds of custom and established the right to live and to kill too, there was great rejoicing...The Rights of Women began to have a concrete meaning" (*Works* 112; vol. 3). Dunbar-Nelson's outright statement here concerning the rights of women is something that did not appear in her earlier stories. Nevertheless, this statement does not come across the same way as one of Hopkins' or Harpers' speeches. The narrator makes this bold claim concerning women's rights, but then complicates it through her characterization of Belle and her daughter Lizzie, who almost witnessed the murder. Lizzie only saw her mother's face "convulsed with

dreadful anger” before hiding under the bed, “too glad that the drunken hands were off her small person at last” (*Works* 117; vol. 3). In the aftermath of the murder, Lizzie can no longer look at her mother and see her as she did before; instead, she only sees “a mask with distorted features working in convulsive rage and hate” when she looks at her mother (*Works* 112; vol. 3). All of the pain and anger produced as a result of living under such abuse and oppression—of trying to maintain as happy a home as she could under the circumstances—forever haunts Belle and Lizzie. Perhaps saddest of all is that at one point, Lizzie says she actually preferred when her step-father was alive because his abuse “was not without a certain sweetness” because after it was over, “she and Belle might creep into one another’s arms and sob out certain comforting things to each other” (*Works* 113; vol. 3). Though Belle wins her case because of the testimony of her daughter (or rather, the lack of testimony), the “concrete meaning” of the rights of women is questioned when the wounds of patriarchal oppression still linger and nothing has really been done to dismantle the cause of those wounds, either.

One of the story’s strongest moves is that it draws attention to the ineptness of the legal system despite the fact that the narrator notes that cases such as Belle’s were common for the area; the story shows the ways in which injustice is built into the legal system. The court sees the case as “a very ordinary affair,” but they decide to try to make an example of Belle anyway in an attempt to crack down on crime in ‘Steenth Street, so they threaten her with execution. Belle’s jury is made up of “twelve serious men” who were exactly “like the men who come out of [the local bar] McEneny’s side door on Sunday afternoons” (*Works* 118; vol. 3). Dunbar-Nelson critiques the all-male judge and “jury of [her] peers” in such a case, likening them more to Belle’s alcoholic late husband than to Belle herself. In this story, Dunbar-Nelson makes a strong

critique of the insidious ways in which violence, oppression, and suffering at the hands of a patriarchal system becomes normalized, both in law and at an emotional and cultural level.

While many of Dunbar-Nelson's stories such as "Witness for the Defense" and "Tony's Wife" depict a kind of symbolic mask (in the wife's blank face and Belle's murderous one), in some of her stories, her characters are quite literally masked. Dunbar-Nelson takes advantage of the New Orleans festival of Carnival to write her own "masked" critiques of racial and gender norms. Her most well-known Carnival story is "A Carnival Jangle," which was first published in *Violets* and reappears in *Goodness*. It tells the story of a young white girl named Flo who is persuaded by an acquaintance dressed as the devil to leave her group of friends, mask herself as a male troubadour, and explore New Orleans during Carnival to find out "what life is" (*Works* 129; vol. 1). As they leave uptown and venture into the lower districts, they encounter the Mardi Gras Indians, a group of African American working class men who dress in elaborate costumes based loosely on Native American ceremonial attire and organize themselves into "tribes." While today the Mardi Gras Indians express tribe rivalry through the elaborateness of their dress and dance competitions, at the time the story was written, the Mardi Gras Indians' rivalries often erupted in violence (Lipsitz 113). Mistaking Flo for a rival tribe member, one of the Indian chiefs stabs her in the chaos of the crowd and the story ends with Flo's mother, crying over her daughter's dead body.

The story itself begins innocently and lightheartedly enough, with the "merry jangle of bells" and "the flaunting vividness of royal colors," masking the violence that is to come later in the story, as well as the violence and chaos beneath the surface of New Orleans (*Works* 127; vol. 1). The story's opening reflects the quaintness that critics have attributed to Dunbar-Nelson's stories, but she quickly pops the "effervescent bubble of beauty" (another descriptive phrase

from the story's introduction) that is Carnival (*Works* 127; vol. 1). According to Mikhail Bakhtin, Carnival is a time when social hierarchies and dominant forces of everyday life are overturned by normally suppressed factions of society. Furthermore, Bakhtin notes that Carnival is not something that one merely observes, but is participated in by everyone. Both of these aspects of Carnival are reflected in "Carnival Jangle." Flo begins the story with a rather tame group of unmasked friends, and she, "the quietest and most bashful of the lot," is after a bit of adventure and the thrill of losing herself for one day (*Works* 129; vol. 1). She dons her troubadour mask, becoming more of a participant and less an observer, but neither Flo nor her new friends take their actions very seriously. At one point, to describe the route Flo and her friends have taken, the narrator recommends in the manner of a tour guide, "When the flash and glare and brilliancy of Canal Street have palled upon the tired eye, when it is yet too soon to go home to such a prosaic thing as dinner, and one still wishes for novelty, then it is wise to go into the lower districts" (*Works* 131; vol. 1). In light of the end of the story, such a recommendation hardly seems wise. In retrospect, the narrator's advice takes on a derisive tone. Dunbar-Nelson again makes use of the conventions of local color fiction while twisting them to suit her purposes. The tour-guide narrator is mocking Flo and her friends for being tourists, for their voyeuristic trip to the lower districts out of a sense of boredom and a search for "novelty." This is not the only time that Dunbar-Nelson resists being the typical tourist narrator of local color fiction. While she appears to adhere to the convention, she also leaves out several important details, namely any history of the Mardi Gras Indians. Only someone familiar with Mardi Gras traditions would know that the "mimic-Red men" she refers to are in fact this group, or that they are African American men.

Flo and her friends see the Mardi Gras Indians as mere entertainment, thinking that “It was amusing to watch these mimic Red-men, they seemed so fierce and earnest” (*Works* 133; vol. 1). For the Mardi Gras Indians, however, their performance is in fact a serious traditional and cultural act. These African American men spend an entire year hand-sewing their costumes and planning their performances. Their dress and songs are picked from numerous traditions, but the men’s choice to dress themselves as Native Americans is meant to call attention to, or “unmask” the repressions and violence that dominant society would rather keep invisible—namely, the fact that white American “civilization” is built on the subjugation of Native and African Americans (Lipsitz 111). As George Lipsitz notes of their performance, “Mardi Gras Indians and their audiences profit from the cultural legacies of the past, even while adapting them to the present. Mardi Gras Indian traditions are not a matter of establishing precise origins or maintaining authentic folk forms; rather, they seek to unite the present with the past in a dynamic, yet continuous process” (111-12). They adapt traditional folk forms to respond to present needs, much as Dunbar-Nelson does with her own stories. The Mardi Gras Indians’ costumes are not merely meant for amusement or play; rather, they allow the black performers an opportunity to subvert the dominant narrative, to express themselves openly in a way in which they would not typically be allowed in their day-to-day lives. Being black, the Mardi Gras Indians were not even allowed to wear masks as there was a law against African Americans doing so in New Orleans at the time, so their costume takes on added significance. Their daily lives required them to “wear the mask” in the manner of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, hiding their pain and submitting to oppression while their physical bodies were painfully exposed and exploited. Carnival and the tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians allow them one day during the year to literally and figuratively unmask themselves through their performance.

Flo, on the other hand, is attempting a temporary subversion. For her, masking is a game, a slightly risky diversion. As soon as she puts on a mask and gives up her privilege as a white woman, however, she is subject to the very real dangers faced by members of less privileged groups. The chief who kills Flo mistakes her for a man named Leon, saying, “I know those white hands like a woman’s and that restless head” (*Works* 133; vol. 1). The chief ascribes his own stereotypes of race and gender to Flo/Leon, associating light skin with femininity, and uses them to justify her identity and her murder. As a white woman with little more than her hands visible, Flo is able to pass for a light-skinned black man whom the chief derisively calls “sweetheart” and believes to be overly feminine (*Works* 133; vol. 1). It is significant that Flo is killed as a result of mistaken identity because it allows Dunbar-Nelson to show how the associations we attribute to certain groups and the arbitrary distinctions we use to categorize people come with serious and sometimes violent or even deadly consequences. The narrator questions the pointlessness of Flo’s death and the attempted murder of Leon, asking, “There is murder, but by whom? For what?” (*Works* 134; vol. 1). So while Dunbar-Nelson questions the rigidity with which we assign identities and police the boundaries of those identities, she nevertheless shows the very real consequences that violating racial and gender norms can have—that cross-cultural encounters are not always opportunities for creative possibility, but they are interactions determined by and imbued with power.

In many of her stories, Dunbar-Nelson creates sympathy for her women characters, as she did for her poor male Creole characters. Tante Marie is viewed by customers and even readers as a little more than a seller of candy, when in reality she is working to support herself and her adopted daughter. Tony’s “wife” is left a battered and abandoned woman on the streets of New Orleans, and Sister Josepha is doomed to a future of self-repression. For all of these women and

the others I have not mentioned, the world is not a safe place, but neither is the home. The stories are most tragic when her characters fail to realize the rigidity of identities and the seriousness with which they are maintained. Little Miss Sophie kills herself in the attempt to maintain Ned's identity and to uphold his marriage to his beautiful new bride whom Sophie idolized when she caught a glimpse of her in the church. Flo's blindness to racial violence leads to her own death as a result of mistaken identity.

The most successful manipulators of masks and racial or gender restrictions in these stories are those who work within the dominant culture, appearing to follow its rules while subtly pointing out its inconsistencies and delegitimizing its claim to power. As Butler argues, "power can be neither withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed" (124). The best example of this are the Mardi Gras Indians who participate in Carnival, but draw from a blend of traditions and cultures to challenge the New Orleans elite. Even Tony's wife is able to successfully subvert her husband's authority by working only when he commands her to and spending every other free moment developing her talent and passion for knitting. The fact that it is a "feminine" activity that brings in a profit prevents Tony from reprimanding her for it. In a similar way, Dunbar-Nelson writes fiction that appears on the surface to be deferential to mainstream expectations, and is even in some sense still trapped by traditional gender and racial conventions, but works subtly to undermine the very culture it appears to be a part of. She writes small, unassuming texts and stories while inserting critiques and even some outright claims to equality. For instance, though she claims her first collection is "slight" and "unassuming" entertainment, she includes an essay that claims the right of women such as herself to be New Women, an identity reserved for white women. The essay, as noted earlier, is not without its problems, materialism being chief among these. Furthermore, Dunbar-Nelson's language, tone, and genre is all very fitting for

a woman at the turn of the century. Her diction is refined, her stories sentimental, her characters charming—yet, upon closer examination, they reveal problems with modern society. Creoles are sacrificed on the color line and women live in unhappy partnerships with men who exploit them. Certainly, her stories do not go so far as to imagine alternatives for her trapped women characters. This is something that would come with later writers. Nevertheless, rather than separating herself from the masses, she uses her stories to connect her readers with the Creole culture she knew from her youth. By focusing on a specific region, she is able to show how race is influenced by place and movements of people and not something that evolves into higher or more civilized forms. Her alternative use of dialect and her critique of bourgeois institutions and morality anticipates the stronger racial protests and appreciation of folk culture that characterizes the fiction of Hurston and others in the Harlem Renaissance and beyond.

III

Theorizing and Validating Folklore in Zora Neale Hurston's Short Fiction

In many ways, Alice Dunbar-Nelson's work forecasts the kind of writing for which Zora Neale Hurston would be known and celebrated. Two decades before Hurston began publishing, Dunbar-Nelson wrote fiction that portrayed the South as a region with a complex history and culture—one which provided a dynamic setting that was worthy of portrayal, and not merely a region in need of rehabilitation. Likewise, Dunbar-Nelson's Southerners are largely sympathetic—while more tragic than Hurston's characters, they are important counter-portrayals to simplistic renderings of Southerners in fiction by white and black authors alike. Though not a central focus of her work, Dunbar-Nelson made sophisticated use of dialect in her fiction, while dialect becomes essential in Hurston's work. While Hurston is often credited as being the first black woman writer to portray Southern black folk culture positively, it is important to recognize that writers such as Dunbar-Nelson were doing similar work at the turn of the century. As Shirley Moody-Turner argues, a linear progressive view of black literature not only discredits the work of earlier writers as being less polished and politically significant but “it also reproduces a teleology that views the African American literary tradition as moving toward a more perfect and sophisticated enunciation of a black literary aesthetic” (11). In such a formulation, the Harlem Renaissance and its aesthetic (or what critics have constructed as *the* Harlem Renaissance aesthetic) becomes the height of black art and the signifier of black authenticity. As I argued in my previous chapter, Dunbar-Nelson's writing complicates our understanding of the Post-Reconstruction era as a period of literary concession to white values or audiences. It is important to recognize that writers such as Dunbar-Nelson existed and preceded Hurston, not, of course, to discredit Hurston's work, but to gain a fuller understanding of the writing black women were

doing in the early twentieth century. Considering these writers together allows us to better understand the black women's literary tradition, and how it has been created.

In my next two chapters, I examine Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson together, paying close attention to aspects of their fiction where they align as well as where their aesthetics diverge. Dunbar-Nelson and Hurston share a great deal in common, particularly in terms of their views on the relationship between literature and politics, as I discussed in my introduction. Their emphasis on the folk, their use of the black vernacular, their treatment of women of color, and especially their attitude toward the New Negro movement are similar in many respects; nevertheless, Hurston's style is undoubtedly bolder and shares more in common with her Harlem Renaissance contemporaries than with Dunbar-Nelson's more sentimental prose. I examine them together in these chapters to explore the simultaneous breadth and cohesiveness of the black women's literary tradition. By analyzing the work of one writer who is now a staple of this tradition with another who remains undeservedly overlooked, I wish to emphasize the diversity among black women writers in terms of their backgrounds, aesthetics, and politics. At the same time, I hope to shed light on their common goals in spite of their differences. Above all, I aim to underscore the artificial construction of the canon—the fact that the “tradition” is incomplete not because of the quality of these writers' work but because of our own critical politics which highlights some texts while discounting others.

In this chapter, I focus on Hurston's short stories. The aspects of Dunbar-Nelson's fiction on which I centered my examination—her attention to folk elements and culture, her use of dialect, and her critique of gender roles—have long been analyzed in Hurston's fiction, particularly her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Critical attention has focused on this novel because of its positive depiction of folk culture, especially Hurston's strategic use of the

black vernacular, as well as the novel's possibilities for feminist interpretations. Far less attention has been paid to Hurston's short stories, though these texts provide critical opportunities just as rich as those in *Their Eyes*. Hurston's short fiction offers important points of comparison with Dunbar-Nelson's not only because of the genre, but also because a good many of Hurston's short stories were published earlier in her career and are therefore closer in terms of time and historical context with Dunbar-Nelson's writing. Throughout this chapter, I draw comparisons back to Dunbar-Nelson's short stories, keeping several goals in mind. I shed light on the ways in which Hurston's short fiction shared many of the same elements as Dunbar-Nelson's, despite their seemingly stark differences. Doing so will, I believe, help to answer why Dunbar-Nelson has not been so readily accepted in the tradition at the same time that it brings greater attention to Hurston's infrequently discussed short stories. I hope to explain why Hurston's approach toward folklore appears different and more sophisticated than her predecessors, both to draw attention to the remarkable work Hurston was doing in her short fiction, and to dispel notions of a linear progressive literary tradition and an idealized Harlem Renaissance folk aesthetic.

Though most well known for her novels, Hurston was also quite successful as a short story writer. Most of her early fame was due to her short stories;¹ in fact, she did not even publish her first novel until 1934, near the end of the Harlem Renaissance. As Carla Kaplan notes, "the

¹ And, undoubtedly, her infectious personality. Most of her published short stories were likely already familiar to her audience of friends as she was known for her oral story-telling at Harlem parties. See Boyd (140).

short story was her original medium” (306). Yet, most critical focus remains on Hurston’s novels and anthropological work; several of her more frequently anthologized stories have received significant critical attention, such as “Sweat” and “The Gilded Six-Bits,” but a broader consideration of Hurston’s short stories is necessary as provides more insight into Hurston’s relationship to her peers as well as her contradictory stances on numerous political and social issues. Hurston’s early short stories explored many of the same themes and utilized many of the same formal and narrative elements that she would elaborate on later in her novels. Though Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Sieglinde Lemke state in their introduction to a collection of Hurston’s short stories that her stories are experimental, “a sketch for a larger work of art,” it can be argued that her stories deserve just as much attention as her novels (xi). As Gates and Lemke go on to note, her stories are remarkable for their attempt “to register a distinct sense of space—an African-American cultural space” and for Hurston’s “delight in the Southern black vernacular voice as a vehicle for narration” (xi, x). Similar to Dunbar-Nelson’s stories, Hurston’s are significant for their ability to capture the complexities of a particular region. While Dunbar-Nelson appears to engage directly with the local-color movement that was popular at the time she was writing, Hurston is more concerned with actively trying to represent the folk culture of the region in which she was raised, balancing her various professional and creative identities as author, autobiographer, folklorist, and ethnographer. As Kaplan notes, “Zora Neale Hurston was deeply interested in the form of the short story, particularly its adaptability to oral traditions, folklore, and the vernacular, and she returned to it again and again throughout her life, experimenting with its possibilities and bringing to bear on it all of her varied and complex interests” (310). Many of her stories are drawn directly from Eatonville “porch talk” or “lying sessions” that she either remembered from her childhood or collected on her trips to the South

while she was working for Franz Boas or Charlotte Osgood Mason. Some, such as “Black Death” or “Spunk,” read similarly in terms of structure and style to stories she included in her folklore collection, *Mules and Men*. Others, such as “The Country in the Woman,” are retellings of tales she included in “The Eatonville Anthology” and her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

Hurston used her short stories to theorize about folklore itself, moving beyond her education that taught her to “collect” it as objective, scientific proof of an anthropological theory of how cultures interact. As Moody-Turner notes, Hurston “continually challenged the epistemological and representational strategies emerging from anthropology and folklore studies,” namely the “taxonomy of collecting, classifying, and categorizing” of cultures (158). Moody-Turner goes on to argue that Hurston and her contemporaries, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles Chesnutt, used their writing to critique the fact that African Americans were often the objects of folkloric studies, and not the folklorists themselves. She argues that Hurston in particular “uses literary conventions to expose the limits of traditional ethnographic representations of black folklore” in her folklore collections such as *Mules and Men* (Moody-Turner 159). I argue that Hurston uses her short stories in much the same way, to expose the limitations of a wholly scientific, objective approach to folklore. Her stories often challenge the terms of folklore itself by blurring the lines between memory and fact, effectively challenging the notion of a factual, recorded, or “authentic” narrative. Much like Dunbar-Nelson who challenged the turn-of-the-century notion that Southern black folk and folk culture were impediments to social, cultural, or political progress, Hurston also saw the value and power of folklore, ultimately making the case that folklore is not a static bit of culture to be researched and studied, but instead acts as a form of resistance as well as a source of empowerment and

communal bonding. Hurston not only delights in the play and humor of black folklore, but uses it as a challenge to popular representations of Southern life from both the New Negro movement as well as white representations of black life and folk culture, as did Dunbar-Nelson.

A great deal of Hurston's fiction was influenced by her training as an anthropologist and by the shifts that were taking place in the field of anthropology in the early twentieth century. While an unscientific form of anthropology, grounded in racist nativism and biological determinism, was popular at the turn of the century, leading to Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color*, the field was undergoing a significant change. Early anthropologists such as the founder of the American Folklore Society, William Wells Newell, advocated a more scientific, objective approach to collecting and studying folklore. Newell recognized that most folklore was collected with the purpose of identifying a racial or national origin, a practice which he observed was more about constructing a national mythology out of a sense of patriotism than it was about scientific observation and analysis. Newell instead proposed that folklore was transmitted during the interaction of cultural groups (Moody-Turner 22). While Newell still adhered to the notion that some cultural groups were more civilized than others, Franz Boas proposed the notion of cultural relativism, which directly challenged earlier cultural evolutionary models. His observations laid the foundation for modern anthropological studies by divorcing race from culture and asserting that all cultural forms were "the result of historical happenings" (qtd. in Ward 305). In other words, according to Boas, there was no such thing as "civilized" and

“primitive” cultures. All cultures were the result of historical processes and social interactions, and therefore could not be endowed with any kind of intrinsic value.²

As Boas’ student, Hurston was undoubtedly influenced by his approach to anthropology, not only in her folklore collections such as *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*, but in her fiction, as well. Writers such as Pauline Hopkins might have been skeptical of pseudoscientific evolutionary theories, calling the conclusions of those theories into question, but they were unable to imagine an alternative framework.³ Advances in the field of anthropology allowed Hurston and others to write using an oppositional black folk aesthetic, one that was a source of racial pride for the black artistic community, and not embarrassment. This black folk aesthetic

² While Boas was an advocate of cultural relativism, and posited in the introduction to his 1911 study, *The Mind of Primitive Man* that “there is no such thing as a ‘primitive mind’, a ‘magical’ or ‘prelogical’ way of thinking,” (qtd. in Ward 305) his arguments in this same work still tend to uphold a distinction between “primitive” and “civilized” cultures based on principles of rationality, similar to Newell. It is this very focus on scientific rationality and objectivity that Hurston overturns in her writing.

³ While Pauline Hopkins may have relied more on cultural progressivism and language that correlated intrinsic characteristics and behaviors with one’s “blood” and racial background than other writers in the period, it is important to note that not all writers in the Post-Reconstruction era did so. Shirley Moody-Turner’s *Black Folklore and the Politics of Racial Representation* examines the work of several writers such as Anna Julia Cooper, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Charles Chesnutt, and argues that each of them challenges conventional representations of black folklore in ways that anticipate Zora Neale Hurston.

was not created whole-cloth by Hurston, but was anticipated by earlier writers, and came to fuller fruition in Hurston's work, partially because of these shifts in the field of anthropology. For instance, while Dunbar-Nelson may not have had Hurston's anthropological training, or done fieldwork as Hurston had, she nonetheless delighted in writing sketches of New Orleans life, as can be found in her unpublished journals, and in writing and stories capturing the lives and struggles of Creoles of color, as can be seen in *The Goodness of St. Rocque* and other stories. In her essay, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Hurston offers up her own definition of black folklore, saying, "Negro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in the making. Its great variety shows the adaptability of the black man: nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use" (836). Significantly, Hurston recognized and wanted to convey the message that folklore was not something that belonged only to "primitive" cultures. Folk practices, according to Hurston, were not preserved, intact and untouched from ancient times and places, serving as indicators that a culture was somehow closer to its roots than other more "developed" cultures. Rather, folklore was the result of a dynamic, ever-changing process, "a series of negotiations with and across difference"; folklore was still in the process of creation, and had the potential to create new possibilities as its creators adapted it for their present circumstances (Sorensen 5). Hurston's formulation of folklore resists essentialism and the narrative of authenticity that often accompanied folklore's representation. If folklore was in a constant state of flux and revision, dependent on present situations, locations, and the needs or desires of the artist, there could be no one "authentic" representation of black culture. At the same time, Hurston still distinguishes "Negro folklore" from other types of folklore—her entire essay in which this definition appears is dedicated to identifying distinguishing features of black culture. For Hurston, a self-defined black community with its own valued and valuable cultural

aesthetic was an important source of empowerment, pride, and strength. As Leif Sorensen argues, “Hurston’s thinking about culture is shaped by a desire to conserve authentically black cultural forms and the conviction that these forms are modern in their own right” (6).

Hurston went beyond theorizing about folklore in non-fiction essays, however. As many of Hurston’s critics have noted, folklore is essential to her fiction; her stories and novels are infused with it. Hurston goes beyond merely inserting folklore into her fiction to using her fiction to theorize on the construction and representation of folklore itself. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston explained that her formal training as an anthropologist caused her to think differently about the stories that surrounded her as a child growing up in Eatonville. She says, “it was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garments. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that” (*Mules* 159). While Hurston’s education uniquely positioned her to see the value of black culture in a way “that probably no one else was capable of doing” (*Hurston Life* 50), as numerous critics have pointed out, the “spy-glass of Anthropology” also represents an objectifying and voyeuristic gaze that only purports to be objective and scientific. As Karen Jacobs questions, “to what...identity positions would the black female viewer be subject when aspiring to organize her worlds through that lens?” (330). While Hurston might have been forced to see herself and her culture as an object of study, Hurston challenged that lens in her anthropological work and her fiction alike. In her anthropological studies, she made herself a character in the text, drawing attention to the unavoidable interaction between folklorist and the subjects being studied. In her fiction, she retold tales collected elsewhere as part of her anthropological fieldwork, presenting them as stories that may or could be “true,” resisting concrete answers as to whether or to what extent her tales were based in reality or imagination.

Hurston used her stories in much the same way as she used her novels—to represent black folklore in such a way as to show that black communities had created, and continued to create, a history and culture of their own. This representation of black folklore as vibrant, dynamic, and empowering was in distinct contrast to popular depictions of black folk culture (most often by whites) that reduced and distorted black cultural representations to a supposedly “authentic” expression of inherent racial and biological characteristics. Additionally, Hurston presented an alternative history of southern black life from that presented by many of her New Negro contemporaries. As Tiffany Patterson argues, "For the 'best-foot-forward Negroes' who sought social acceptance, southern black folk knowledge was an impediment. Hurston, by contrast, validated this folk knowledge, its beauty and tragedy, its tensions, its contradictions, and its ethos of resistance" (10). Hurston was dedicated to this project early on in her career, as can be seen in her first published short story, “John Redding Goes to Sea.” She published this story in 1921 as a member of Alain Locke’s exclusive literary group at Howard University, The Stylus. Critics have labeled this story “not one of Hurston’s best” (Hurston *Life* 40) and somewhat more harshly, “a groping, stumbling attempt to capture the folk ethos, overladen with sentimentality” (Hemenway 19). In many ways, the story’s “crucifixion” in its ending recalls the tragic turns in many of Dunbar-Nelson’s stories. While the story contains markers that it was one of her earlier works, discounting the story for its sentimentality leads us to ignore the important work Hurston was doing with the folk ethos and with the black vernacular even in this early story.

I want to begin by examining this first story of Hurston’s because it explores many of the same themes and artistic strategies that she would return to again and again in her later short stories. The role of hoodoo beliefs in African American culture is one of these themes. The first

lines of the story reference hoodoo beliefs, as John's mother, Matty, says to his father, "Alf, it's too bad our boy's got a spell on 'im'" (*Complete 1*). Their exchange shows the complex relationship that many black Southerners had to hoodoo culture as Alfred impatiently tells his wife to "stop dat talk 'bout conjure. Tain't so nohow. Ah doan want Jawn tuh git dat foolishness in *him*" (*Complete 1*). While Alfred thinks of conjure as "foolishness," and something that should not be passed on to future generations because it represented belief more than reality, his wife holds firmly to her conviction.

This dynamic continues throughout the story as Matty insists that a witch sprinkled travel dust around the house the night John was born, making him want to leave home, while Alfred counters that John's desire to travel is simply part of his manly nature. He tells Matty, "a man doan need no travel dust tuh make 'im wanten hit de road. It jes' comes natcheral fuh er man tuh travel" (*Complete 4*). The story contains many biographical details, and Hurston shares a great deal in common with her protagonist—Hurston's mother said someone must have sprinkled travel dust around the young Hurston because of her daughter's insatiable desire to see the horizon. As such, critics such as biographer Valerie Boyd have speculated as to why Hurston swapped the genders of her main characters (85). In the story, it is a man who dreams of "riding away to the horizon" and John's father is the one who encourages him, while Hurston identified with her mother and had a contentious relationship with her father (*Complete 2*). It seems most likely that Hurston changed the gender of her main character to reflect cultural norms for many black men at the time Hurston was writing; nevertheless, knowing Hurston's own history as a constant wanderer reveals Alfred's assertion that John "kain't help wantin' tuh go cause he's a man chile" to be just as ideologically based as his wife's explanation for John's travel lust. The

notion that male biology breeds a desire for mobility and adventure is no more a rational explanation than conjure.

As Boyd argues, Hurston actually validates hoodoo in this story, as she would do in her later fiction. She points to the scene near the end of the story when John is working on the bridge during a storm and a screech owl lands on the roof and lets out a cry, a “sho’ sign uh death” for the villagers (*Complete* 13). To protect John, Matty turns her wrap inside-out and Alfred does the same with his sock. Boyd states, “in her first short story, she presented black people's faith in such supernatural phenomena sympathetically, without a trace of sensationalism or derision. She would continue this approach throughout her career” (86). While Hurston’s somewhat unfavorable portrayal of Matty throughout the story might lead readers to disregard her beliefs as mere superstition, the fact that even Alfred turns to hoodoo in an emotional moment for the family (and that the screech-owl’s presence accurately portends John’s death) lends the folk belief validity. In this way, Hurston’s treatment of hoodoo is similar to Dunbar-Nelson’s. Both lack the sensationalism of Hopkins’ portrayal, and, like Dunbar-Nelson, Hurston presents it as an alternative worldview in this early story. In her later fiction, it would become even more central to the plot and the lives of her characters than it is in “John Redding.”

Hurston’s treatment of hoodoo is similar to Dunbar-Nelson’s in more ways than in their shared lack of sensationalism; like Dunbar-Nelson did in “The Goodness of St. Rocque,” Hurston also portrays hoodoo as compatible with Christianity. Hurston’s syncretic aesthetic and dedication to portraying religious systems as various, and often hybrid, worldviews is also something that she begins in this first story and continues throughout her writing career. From a young age, Hurston expressed a certain fascination with Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology as well as the Old Testament. Not being a devoutly religious child or adult, despite being the

daughter of a preacher, Hurston was more interested in the mythology and “high drama” (*Dust* 220) of religion, always drawn more to “mighty smiting,” (*Dust* 40) baptisms and funerals than doctrine. “John Redding” features a mix of mythological and Christian symbols as well as hoodoo. As Elaine J. Lawless notes, “From her early beginnings, Hurston recognized how Christianity and this high drama of her father's church co-existed in her community with a deep-rooted belief in conjure” (170). The most obvious mythical symbol in the story is the river, which serves as a vehicle for John’s imagination and desire to travel beyond his small Florida village. It is also the force that kills him. In a description of John’s death, overlaid with Christian imagery, the water turns red from the clay in a reference to one of the Egyptian plagues and “three big pine trees”—reminiscent of the three crosses on Calvary—sail down the river, taking out the bridge that the men are fortifying. John is symbolically crucified, as his family finds him lying outstretched on a timber with a hole pierced in his left side (*Complete* 15). Hurston imbues the river with Christian imagery and symbolism, but it is also important to note that rivers were often sacred sites in many West African cultures and religions, associated with protection and purification. According to Walter C. Rucker, one of the reasons that American slaves gravitated toward the Southern Baptist Church is because of the familiarity they would have found in the transformative and sacred power of baptism by immersion (147). The river in Hurston’s story is associated with these supernatural, transformative and cleansing elements found in both Christianity and West African religions. It is significant that Hurston uses the St. John River in the story, maintaining the connection between the river and the biblical John the Baptist and ultimately the river’s association with rebirth and a tragic salvation, as John finally realizes his dream of sailing out to sea, but only in death.

Along with hoodoo, the river is a folkloric element; both of these are set against a realistic backdrop, however. Hurston infuses a story filled with real-life concerns for African Americans with mythic, folkloric elements, which she uses as commentary on, or even resistance against, racist structures. Throughout the story, John sees the St. John River as a means for a new life and greater opportunities. As a child, he dreams of “sail[ing] away down stream to Jacksonville, the sea, the wide world,” of exploring new places and meeting new people outside his small village which few ever left (*Complete* 1). He is, somewhat problematically, held back from his dream by his weeping mother and wife who insist on keeping him “home-tied” (*Complete* 8). His more innocent childhood dreams of exploration take shape once he decides to fulfill them by joining the Navy and serving the nation. Additionally, he begins to associate his travels with masculinity, saying “I want to do something worthy of a strong man... Let me learn to strive and think—in short, be a man” (*Complete* 9). In light of this change in John’s motives, from curious exploration to a desire for material, gendered uplift, and service to country rather than himself, the supernatural flooding of the river could be read as a corrective, natural force, meant to fulfill John’s original dream. It is also significant that John’s desire for masculine heroism is somewhat misplaced in his eagerness to help fix the bridge. It is a white man, Mr. Hill, who recruits John, claiming the damages will be five months of work lost and a quarter of a million dollars if the bridge is destroyed—notably, Mr. Hill does not appear concerned about the safety of the black men he is recruiting. In light of this, the river’s destruction of Mr. Hill’s bridge could again be read as a form of (super)natural revenge against the bridge as a man-made structure and symbol of greed and exploitation. John’s death would seem to imply a kind of hopelessness for black men, prevented from pursuing their dreams by numerous factors: generational differences of opinion held by over-protective black parents, gender politics, and

ultimately by white men. Turning John into a Christ-figure at the end of the story further emphasizes the tragedy of John's situation and the situation of black men in general.

Another familiar element in this story is Hurston's use of the black southern vernacular. Even in this first story, Hurston was experimenting, as Dunbar-Nelson did in her short fiction, with the voices and folk language of her characters. Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes Hurston's language as being characterized by a "mastery of books and language, language and linguistic rituals as spoken and written both by masters of the Western tradition and by ordinary members of the black community. These two 'speech communities,' as it were, are Hurston's greatest source of inspiration" as she "moves in and out of these distinct voices effortlessly" ("Zora" 291). In "John Redding," the split between the two voices is more apparent than in Hurston's later fiction, and even than it is in Dunbar-Nelson's. John speaks in the same black vernacular as his father and mother as a child, telling his father, "Pa, when ah gets as big as you Ah'm goin' farther than them ships. Ah'm goin' to where the sky touches the ground" (*Complete* 2). But after John goes "to high school at the county seat where none of the villagers went," his language changes, becoming more like that of the narrator. He tells his mother, using noticeably different language and diction than previously, "I'm stagnating here. This indolent atmosphere will stifle every bit of ambition that's in me" (*Complete* 5). Similar to Victor Grabert in Dunbar-Nelson's "Stones of the Village," John's voice shifts, moving farther from the voice of his family and youth as he becomes more educated. However, in Hurston's story, John's change of voice is not associated with a loss of identity. Significantly, John's new voice, combined with his gift of metaphor, gives him greater ability of expression. After John has a conversation with his father in which he likens himself to conscious soil, acted upon by outside forces, but unable to move himself, Alfred tells John, "Ah have them same feelings exactly, but Ah can't find no words lak

you do...But anyhow you speaks for me, so whut's the difference?" (*Complete* 10). At this point in Hurston's career and education, it is significant that she positions her more educated characters in relation to the folk in this way, with her more educated character speaking for his father. Early on, Hurston admitted to struggling with her newly acquired academic voice and persona, blaming her initial failure with gathering folk materials from native Floridians on the "glamor of Barnard College" that clung to her and her accompanying "carefully accented" and overly polite academic inquiries (*Dust* 143-44). While Hurston represents the language of the folk, and John does not appear to think himself superior to his fellow village residents, in this early story, his relation to them is analogous to Alain Locke's "thinking few" in relation to the "multitude." In describing the dawning of a New Negro consciousness, Locke says, "The multitude perhaps feels as yet only a strange relief and a new vague urge, but the thinking few know that in the reaction the vital inner grip of prejudice has been broken" (qtd. in Gates and Jarrett 113). John's position and education allows him to speak for his father in this story, which is perhaps one reason why Boyd criticizes Hurston's use of dialect in "John Redding" for its lack of sophistication. While Boyd notes that the story "disclosed Hurston's delight in the southern black vernacular voice" as it was "the language of Eatonville, authentically and lovingly re-created," she also notes that the story is lacking much of the metaphor and humor of her later fiction (86). In her later fiction, Hurston would place greater value on the language of her own youth. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a similar interaction takes place between Janie and Phoeby as between John and his father, but Janie noticeably retains the black vernacular voice throughout the novel, and inspires Phoeby to use her own voice more forcefully. In this first story of Hurston's, one can see how she is both influenced by the ideas of her contemporaries, such as Locke's, and how she challenges them. This first story is also useful to examine as it

shows how Hurston's own style and themes shifted—and what aspects of both she retained—throughout her career.

In Hurston's later short fiction, southern black vernacular, idiom, and folklore becomes more central to her work. By 1925, she was writing stories that challenged the terms of folklore itself. In Hurston's stories, folklore becomes more than an element in her regional fiction; instead, she blurs the lines between memory and imagination, recorded narrative and fictional remembering. One such story in which she does this is "Black Death." While the story was never published in Hurston's lifetime, she submitted it to a contest for *Opportunity* magazine in 1925, where it won honorable mention.⁴ "Black Death" is the story of a womanizer, Beau Diddely, who falls for and impregnates the innocent young Docia Boger. When Docia's mother tries to convince Beau to marry Docia, thereby saving her reputation and protecting her economic situation as Mr. Boger is dead, Beau refuses. He spreads the rumor around Eatonville that Docia whom he calls a "piece of earth's refuse" had failed "to inveigle, to coerce him into a marriage"; when that failed, she hid herself in a bush and threw herself on him (*Complete* 205). Hurt and angry, Mrs. Boger seeks the help of the local hoodoo man, Old Man Morgan, who helps Mrs.

⁴ It was based on the strength of "John Redding Goes to Sea" that Charles S. Johnson, a major figure in the Harlem Renaissance, encouraged Hurston to publish in *Opportunity* (she published another short story, "Drenched in Light" in the magazine in 1924), move to Harlem, and submit her work to the contest. At this contest, Hurston's short story "Spunk" and her play *Color Struck* won second-place prizes and a now-lost play, *Spears*, won honorable mention as well. It was arguably this contest (and Hurston's memorable appearance at the award dinner) that won her entrance into the Harlem Renaissance's inner social circle. See Boyd (91, 96-98).

Boger to kill Beau. Some critics have struggled with the categorization of this story. Hurston published two retellings of the story in folklore collections later in her career, one in 1931 in an essay “Hoodoo in America” in the *Journal of American Folklore* and another in her story “Uncle Monday,” published in Nancy Cunard’s 1934 collection, *Negro: An Anthology*. As such, biographer Robert Hemenway states that the fictional version “summarizes her uncertainty over how to use the Eatonville material,” calling the story “either a direct redaction of an Eatonville folktale, or a work of fiction Hurston permitted to masquerade as authentic folktale” (74). Even recent critics have made attempts to separate Hurston’s fiction from her scholarly research. Christopher Allen Varlack, for example, claims that “Black Death” “is not about hoodoo” and is instead an exploration of gender roles and power, stating that “Hurston reserves her anthropological work, *Tell My Horse*” for an analysis of hoodoo (118). What both of these responses reveal is a certain level of discomfort over a blending of an authentic “piece of scientific research” and a retelling of a folktale through the use of imagination and memory. However, this is precisely what Hurston does in this story.

Hurston not only challenges the superiority of a supposedly rational and scientific approach to folklore in the story’s form, but she also does so in its content. While white institutional racist structures often stand on the edges of Hurston’s fiction as she preferred to focus on black lives, “Black Death” “blatantly contrasts white and black customs,” as Laurie Champion notes (88). The story opens with the sentence, “The Negroes in Eatonville know a number of things that the hustling, bustling white man never dreams of” (*Complete* 202). This line continues the work that Hurston did in “John Redding” of overturning Western ideologies of knowledge and rationality, but in this story, she makes rural black folk the undisputed bearers of knowledge. The line expresses a similar critique of “knowledge” that appears in “John Redding”

when Matty tells Alfred that conjure is not “low-life mess” (*Complete* 3) but that Alfred “allus tries tu know mo’ than” her, stating confidently, “Ah ain’s so ign’rant. Ah knows a heap mahself” (*Complete* 1). In “John Redding,” Alfred represents a kind of black Southerner who is trying to achieve progress by conforming to the dictates of modern white society: he equates hoodoo with “low-life” and backwards “foolishness” that would be better abandoned in favor of experiencing and observing the world through travel, a practice he reserves only for men. In “Black Death,” Hurston emphasizes hoodoo as a valid worldview and uniquely black cultural practice. In her opening sentence, it is the narrator, not a character, who confidently states that the black residents of Eatonville “know,” thereby lending the reformulation of knowledge extra credibility. Furthermore, in the opening lines of the story, the narrator asserts that the white man’s lack of “true” knowledge arises from his obsession with material, observable nature, postulating that he “never dreams of” what the black man knows. While a common expression, the phrase also draws attention to white culture’s dismissal of things such as dreams as a source of knowledge, preferring Western-defined “reality.”

The story’s following paragraph gives one important example of this alternative knowledge of black folk, hoodoo. The narrator states:

For instance, if a white person were halted on the streets of Orlando and told that Old Man Morgan, the excessively black Negro hoodoo man, can kill any person indicated and paid for, without ever leaving his house or even seeing his victim, he’d laugh in your face and walk away, wondering how long the Negro will continue to wallow in ignorance and superstition. But no black person in a radius of twenty miles will smile, not much. They *know*. (*Complete* 202)

Hurston sets up her story to counter popular and anthropological discourses that dismissed black folk culture, particularly hoodoo, as evidence of African American “ignorance and superstition.” Hurston’s story directly challenges opinions such as William Wells Newell’s. Hoodoo practices were not to be collected to prove the superiority of white civilization, or to objectively assess such practices as remnants of a savage African past. Instead, in this story, the narrator states frankly, “White folks are very stupid about some things. They can think mightily but cannot *feel*” (*Complete* 203). The narrator goes on to list specific examples of the types of conjure Morgan performed, noting that many are kept secret, but that others were well known within the community. The narrator states, “All of these things and more can easily be proved by the testimony of the villagers” (*Complete* 203). Hurston frames her story by shifting her readers’ understanding of what counts as valid evidence. She sets up her folktale with an alternate framework for understanding truth: communal testimony is proof of the reality of an event or phenomenon, and not to be dismissed as mere gossip. This formulation validates folklore itself and a distinctly African American worldview as an alternate, and superior, way of perceiving reality—one which incorporates feeling as well as thinking and the word of the community rather than the word of the “educated” few.

“Black Death” is especially concerned with validating the experiences of rural black folk in contrast to supposedly experienced and cultured members of society. One of the reasons Beau is so upset that Mrs. Boger tries to convince him to commit to Docia is because it would ruin his plans “to go North with the white tourists” (*Complete* 204). Beau imagines himself a fashionable and sophisticated man, telling Mrs. Boger, “I’m a man that’s travelled a lot” and insisting that he is “none of your down-South-country-suckers” (*Complete* 204). As for Docia, a pretty young chamber-maid who plays the blues and sings in the country church, Beau insists he could “pick

up a better woman out of the gutter” (*Complete* 204). He blames Docia’s pregnancy on Docia herself, telling the villagers that “It couldn’t have happened with the *right* kind of girl, and he thought too much of himself to marry any other than the country’s best” (*Complete* 205). In other words, Beau believes that a poor Southern girl is not good enough for a man of his stature and class.

The story’s frame sets the reader up to expect and even value shifts in power, which is significant in a story that features women claiming alternative sources of power for themselves. While critics such as Varlack have claimed that the story is about gender and not hoodoo, it is more accurate to recognize the ways in which gender and hoodoo overlap. As I mentioned in my analysis of Dunbar-Nelson’s regional fiction, hoodoo was often used by women as an alternative source of power. As Tiffany Patterson argues,

It was not unusual for women and men to consult their African belief to find both solace and justice in a world that provided them neither. ‘Black Death’ affirms both a black woman’s right to pursue justice and the local cultural knowledge that African Americans could draw upon to protect themselves in a hostile world. It affirms community cohesiveness in the face of betrayal. (96)

In Dunbar-Nelson’s stories, she demonstrates that conventional forms of justice, meted out by white institutions, are not to be trusted, as in “Witness for the Defense.” In Hurston’s fiction, she shows black women seeking out an alternative form of justice. In “Black Death,” Mrs. Boger’s raw emotion and pain over her daughter’s betrayal causes her to become “a tiger, a female tiger” who remembers Old Man Morgan, “and all Africa awoke in her blood” (*Complete* 206). Mrs. Boger’s love for her daughter and her lack of recourse to any traditional method of justice as a black widow woman lead her to seek out a different source of help. As she continues to

Morgan's house, the narrator says, "three hundred years of America passed like the mist of morning. Africa reached out its dark hand and claimed its own. Drums, tom, tom, tom, tom, tom, beat her ears" (*Complete* 206). As Hemenway points out, scenes such as this risked being identified with the kind of primitivism that was in vogue in the Harlem Renaissance at the time, as "tom-tom beats were almost a cliché in Harlem Renaissance writing" (75). Nevertheless, in this story, Hurston does not so much identify Africa with exotic primitivism as she depicts the persistence of African folk practices and religion within the culture of Eatonville (T. Patterson 98). For instance, it is significant that Hurston titles the story "Black Death." The title signifies the uniquely African American method of Beau's death, and as Champion notes, not just the "darkness of death," or the skin color of the man murdered, but the "black as opposed to the white system of justice" (191).

In many ways, "Black Death" could be seen as continuing the kind of work that Dunbar-Nelson did in her regional fiction. In stories such as "The Goodness of St. Rocque," Dunbar-Nelson similarly documented the persistence of Voodoo in modern New Orleans culture. Furthermore, in her fiction, she demonstrated how it was often used by women as an alternate resort as Claralie turns to it when her prayers at the cathedral fail to win back her lover. Most importantly, the story's ending with its multiple, and largely open-ended, interpretations of what happened suggests that any one community member's version of events is just as valid as another. This same insistence on communal storytelling is likewise emphasized in Hurston's Eatonville tales, particularly those featuring hoodoo such as "Black Death" or "Spunk." However, the last line of "The Goodness of St. Rocque," which I examined in the previous chapter, features a narrative intervention claiming that ultimately, "St Rocque knows" what happened (*Works* 16; vol. 1). This final emphasis on the Catholic point of view, and its direction

to readers to be “true and good, and make your nouvenas with a clean heart” demonstrates a kind of ultimate, if insincere, concession to the most socially acceptable explanation of unusual events (*Works* 16; vol. 1). By the time Hurston is writing her fiction, she does have to be aware of those who will read her hoodoo references as primitive, as did Dunbar-Nelson, but notably, Hurston seems to ignore such concerns. Her narrative voice leaves no doubt that the rural, southern African American community’s religious and cultural perspective is the knowledgeable one, going so far as to call a white worldview with its emphasis on fact and rationality “stupid” (*Complete* 203).

Hurston was able to expand on the work begun by writers such as Dunbar-Nelson in other important ways as well. Pauline Hopkins and others tended to depict Southern characters as humorous and uncivilized in relation to their more sophisticated Northern, middle-class counterparts to emphasize black progress. Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson notably shift this representation, returning to Harper’s emphasis on the South, with a few important differences. Even though Harper saw the South as an important site of communal resistance, she nevertheless portrayed any non-Christian remnants of African culture such as hoodoo as immoral, heathen, and better left in the past. Dunbar-Nelson and Hurston both take part in important movements to reclaim that past as a present, vital, and essential element of modern black culture. Both portray their rural Southern characters sympathetically, often making them appear better human beings than more worldly or well-traveled characters. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Dunbar-Nelson does this in several stories, most notably “M’sieu Fortier’s Violin” and “When the Bayou Overflows.” By portraying Docia as a thoroughly innocent victim and Beau a despicable figure who gets his comeuppance, Hurston creates empathy for her poor rural Southern characters. While Dunbar-Nelson portrays the majority of her poor rural folk as victims of a rapidly

changing society to counteract negative portrayals by earlier writers, Hurston has the freedom to create unsympathetic characterizations of Southern folk as well. Whether because writers such as Dunbar-Nelson had paved the way for Hurston to be able to focus much of her writing fully on rural Southern communities, or because Hurston's own philosophies on art and politics would not let her do otherwise, Hurston was able to portray black life more fully.

One often overlooked piece of evidence demonstrating Hurston's commitment to portraying a range of black lives is the fact that she set a number of stories in Harlem. While Hurston is better known for her Eatonville-based fiction, she did write several Harlem-based stories, many of them during the height of the Harlem Renaissance.⁵ These stories, two of which I will examine here, are significant in that they contradict the criticism of her contemporaries such as Locke and Richard Wright, as well as modern critics such as Hazel Carby.⁶ As I note in

⁵ Glenda R. Carpio and Werner Sollors surmise that Hurston may have written more stories set in Harlem during the mid 1920s because she had yet to make some of her more successful folklore collecting trips at this time. They suggest that she shifted her fiction to Southern settings in her later work after being inspired by these trips and her anthropological education.

⁶ One reason recent critics have not paid as much attention to Hurston's urban fiction is simply that it was not known about. For instance, five newly rediscovered stories, "The Country in the Woman," "She Rock," "The Back Room," "The Book of Harlem," and "Monkey Junk" all were reprinted for the first time in 2010 in an issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies*. Several of these stories were known about previously and discussed (if rarely) by critics and students and others were not known of at all. Still other Harlem stories, such as "Muttsy" and "Now You Cookin' With Gas" were known about and republished in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Sieglinde

my introduction, Hurston's work did not represent an insular and idealized black community, particularly not one that either romanticized or minstrelized her folk characters. By setting a number of her stories in the North, Hurston shows that she was committed to representing a range of black communities and the interactions between them, and that she "attempted to capture, with her unmistakable sense of humor, the new urban sensibility and language of migrants to the city" (Carpio and Sollors 557). The two stories I will examine here feature recent Southern migrants to New York, though she did write other stories such as "The Back Room" and "Story in Harlem Slang" in which the characters' backgrounds as migrants matters less to the plot. In the stories I examine here, Hurston is concerned with overturning Southern stereotypes, emphasizing as Dunbar-Nelson did, the value of an aesthetic that is rooted in Southern culture, yet capable of adapting to new environments. By placing newly-arrived Southerners in Northern settings, Hurston is able to speak back to earlier representations of Southern black culture.

One text in particular in which Hurston contrasts Harlem life with Southern culture while portraying a range of black folk, favorable as well as not, is her short story "Muttsy." In this story, Hurston continues to create sympathy for rural Southern characters. Hurston submitted the story for *Opportunity's* second contest in 1926, where it won second place (Boyd 113). The story features a young girl named Pinkie who has just arrived in New York from Eatonville with

Lemke's 1995 collection of Hurston's short stories. Despite this, most critical attention remains on Hurston's Eatonville-based novels, stories, and anthropological works. The critical tendency is to identify Hurston as a writer of the folk only, at the expense of ignoring the work she did in urban fiction, which I discuss here, and in white life-fiction, the focus of my fourth chapter.

nothing more than one suitcase and three dollars. She is unwittingly led to a Harlem brothel owned by Ma Turner, a.k.a., “Forty-dollars-Kate,” a name she earned because of the money she could once persuade men to spend on her (*Complete* 43). Pinkie’s combination of good looks, innocence, new appeal, and “white-folks haih” attracts the attention of the men who frequent Ma’s back parlor as well as the ire of the women (*Complete* 49). None is more smitten with her than Muttsy, the most successful gambler in Harlem. He tries to seduce Pinkie, promising to find her work in order to win her trust, but Pinkie, overwhelmed by the attention and frightened by her new surroundings, removes herself further and further from the company in the back parlor, eventually refusing to leave her bedroom. Muttsy sneaks into her room to talk and is nearly tempted to rape her, but resists, slipping a ring on her hand instead while she sleeps. Horrified upon waking to discover Muttsy’s ring on her finger, Pinkie flees from the house, but runs in to a changed Muttsy on the street several weeks later. He finds work as a stevedore to make himself appear more respectable to her, and convinces her to marry him. Muttsy does not keep to his word, and the story ends with him gambling on the docks, clearly an unreformed man.

In “Muttsy,” Hurston presents readers with a surprisingly complex dynamic between Northern and Southern characters, relying on cultural tropes and popular representations of both, while simultaneously overturning common stereotypes. The story draws on real-life experiences of many black women traveling to the North in search of greater opportunity. Women like Pinkie were the reason Victoria Earle Matthews and Dunbar-Nelson felt the need to establish the White Rose Mission. However, Hurston’s depiction of Pinkie’s experiences complicates Matthews’ vision of “sadly unprotected daughters of the entire South” who were too ignorant to “stop placing themselves voluntarily in the power of strangers” (qtd. in Kramer 243). Pinkie challenges common representations of rural Southern women as entirely helpless, unrefined, and

uneducated, surprising the residents of Ma's house. For instance, Ma's husband attempts to instruct Pinkie how to survive in her new setting, telling her "Ah knows uh heap uh things tuh teach yuh sense you gointer live here" (*Complete* 45). A humorous scene ensues in which Mr. Turner "edgicates" her on how to sit properly in a chair, sit in front of a fire, and eat a fish (*Complete* 44). He also pretends to know Latin, making up words such as "entitlum" and "entrimmins," which understandably confuse Pinkie. Pinkie proves herself to be better educated than Mr. Turner when he asks her if she learned "goes into" in school. Pinkie replies, "You mean long division?" to which Mr. Turner responds, "Ain't askin' 'bout de longness of it, dat don't make no difference" (*Complete* 44). As the man of the house, Mr. Turner believes himself to be superior to Pinkie, but Pinkie overturns common understandings of clueless young girls marked by "southern greenness" by demonstrating her superior intelligence (*Complete* 43).

Notably, Hurston characterizes Pinkie as being refined in comparison to the other characters of the story, though her refinement is not an entirely positive trait. In this way, Hurston imbues Pinkie, a Southerner, with the traits of respectable New Negro Womanhood while simultaneously critiquing it as an ideal. Pinkie echoes Dunbar-Nelson's Louissette in "When the Bayou Overflows" with her pretty innocence, but takes it a step further by adding a critique. Pinkie is repeatedly described as thin, with a pretty face and hair that tumbles to her waist. In a description that is unusual in Hurston's short stories, the narrator says that Pinkie's Eatonville home was a place of "ill treatment and squalor" (*Complete* 45). Despite this, Pinkie maintains high standards and morality for herself, and is thoroughly repulsed by the situation in which she finds herself in Harlem. Pinkie is suspicious of Ma Turner and "her smile [that] resembled the smile of the Wolf in Red Riding Hood," comparing her unfavorably to Southern ladies who "didn't put powder and paint on the face" (*Complete* 42). She feels "contaminated"

by Ma's presence, disgusted by the smell of liquor on her breath, and vows to get a job and "scrape herself clear of people who took toddies" (*Complete* 45). In a fairly typical representation of New Negro Womanhood, Pinkie maintains a sense of feminine respectability in spite of her surroundings. As such, Pinkie is at once a subject of pity and also somewhat frustrating in her naiveté. She is attracted to Muttsy and his wealth, and believes him when he says he will find her a job. She continues to rely heavily on her sense of morality and arguably narrow worldview in her new environment when she says things such as "Gamblin' ain't nice" and when she whines to Muttsy, "Ah wantsa job now!" when he fails to produce one for her (*Complete* 50). Sinking further into depression, she passes out after one drink "mixed with sugar and water" (*Complete* 51).

While one critic has singled out Ma as the powerful female figure in the story as she establishes her power over her husband and her house, I would argue that Muttsy's former love-interest, Ada, is a stronger figure, especially in comparison to Pinkie (Davis 273-74). When Pinkie moves into the house, Muttsy quickly transfers his attentions from Ada to Pinkie. Ada becomes jealous and the other men mock her looks and short hair, telling her that Muttsy has no reason to care about her with Pinkie in the picture. In response, Ada throws her whiskey glass and "with the determined stalk of an angry tiger," confronts the crowd, saying "Muttsy Owens, uh nobody else ain't to gointer make no fool outer *me*" (*Complete* 49). When Muttsy tells her to get away from him, Ada "looked straight into Muttsy's eyes and went on outside" (*Complete* 49). Ada's confrontational attitude and self-respect serves her well in an environment where the fast-talking and signifying of the men causes Pinkie to break into tears. While Pinkie's strategy of removing herself from the back parlor and sequestering herself in her room works, at least temporarily, it takes her some time to gain the courage to leave her situation. Once she does, her

parting action and words to Ma echo some of Ada's own self-respect: she flings Muttsy's ring across the room and shouts, "He ain't going to make *me* none of his women—I'll die first! I'm goin' outa this house if I starve, lemme starve!" (*Complete* 54). At this point in the story, Pinkie has adapted to her new situation, removing her own self "from the power of strangers" and from marriage to a man who threatens her future.

Hurston's final critique of New Negro Womanhood is evident in the story's ending. Similar to the "true woman" and the "cult of domesticity" of the nineteenth century, one of the most important roles of New Negro Women was to inspire morality in their husbands and sons. As Martha Patterson notes, one way in which black women were supposed to "raise" their men was to "inspire their mates to embrace a bourgeois production ethic" (51). Just after meeting Muttsy, Pinkie tells Ma, "I like men to work. I wish he would" (*Complete* 50). Muttsy realizes that only by being a respectable, "New Negro" type man who earns a living through traditional means will he win Pinkie's affections. For a time, it even seems that the ideology of New Negro Womanhood works, and that Pinkie inspires Muttsy to be a "better" man. As he stands over a sleeping Pinkie, stopping himself from taking advantage of her in her drunken state, he tells himself, "Ah reckon ah bettah git married... B'lieve me, ah will, an' go uptown wid dicties"⁷ (*Complete* 52). The following day, he tells Ma, "Ahm gointer get mah'ried tuh de doll baby... An' ahm gointer treat her white too" (*Complete* 54). Hurston uses Muttsy's language to poke fun at the New Negro Movement, both at the notion of a sudden shift in consciousness (as evidenced by Muttsy's hasty and falsely sincere change of heart) and at the white bourgeois

⁷ African American vernacular for upper-middle class blacks, often implying pretention and snobbery.

standard of culture that undergirded the uplift movement. Pinkie loses her newly found self-resolve fairly quickly when Muttsy “took the employment slip from her hand and destroyed it, took her arm and held it” (*Complete* 55). Promised marriage to a man with a secure paycheck, Pinkie immediately changes her mind about Muttsy. Muttsy’s own change of heart is short lived; though he gets a job as a stevedore, he quickly turns back to his old ways and gambles at work, telling his friends, “What man can’t keep one li’l wife an’ two li’l bones?” (*Complete* 56).

With this ending, Hurston critiques marriage as well as New Negro Womanhood, insinuating that neither were realistic solutions to the problems facing African Americans in the North. In Hurston’s story, Southern women do face dangers in the North, but marriage and aspiration to a bourgeois, middle class life is not the solution that proponents of uplift make it out to be. Neither are Southern women inherently in need of uplifting in the first place, as Pinkie demonstrates. The story presents a strikingly different image of life in the North for African Americans than *Contending Forces*, where marriage and a commitment to motherhood redeems Sappho, another Southern New Negro Woman. The story is also a departure from Dunbar-Nelson’s representation of beautiful and tragic Southern women such as Sophie or Sister Josepha. Dunbar-Nelson’s Creole women of color remain in the South where they are victims of white men and institutions such as the plaçage system, or even the Catholic Church. Hurston moves her female protagonist to the North, where she is able to contrast her with Harlem society and overturn simplistic stereotypes of Southern women. More significantly, however, Hurston does not shy away from representing the underbelly of Harlem life or portraying black men as womanizers and gamblers or black women as alcoholics and prostitutes. Throughout the story, she resists judgment of these characters, portraying them humorously and matter-of-factly as people who “danced on, played on, sang their ‘blues’ and lived on hotly their intense lives”

(*Complete* 42). Ever the proponent of individual responsibility, Hurston resists depicting her women characters as victims. Even Muttsy is not completely reprehensible; he even overturns an especially damaging stereotype of black men when he stops himself from raping Pinkie. Such a portrayal of black culture would likely have been too risky for writers such as Dunbar-Nelson to attempt. While arguably still risky, even for Hurston, who has been by her contemporaries and modern critics alike of portraying stereotypes, Hurston reserves her greatest critique in “Muttsy” for New Negro ideology and its accompanying emphasis on marriage and the politics of respectability. In this way, Hurston can be seen as continuing the work of Dunbar-Nelson and others for a new generation of African Americans, by resisting a critique of black culture, and instead leveling it at ideologies and institutions which she saw as threatening or misleading.

While Hurston overturns the stereotype of Southern women as uneducated, ignorant, and in need of moral uplifting in “Muttsy,” she reverses her strategy in another short story, “The Country in the Woman.” In this story, Hurston uses the completely opposite tactic of embracing the stereotype of the loud, uncouth rural Southerner, turning her into a powerful and confident woman who embraces that identity, showing it to be a source of strength in the North. “The Country in the Woman” is a revision of a tale Hurston originally set in the South. Her first version appears in “The Eatonville Anthology,” which was published in *The Messenger* in 1926. In this original version, “Pants and Cal’line,” Ca’line Potts learns of her husband, Mitch’s, affair, and catches him sneaking off to his mistress’ house with a present of new shoes. She follows after him with an axe, much to the amusement of the Eatonville porch-dwellers. While the 1926 version was cut off at this point due to an editing error, all later versions of the story have Caroline sauntering back sometime later with Mitch’s pants slung over her axe handle. Different

versions of the story appear in at least three other places in Hurston's known works.⁸ The version I discuss here was published in 1927 in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the most widely circulated African American newspapers in the 1920s and 30s. In fact, it is the same magazine in which Dunbar-Nelson published her popular column "From A Woman's Point of View"/ "Une Femme Dit" from January through September of 1926. "The Country in the Woman" is significant for shifting the setting from Eatonville to Harlem, but preserving Caroline's bold tenacity and delight in humiliating her husband. As M. Genevieve West suggests, Hurston "revised her rural Caroline tale for new audiences--urban migrants who were themselves adapting to new social norms" (478). Hurston's new version of the folktale encourages her audience to preserve folk identities while critiquing African Americans who were quick to cast them off as a source of embarrassment.

Like "Muttsy," "The Country in the Woman" counters New Negro ideology, particularly the pressure placed on African Americans to represent the progress of the race by conforming to bourgeois notions of morality and respectability. The story opens with an epigraph, one which we learn later is in Mitch's voice, but that reads not just as a reminder for Caroline, but for all Southern women. The epigraph reads, "*Looka heah [C]al'line, you oughta stop dis heah foolishness you got. Youse in New Yawk now—you aint down in Florida. Thaas just what ah say—you kin git a woman out de country, but you can't git a country out de woman*" ("Country"

⁸ Later versions appear in "She Rock," (1933) published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, which is similar to the 1927 version I discuss here, but retold in biblical-verse style. The last version is in her 1942 autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in which Hurston tells the story of her aunt Caroline, suggesting that the tale was based in family history.

587). African American women, particularly Southern migrants to the North, were continually reminded that they were responsible for representing the race, both to black and white society. As West argues, "New Negro ideology promoted the pure, self-effacing, domestic wife and mother whose place was first and foremost in the home to counter dominant cultural depictions of the loud, promiscuous, unclean street woman whose moral failing was responsible for the degraded condition of the entire race" (M. West 480). In order to break from the slave past and from the association of black women with excess, both in terms of emotions and sexuality, black women were encouraged instead to be demure helpmates. As Hazel Carby notes, women who did not conform were "variously situated as a threat to the progress of the race; as a threat to the establishment of a respectable urban black middle class; as a threat to congenial black and white middle-class relations; and as a threat to the formation of black masculinity in an urban environment" ("Policing" 741). In Hurston's story, a non-conforming woman, one who refuses to "get the country out" of her, boldly challenges the chastising reminder of New Negro Womanhood.

Throughout the story, Mitchell continually tries to convince his wife to conform by performing a progressive New Negro identity. When we are introduced to Caroline, she is wearing "sloppy clothes and run-down shoes" but standing "arrogantly akimbo" in contrast with Mitch's mistress who is "stylish in a Lenox avenue way" ("Country" 587). Later, Mitch complains of her clothes as a marker of her homeliness and country-backwardness, telling her that she has a "way-down-in-Dixie look" and thinking to himself that she is a "dark brown lump of country contrariness...in a yellow homespun nightgown" ("Country" 588). For Mitch, Caroline's dress and appearance is a marker of her resistance to progress, a signifier that she is from "de basement" of the South ("Country" 588). In contrast, Mitch tries to perform an urban,

modern Harlem aesthetic through his own dress, an action the narrator's tone mocks. The narrator says, "He looked the big town and tried hard to act it. After work, he affected Seventh avenue corners and a man about town air. Silk Shebas, too; no cotton underwear for him" ("Country" 589). While Caroline may be homely and an embarrassment to Mitch, her attitude and dress is unaffected while Mitch's is clearly a performance. Though Mitch makes a show of his new identity, there are several markers in the text that he is still just as "country" as Caroline. The narrator notes, for instance, that Caroline "cooked him a fine dinner which they still spoke of as supper" ("Country" 588). Furthermore, Mitch's desire to carry on with his affairs betrays his "country" ways, or rather, his typical patriarchal attitude. Mitch believes that the country with its porch talk "cramped his style" and that he would be able to carry on with his "side gals" more easily in a big city ("Country" 589). His infidelity does not align with New Negro ideals, which emphasized family and propriety. In this way, Hurston is slyly saying that you cannot take the country out of the man, either.

Mitch wants Caroline to conform to the strictures of New Negro Womanhood for largely selfish reasons; Caroline threatens his own performance of a masculine New Negro identity. Not only does her "country contrariness" reflect poorly on him as her husband, revealing his own Southern origins and lack of power in the relationship, but her refusal to perform the role of a homebound housewife prevents him from carrying out his affairs. In the story's opening scene, Caroline tries confronting Mitch and his mistress, Lucy, on the corner of Seventh Avenue and 134th Street. Mitch tries to avoid a scene, warning her that "dese heah folk is all standin' round trying to git into mine and yo' bizness" ("Country" 587). Mitch does not want people to realize that he is not the one in charge in his relationship with his wife, nor does he want people to think he and his wife uncivilized Southerners, willing to air their dirty laundry on a busy Harlem

intersection. Openly resisting Mitch's attempt to deescalate the situation, Caroline "let[s] out" a string of insults aimed at Lucy, most of them with unmistakably rural imagery and folk idiom, such as "Maybe dat hussy think she's a big hen's biddy but she don't lay no gobbler eggs" ("Country" 587). Caroline's insults, when transferred from an Eatonville porch to a Harlem street corner, humorously challenge gender roles as well as New Negro ideology. Caroline uses the language of her home not only to publicly stake her claim as Mitch's wife, as West argues, but to humiliate her husband (M. West 483). While West believes Caroline is more serious in her attempt to protect her marriage, the narrator is careful to note Caroline's lack of jealousy and that all of her actions were done for her own enjoyment—that "she thought out ingenious embarrassing situations and engineered the two into them, with all the cruelty of the rural" ("Country" 587). In this light, Caroline's action on the street corner is more a social experiment than the actions of a woman protecting her marriage. Caroline uses her folk appearance and language strategically, flaunting her non-conformity to emphasize the absurdity of Mitch's performance of a New Negro identity.

Ultimately, Caroline uses her folk background and identity to claim agency for herself while challenging the ideology that would seek to restrict it. Mitch's friends at work and the poolroom encourage him in his attempt to curb Caroline's behavior, telling him, "Man, you oughter make her stop that foolishness; she's up North now. Make her know it" ("Country" 589). Performance of a New Negro male identity is collectively enforced, so Caroline's very public counter-performance with the axe serves as an important reminder for the entire male community of the tenuousness of their power. West rightly notes that Hurston's use of a humorous folk character who publicly performs ridiculous antics is a risky one, and this is most obvious with the reappearance of the axe, an object conspicuously out of place in Harlem. Even the men's

reaction to the axe is more startled than in the other Caroline stories—it is the only version where they are genuinely concerned for Mitch’s safety and even contemplate calling the police.

Nevertheless, Caroline’s clever use of double-entendre in her reply to the men, that “Theys wood to be chopped up North too” makes us laugh less at the persistence of her country ways and more at the obvious joy Caroline takes in tormenting the men. As such, the reappearance of the axe is a fitting reminder of the timeless power of women being capable of controlling their own destinies. It is important to consider how she is using humor and the folk differently than other writers. For instance, while Hopkins used folk characters as a source of humor, her Southern-identified characters are objects of laughter for their failure to reach a standard of bourgeois gentility that other middle-class African Americans have been able to achieve. In Hurston’s story, the men who try to silence folk characters are the objects of criticism. We laugh at these men, not for their inability to fully ascribe to the tenets of New Negro progressivism, but for their masculine posturing and their underestimation of the folk sensibility, particularly when it is wielded by a determined woman. We laugh with Caroline rather than at her as she conducts her social experiment. West states, "Rather than avoid that which might be misread or appropriated by racist white readers, Hurston engaged in efforts to revitalize black folk traditions, to transfer to the page that which she knew lived and changed even as she wrote. She understood that humor and language were central to the performance of folk traditions" (M. West 485). Hurston uses folk humor and language to great effect in this story, essentially making the argument that folk traditions can empower African Americans in a society and nation that had attempted to deny the value of black culture.

In Hurston’s short fiction as a whole, she posits the power of folk-based alternative identities. While Dunbar-Nelson may not have written a Caroline, one can certainly still see how

her emphasis on the value of an identity rooted in Southern culture, history, and language anticipated the kind of work that became increasingly central to Hurston's own short fiction. Furthermore, while Hurston is primarily associated with folk-centric literature, it becomes especially evident in her migrant fiction that she was also concerned with challenging dominant ideologies, particularly those that questioned the value of folklore. She shares this strategy with Dunbar-Nelson despite their insistence on producing literature that was not politically motivated. Just as Dunbar-Nelson challenged New Negro ideology in stories such as "The Pearl in the Oyster" and "The Stones of the Village," so too did Hurston in stories such as "Black Death" and "The Country in the Woman." Dunbar-Nelson warned readers of the dangers that occurred when one gave up one's identity and culture to gain social and political capital; Hurston's stories, in contrast, show how powerful black culture can be when it is retained and wielded against those who seek to suppress it. Both foregrounded their characters' day-to-day lives, celebrating and taking great joy in sharing the language and culture of Southern black folk while simultaneously and subtly critiquing and revising dominant ideologies.

Discounting Hurston's short stories in favor of her novels and folklore studies causes us to overlook some of her connections with earlier regional writers such as Dunbar-Nelson, or as Moody-Turner notes, Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar. As such, Hurston appears to be an exception, a rare woman who because of her life and upbringing in rural Florida and her unique talent, was able to write folk literature as no one before her was capable of doing. While Hurston's circumstances certainly did contribute to her unique voice, advances in anthropological studies as well as some of the increased freedoms of her era allowed her to write as boldly as she did. Keeping these factors in mind while also carefully examining the works of earlier writers, rather than dismissing them as acceding to white values, allows us a fuller

consideration of how the folk have been represented in African American literature. African Americans did not just begin writing about themselves with an appreciation of their culture and history with the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance. Rather, by looking back to earlier writers, we can see how African American writers have long been active participants in maintaining and creating their own folklore as well as engaging in discussions (both scholarly and literary) over how black culture is represented. Doing so broadens not only our understanding of the black literary tradition, but also helps us to see how these writers were engaging with one another and with the racial and cultural politics of their respective eras. Dunbar-Nelson's stories can then be seen as more than apolitical, quaint, or womanly sketches; rather, we see how they subtly undermine racist and sexist ideologies that Dunbar-Nelson saw as threatening to the communities she lived in. Likewise, Hurston's stories can then be seen as something more than practice for her novels, or the written-down version of stories she told at parties, but instead as short but powerful works that bonded and empowered her readers. Both women can be seen as engaging in the practice of revising, correcting, and complicating the image of African Americans, especially women by rooting their fiction in black culture as they experienced it.

IV

A Modern Undine and Seraph on the Suwanee: Challenging the Black Women's Literary Tradition Through White-Life Fiction

It is significant that, in their push against both racist stereotypes and the New Negro movement, Alice Dunbar-Nelson's and Zora Neale Hurston's short fiction challenged popular representations of black Southerners. Both wrote powerful fiction featuring black characters and folk communities. Both also wrote equally powerful fiction featuring white characters. Yet in Hurston's case, she is remembered and praised for her stories and novels featuring black folk while her fiction featuring white characters is dismissed as an outlier in her oeuvre. In Dunbar-Nelson's case, she has been marginalized almost entirely because of the assumption that she wrote primarily about or for white people. Ann duCille has pointed out that certain works by black writers have been more readily accepted into the black literary tradition than others, and that works featuring white characters such as Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* are all too often left out of the tradition entirely. duCille notes that these works often have important critical contributions to make, saying, that *Seraph* "should be an interpretive gold mine," but is instead ignored because "within the confines of the mainstream African American and black feminist literary traditions, Hurston is authorized to write about women's experience so long as the women she writes about are black" (147). In this chapter, I shift focus to Dunbar-Nelson's and Hurston's fiction featuring white characters. I argue that it is necessary to reconceptualize the black women's literary tradition by examining outlier authors such as Dunbar-Nelson and outlier texts such as *Seraph* to gain a fuller understanding of the African American novel and the work being done by black writers in the Post-Reconstruction era and beyond.

In this chapter, I will focus primarily on Dunbar-Nelson's posthumously published novella, *A Modern Undine* (written between 1898 and 1903 and published in Hull's 1988 collection), and Hurston's last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, published in 1948. *A Modern Undine* and *Seraph on the Suwanee*, when read together, offer important insights into why black women might choose to write about white characters and into our own critical responses. As duCille has suggested, the two works have startling similarities: both feature self-absorbed women contrasted with their hard-working, confident husbands, both have a disabled child who embodies the mother's personality flaws, and they both share the same general story arc.¹ While duCille brings up their similarity to make the point that Hurston "did not give birth to herself," I

¹ While there is evidence that Dunbar-Nelson circulated at least one copy of her novella, as she received feedback from a reviewer, there is no evidence that Hurston ever read *A Modern Undine*. There is also no evidence that the two ever met, though they certainly shared many acquaintances; they also published in the same newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, so it is likely that they knew of each other's work. The closest I have been able to place them together is through a letter Dunbar-Nelson wrote to someone she refers to as "Dearest Cap'n" on October 6, 1930. In this letter, Dunbar-Nelson said she attended "a hot waffle party with Langston Hughes and some of the Hedgerow Theatre people" and goes on to note, "Langston is there writing a play" ("Letter to Dearest"). Given the date of the letter, the play she is referring to would be *Mule Bone*, which Hughes wrote in collaboration with Hurston. Dunbar-Nelson does not mention Hurston in the letter, but it is hard to imagine Hughes discussing the play with Dunbar-Nelson and not mentioning Hurston (though the two did have a falling out over creative rights to *Mule Bone*, so it is possible).

wish to build on this point by examining how both writers were responding to problematic social structures through the use of the “white-life fiction”² genre in their own cultural moments (83). As I noted in my previous chapter, both Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson were invested in problematizing the ideal of New Negro Womanhood, which was largely modeled after white Victorian womanhood. Writing about white women allowed Dunbar-Nelson and Hurston to target the ideal itself, rather than leveling their critique at black women. In his recent study of the white-life novel, John C. Charles analyzes this strategy on the part of many twentieth-century black authors, stating, “the white-life novels generate authorial racial privacy by shifting the sympathetic gaze of their largely white readership *away* from suffering black ‘others’ and *toward* troubled and troubling white subjects that often unsettle, disturb, and even queer normative understandings of ‘whiteness,’ and white heteropatriarchy in particular” (*Abandoning* 9). The choice to feature white characters allowed both authors to analyze racist, sexist, and classist social structures without having to deal with the complications that resulted from representing black characters as simultaneously residing within and revising those structures, as did Harper and Hopkins. In *A Modern Undine*, Dunbar-Nelson uses subtle satire to suggest that white,

² According to John C. Charles, the simple definition of a white-life novel is “novels by African Americans with white protagonists” (*Abandoning* 2). A more complex definition considers the white-life novel as a “strategy of critical agency” used by black authors to comment on white society and culture, as “a means of exercising ‘freedom’ and resistance within a deeply constricted social and literary field” (*Abandoning* 10). According to Charles, these novels are (or should be) considered “African American literature” not solely because of the race of the author, but also because of the perspective these black authors are offering on white life.

middle-class Victorian women are self-absorbed and even soulless; their only hope lies not in their husbands or children, but through meaningful interactions with those less privileged than themselves. In *Seraph*, Hurston likewise questions the idyllic white family by revealing their seeming perfection, control, and natural position of power to be based in myths that could be traced back to the Old South. Both writers are invested in revealing the mythology of white dominance by depicting white characters who are selfish and self-righteous, capable of extreme violence and apathy toward others while being simultaneously weak themselves.

Seraph is often ignored or rejected as a failure because it is seen as lacking the authenticity of Hurston's earlier works; in other words, the assumption is that black women should write books about black life and black families—preferably Southern black folk and not middle-class black families—in order for those books to be considered “authentic.” Likewise, Dunbar-Nelson's writing has long been ignored at least partially because her aesthetic is seen as generally lacking that same “authentic” quality expected or looked for in black literature—her black characters are not as obviously black as readers think they should be, and her aesthetic is more sentimental than gritty or realistic. Examining these works in which Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson choose to write about middle-class white families will shed light on our critical responses to such works as well as what it means for a black writer to write about white characters—what might motivate them to make that choice, and what are the potential critical rewards and risks of that choice? An examination of Hurston's and Dunbar-Nelson's white-life fiction together demonstrates that there is more than one way to critique dominant norms such as white masculinity, Southern white womanhood, or even New Negro womanhood. Examining the full range of Dunbar-Nelson's and Hurston's work allows us to see that black writers have long

experimented with different forms and genres and that we need new, more inclusive definitions of “authentic” when it comes to black women’s literature..

Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s *A Modern Undine*

As I noted in my chapter on Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Gloria Hull claimed that Dunbar-Nelson’s “strategy for escaping” the expectation to depict minstrel stereotypes was to “eschew black characters and culture” by writing “aracial, Creole sketches” (“Introduction” xxxii). Dunbar-Nelson did write Creole sketches (which I have argued are most certainly not aracial), but she also wrote a great deal of fiction featuring white characters. While writing fiction about the lives of white characters, or characters who were not easily identifiable as black, has led to the separation of Dunbar-Nelson’s fiction from a black women’s literary tradition, she was writing in direct response to social structures that other black women tackled in their writing. Many of Dunbar-Nelson’s contemporaries, such as Pauline Hopkins and Frances Harper, attempted to offer a counternarrative to negative stereotypes by depicting African Americans as responsible, upstanding citizens, capable of achieving cultural assimilation through a bourgeois nuclear family model. Instead of trying to counter stereotypes, Dunbar-Nelson levels her critique at the (white) bourgeois family model itself. Dunbar-Nelson maintains a Victorian sensibility through her tone and literary aesthetic while interrogating and exposing the idealization of the white family structure, thereby masking her critique. These ideologies become the object of interrogation, the site against which cultural and racial “progress” is measured, and not lower-class African Americans or rural Southerners.

Dunbar-Nelson was quite critical of both Victorian Womanhood and white women in her non-fiction, lending credence to the idea that she is critical of it in her fiction as well. In her essays, she frequently targets race leaders and politicians who blame the problems of society on

modernity, especially young women. In one article from 1926, she combines her frequently sarcastic writing with such criticism when she gives an example of an average speech tactic of a race leader, saying, “Go for the young people! Wonder what is to become of them...Criticize their dress, lip-sticks, rolled hose, boy friends, the Charleston, and taste in cocktails. Paint the decline and fall of the Roman Empire due to just such a condition. Heavy sighs and groans, with fervid Amens!” (*Works* 113-14; vol. 2). Dunbar-Nelson, though in her fifties when she wrote such statements, was a staunch defender of black youth and often embraced modernity in her writing. She was equally critical of Victorian morality. For instance, in her essay “Facing Life Squarely,” she writes, “We have come a long way from the Victorian days of repressions and hidings of the truth, and silences about what everyone knew was true, and pretences and shams, when the mention of any portion of anatomy but the face was silenced with blushes, and no respectable woman wore silk stockings” (*Works* 297; vol. 2). Though she held the opinion that the Victorian era was an era of repression in 1927 when she wrote the essay, it was an opinion that she held when she wrote fiction at the turn of the twentieth century as well. Her first collection, *Violets and Other Tales*, though largely sentimental, also featured an essay defending key principles of New Womanhood. This early essay makes no outright mention of race, but her later essays were outspoken on the subject. She was often more critical of Southern white men than women, but she did throw a few barbs at them as well. In one 1926 column that combines her tendency toward sarcasm with her criticism of Southern white women, Dunbar-Nelson contemplates why white women choose to join the Ku Klux Klan, and finishes by saying, “Poor white women! One cannot but be sorry for them; they have so much to bear—their own men—the burdens of the white race, and all the other sorrows of womanhood” (*Works* 118; vol. 2).

Dunbar-Nelson's clear opinions on Southern white families and Victorian morality in her non-fiction aligns with her use of sarcasm in her fiction targeting the same structures.

Stories featuring white characters (such as *A Modern Undine*, "Tony's Wife," and her 'Steenth Street stories, among others) have not been discussed as frequently as stories featuring Creoles of color, but they merit close reading because they allow us to see how Dunbar-Nelson portrays white domestic space as troubled and unworthy of being held up as a norm, or an ideal. In this way, Dunbar-Nelson can be seen as participating in the same tradition as Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar, both of whom wrote white-life novels.³ According to John C. Charles, the white-life novel was most prevalent during the mid-twentieth century, citing Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* as one such novel; however, Dunbar-Nelson experimented with this genre nearly fifty years earlier. Part of its appeal for black authors, Charles argues, was that writing about white characters allowed black authors to participate in public debates on issues that were typically thought to be beyond their authority or ability (*Abandoning* 6). Dunbar-Nelson is, in many ways, arguing for her right to participate in these conversations, and in so doing, demonstrates her civic and intellectual equality (though, ironically, her white-life novella, *A Modern Undine*, was never published in her lifetime). It is a clever choice of genre, particularly for the post-Reconstruction period when depicting "suffering black 'others'" was the last thing that many African American writers wanted to do. However, writing about white characters instead of black did not equate with avoiding discussions of race or writing outside of

³ See Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Uncalled* (1898), *The Love of Landry* (1900), and *The Fanatics* (1901). See Charles Chesnutt's *Evelyn's Husband* (published posthumously in 2005), and *A Business Career* (written in 1890, published posthumously in 2005).

the black literary tradition, as Hull suggests. In Dunbar-Nelson's fiction, white families are anything but paragons of civilization, virtue, or domestic bliss. She does not reinforce heteronormativity, cleanliness, or respectability in these households. While all of Dunbar-Nelson's white-life stories deserve further analysis, her novella, *A Modern Undine*, is especially notable for how it shifts the discussion away from the complexity of representing race, and particularly black womanhood, to a reading public quick to judge the representation, and instead offers a decidedly critical representation of racial and sexual "norms" that often functioned as a source of oppression for African Americans.

A Modern Undine features a self-absorbed and apathetic Southern white woman in order to show the absurdity of the idealization of Victorian womanhood. In the novella, George Howard, a Northern businessman, falls quickly and hopelessly in love with Marion Ross, the titular character. As Hull explains, "In folklore, an *undine* is a 'female water sprite who could acquire a soul by marrying a human being'" ("Introduction" xlv). The story follows and revises this folk narrative. Howard rushes to propose and it is clear that Marion has little desire for the marriage or Howard, but she acquiesces anyway. Howard quickly discovers that her detachment, which he took to be feminine demureness, is actually rooted in selfishness. He becomes bitter that all of his efforts to be romantic and provide for their family go unnoticed. To further emphasize Howard's goodness, he befriends a poor sickly neighbor girl; however, Marion becomes jealous when she sees Howard go into the girl's house one day and immediately assumes infidelity. She faints, falls, and injures the baby she is pregnant with and he is born physically disabled as a result. The couple finally confronts one another when Howard's business fails. Frustrated, he finally lays out Marion's faults in front of her and she begins to understand the damage she has caused their relationship. In Hull's published version of the manuscript, the

novella ends with Howard's escape into hiding because of rumors of embezzlement, Marion's change of heart, and her baby's death. However, two final unpublished chapters exist in Dunbar-Nelson's collected papers in which the couple is reunited on a New York City street and they are "one at last in heart and soul and spirit" (*Modern* 86).⁴

I classify this as a "white-life novel" because it is most likely that Dunbar-Nelson's characters in this novella are white, though there is some disagreement on the subject. For instance, Kristin Mapel Bloomberg interestingly claims that Marion is black, calling her "a literal woman of color standing alone on the shore of a white supremacist patriarchy" (69). There is

⁴ Although Hull recovered the novella from the Alice Dunbar-Nelson Papers at the University of Delaware Library Special Collections, publishing it in *The Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* (1988), her version of the text does not contain these final chapters. According to archivist Timothy Murray, nothing has been added to the Dunbar-Nelson Papers since the University of Delaware acquired them in 1984. Although the previously missing ending was present at the time of Hull's editorial work, Murray notes that the collection had not yet been processed when Hull was working on it; thus, the final chapters were most likely accidentally separated from the first seventy-nine pages and residing in a different folder (Murray). Hull knew the missing chapters existed because of a letter to Dunbar-Nelson from an editor friend critiquing the novel's ending (J. N. M.); however, because the missing ending was separated from the rest of the manuscript, Hull was led to believe that the missing chapters were lost. The facts that the missing chapters do exist, that no version of them has yet been published, and that until now no critic has discussed them in print point to the very real need for more critical work to be done to recover Alice Dunbar-Nelson.

some confusion in the novella as to Marion's race. Howard mentions that she has "dusky eyes and raven hair," which typically signifies Creole descent in Dunbar-Nelson's other works (*Works* 25; vol. 2). The clearest hint that Marion may be a woman of color is when Howard teases her, suggesting that she join the New Era Club, which was a black women's club started by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin (*Works* 26; vol. 2). However, the evidence in the text that Marion is white is more convincing. The most important clue is when Marion is being fitted for her wedding dress, and she is described as having a "bare white neck and shoulders exposed" (*Works* 17; vol. 2). She is described at other times in the novella as being "white" or having "white lips," but in these instances, Marion is overcome with faintness, anger, or some other emotion where "white" seems to signify her emotion more than her skin color. One could argue that these references to Marion's white skin do not rule out the possibility that she is merely a light-skinned woman of color. Other clues that she is white have less to do with her skin color than her social status, namely several references to Marion's family's "ancestral estates" and wealthy forefathers (*Works* 50, 69; vol. 2). One final hint that both Marion and Howard are white is that Howard's best friend, Holt Towneley, is described as a "young man with yellow hair," who draws the eyes and flirtations of Marion's family and friends (*Works* 21; vol. 2). Though not impossible, it is difficult to imagine Howard being black and having a white best friend. It is even more unlikely to imagine Howard as white and Marion as black, given the laws against interracial marriage at the time. Therefore, it seems most likely that the novella features the lives of Marion, a white Southerner, and Howard, a white Northern businessman, despite the reference to the New Era Club. Given the conflicting references, it is quite possible that Dunbar-Nelson at one point imagined Marion as a woman of color—most likely a light-skinned Creole given Marion's ancestral wealth and Dunbar-Nelson's other fiction featuring Creoles. It is interesting to

speculate what Dunbar-Nelson might have done with such passing and conflicting references had she revised and published the novella.

In one of the only substantial readings of the novella, Mapel Bloomberg argues that Dunbar-Nelson modernizes the undine folktale by reversing it and instead presents readers with the story of a woman who is uninterested in “achieving a soul through marriage” (71). She argues that, as a “modern” form of the mythical undine, Marion rejects marriage as a patriarchal institution and instead desires “to be reunited with the utopian feminine world of the sea” (71). According to Mapel Bloomberg, Dunbar-Nelson herself was caught “between white and black, Victorianism and modernism, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Angel of the House and the New Woman” (67). She argues that Marion is Dunbar-Nelson’s representation of a modern New Woman who finds herself in over her head in the “corrupt urban world of men in a new century” but is again reunited with the sea in the novella’s ending (Mapel Bloomberg 74). While such an empowering feminist reading is tempting, it does not account for the fact that Dunbar-Nelson put a great deal of effort into making Marion distinctly unlikable. Furthermore, Mapel Bloomberg’s reading somewhat problematically associates the nineteenth century with a utopian feminine community and “maternal bower,” eliding a definition of Victorian Womanhood and all that it entails (74). Additionally, in light of the unpublished ending in which Marion is happily reunited with Howard, Mapel Bloomberg’s reading becomes far less likely. The novella questions the patriarchal institution of marriage, but it does not uphold Marion as a misplaced feminist heroine. Rather, it is critical of a certain vision of the white bourgeois family that is centered upon the notion of the man as provider and protector of a delicate yet competent female manager of the domestic sphere. Interestingly, the primary target of Dunbar-Nelson’s critique is Marion, who I argue is the novella’s embodiment of white Victorian womanhood, not New

Womanhood as Mapel Bloomberg suggests. Howard is the far more sympathetic of the two, but he is not without fault. He plays the role of the patriarchal husband who desires his wife to be demure, submissive, virginal, and motherly, yet is disappointed in her when her fulfillment of these standards does not live up to his expectations. As such, Dunbar-Nelson shows the problems inherent in the ideal white bourgeois family and marriage as a whole, an ideal that African Americans were dehumanized for their inability to achieve.

At the novella's beginning, Marion is Dunbar-Nelson's version of the "angel in the house" taken to its extreme. While Mapel Bloomberg argues that Marion is distant and cold because she is resentful of "the patriarchal bonds of marriage," her attitude and character is better characterized as distinctly Victorian in nature (72). Throughout the novella, Dunbar-Nelson uses language to indicate that Marion belongs to this class of women, which she sets up in contrast Marion's sister Emmie who much better represents the bubbly, confident New Woman. For instance, Emmie is described as a "frank girl with an unconventionality that was apt to be ... more startling than dignified," which encapsulates some of the defining features of New Womanhood (*Works* 6-7; vol. 2). In contrast, when Howard first meets Marion, he pegs her as a "strait-laced, high-bred young lady of a last century type"; even her letters to him remind him of an "old-world prose tale" (*Works* 5, 16; vol. 2). She tells Howard that the entire town expects her to be "quiet and orderly and mind my p's and q's. It would shock the whole town if I should break into a laugh louder than a whisper" (*Works* 10; vol. 2). Such a description of the sisters places Emmie firmly in the twentieth century and her sister in the nineteenth. In response to this, Howard flirtatiously replies, "They pay you the highest possible compliment...they have set you apart from them as a superior being" (*Works* 11; vol. 2). Howard is not initially attracted to Marion herself, but to the ideal that she appears to represent. However, rather than merely

dashing Howard's vision by revealing Marion to be an average woman, Dunbar-Nelson turns Marion into an embodiment of the Victorian feminine ideal. Marion represents what the Victorian woman would be if some of her most idealized traits took over, thereby exposing the contradictions inherent in the image.

For much of the novella, Dunbar-Nelson presents Marion as a parodic allegory for Victorian womanhood. As Hull states, she "present[s] the feminine ideal elevated to the satiric nth degree of foolishness" ("Introduction" xlvi). Marion takes little interest in her own wedding preparations, which as the quintessential Victorian woman, should be one of the highlights of her life. However, the narrator says that "She had held herself aloof for so long, taking part in life in a merely general way, that now she could not realize herself the central figure in any movement" (*Works* 16; vol. 2). She has been raised to be reserved, quiet, and removed from the outside world, as any respectful young woman should be—in Marion's case, however, she has become so accustomed to being "aloof" instead of "the central figure," that she cannot even enjoy her own wooing and wedding. When Howard proposes, she creates several excuses and delays her response as long as she can, but finally acquiesces. When Howard kisses her for the first time, "he felt a sudden shrinking of her whole being, as if already her soul were closing in upon itself after its brief surrender" (*Works* 14; vol. 2). At this and several other moments in the novella, Marion displays an aversion to physical contact. Howard desires to marry Marion because she is virginal—he calls her a "white lily in a garden of roses"—but, much to Howard's dismay, she desires to hold on to her virginity (*Works* 12; vol. 2). When Howard kisses Marion on their wedding night, a kiss that he intends to be "reverential and holy," she shrinks back and he "notice[s] with a pang the quick compression of her lips" (*Works* 21; vol. 2). Marion cannot be the epitome of virginal purity one day and sexually available to Howard the next, nor can she be

reserved and unobtrusive in public, fully committed to her own home, yet also deeply engaged in social events and charity work, even when appropriate to her gender and class position. Dunbar-Nelson parodies the contradictory requirements of Victorian womanhood by depicting Marion as wholly unable to meet them.

Dunbar-Nelson reveals Marion's aloofness as more than genteel deportment or feminine shyness as the novella goes on—it is rooted instead in self-centeredness, which Dunbar-Nelson implies is one of the more sinister aspects of Victorian womanhood. Once she is married, Marion's desire to remain solely within her domestic sphere becomes a problem for Howard. For instance, a clubwoman in Marion's new Northern town calls on her, but Marion lies, saying she is engaged. The woman sees her in the window, "sitting there, calmly gazing out over the tops of the trees" (*Works* 24; vol. 2). Dunbar-Nelson's portrayal of the clubwomen is similar to Hopkins' portrayal of Mrs. Willis; like Hopkins, she also highlights their hypocrisy and pettiness, mockingly noting that the leader of the group never would have "allowed the wives of the small tradespeople of the town to have appeared in her drawing-room" for her exclusive teas (*Works* 22; vol. 2). The clubwomen display, as Hopkins' clubwomen did, an obsession with class and personal advancement, concerned more with their own image and reputation than with charity work. Marion, however, represents the extreme—the Victorian woman who is so concerned with managing her own household that she cannot and does not care for anyone or anything outside of its sphere. Marion's refusal to leave her house or participate in any social activity exposes multiple contradictions in Victorian womanhood. Rather than leave her house, even for proper women's activities, "Marion entered upon her housekeeping duties quietly, and thoroughly, with all a Southern woman's inborn mastery of the tiniest detail of homemaking" (*Works* 27; vol. 2). Marion is more representative of a type of antebellum Southern Victorian Womanhood in which

Southern plantation mistresses were supposed to be more ornamental than anything. As John C. Ruoff states, “southern belles were to lead a life of leisure...to bear children as soon, and as often, as possible...Plantation mistresses were to direct large households as though by instinct” (215). This is in contrast to the industrious Northern Victorian Women, who were more free to discuss domestic economy and the mechanics of household management. While Marion’s sister eventually marries and “had gone in for charity, and was maintaining a little mission among the alley Negroes,” Marion is too apathetic to take any interest in anything besides herself or her own house (*Works* 29; vol.2). When Howard suggests that she also do some charity work so she does not “grow narrow and circumscribed,” Marion replies, saying “I suppose I am narrow, and all that...but I simply cannot help it. It is my nature, and one cannot change one’s disposition. I never could be interested in things like Emmie, and other people. It’s entirely too much trouble” (*Works* 29-30; vol. 2). This scene reveals the sarcasm Dunbar-Nelson often used in her nonfiction and her diary to make her arguments. The absurdity of Marion’s claim—that it’s too much trouble to “be interested in things...and other people”—is a particularly harsh critique of the actual narrowness of bourgeois Victorian womanhood, especially the older form that Marion represents. While selflessness was an ideal Victorian feminine characteristic, Dunbar-Nelson shows how the narrowness bred by single-minded domesticity precluded any real understanding of, or sympathy with, people of different classes or races—the very people these women were supposed to be helping in their charity work.

While she is particularly critical of white womanhood in *Undine*, Dunbar-Nelson does suggest there is a way for these women to redeem themselves. Marion continually struggles to become more genuine in her emotions and less a parody of an ideal, but she backpedals frequently, and only succeeds in becoming fully “human” once she learns to care for others.

Marion begins to become “a new, more beautiful, more womanly woman” through her love for her child, but she still sees the child as too much like herself to fully break free from her own insularity (*Works* 50; vol. 2). She names their baby Ross after her maiden name and tells him, “You are like my life, baby...maimed and warped and imperfect, and yet all I have” (*Works* 44; vol. 2). Marion’s likening her child to her own life and then telling him that he is “all I have” indicates that her love for her child is more selfish than selfless. Indeed, she keeps her child from everyone, including Howard, whom she blames for Ross’ disabilities. Ultimately, it takes more than her own child to turn Marion from a parody into a person. Marion experiences a tug of emotion when she sees Howard enter the sick girl’s house a second time. While previously indifferent toward Howard, now, “A cold, deadly fury was stirring at her heart, becoming more passionate and human at every instant that Howard stayed in the house” (*Works* 53; vol. 2). Still, this does not complete her transformation, as it is rooted in jealousy and possessiveness of her husband. It is only once Marion agrees to see the mother of the girl that the narrator declares, “She was a human soul at last” (*Works* 64; vol. 2). Breaking free from what Dunbar-Nelson saw as the self-serving restrictions of Victorian white womanhood requires an actual recognition of others.

Even at this point, however, the financial crisis faced by Marion and Howard and the loss of their child nearly causes Marion to slip backwards into her old ways. In the novel’s final unpublished chapters, Marion desires to leave her mother’s house and be by herself for a time until she has “fought it all out” (*Modern* 81). She decides to flee to New York City. While she is looking from her hotel room window down into the street, the narrator notes that “There, below her, flowed life like a turbulent river, and she, as ever before, stood aside, aloof, apart, a mere onlooker, watching the drama of other’s lives” (*Modern* 81). This feeling of being apart lasts “for

an instant only” until Marion remembers the young girl, her helpless child, and her husband’s words to her during their fight (*Modern* 81). This causes her to think that “Surely, in all this, she had lived at last; surely, she had put her feet into the stream of life, and been swept on its current” (*Modern* 82). This revelation causes her to feel suddenly “oppressed” by the four walls of her hotel room and she is swept with “the desire to be down in the street, and a part of the life of them, a member of the swift, moving throng” (*Modern* 82). Mapel Bloomberg associates Marion with New Womanhood because of her comfort when she is near the feminine sea and the novella’s title claiming Marion to be a “Modern Undine.” However, Marion is not a “modern” representation of New Womanhood from the novella’s outset, as Mapel Bloomberg suggests; rather, she transforms from a Victorian Woman to something closer to New Womanhood as the novella progresses. In the novella’s unpublished ending, Marion does not desire to avoid marriage “to be reunited with the utopian feminine world of the sea”; rather, she shifts her interest from occupying a lonely spot by the sea, as she did at the novella’s opening, to joining the swift-flowing river of life (Mapel Bloomberg 71). She “gains a soul” not through marriage, or reuniting with the sea, but by putting herself on the same level with others. Even her former aversion to human contact is gone when she “did not shrink” from people “in the commonest of crowds, in the foulest of streets” (*Modern* 84). Marion’s sense not only of being apart from others, but of being of a higher status, finally disappears. Dunbar-Nelson suggests that in order for middle-class white women to finally reach the status of compassionate fellow humans, they must join with the rest of the world.

Dunbar-Nelson does not just highlight the flaws of Victorian womanhood in *A Modern Undine*. She challenges the patriarchal white family structure as a whole, showing it to be a dysfunctional space, built on myths that perpetuate sexism, racism, and classism. When Marion

learns about the failure of Howard's business, readers discover the reason for her personality. Howard blames her for not being more aware of the situation, and Marion credits her lack of attention to her ancestors who are described as,

generations of forefathers who had eaten, drunk and been merry and had known nothing of the whys and wherefores of their splendors and comforts. Small wonder was it then that if the echoes of the ruins crashing around the citadel came to her ears, they were but abstract echoes to her, nothing more, nothing of concrete significance to her or her home. (*Works* 50; vol. 2)

As a woman from the South, with "generations of forefathers who had eaten, drunk and been merry," it is safe to assume that neither those forefathers nor Marion is black. Dunbar-Nelson subtly points to the fact that Marion is a product of the Old South and generations of men who had built their wealth and families through the work of slaves, who had "known nothing of the whys and wherefores of their splendors and comforts." Marion, and by extension other white women, are privileged, apathetic, and ignorant because of the history and lingering ramifications of slavery, namely the structural inequality that resulted. However, Dunbar-Nelson shows that this privilege cannot shield the white family from dysfunction. On the contrary, the very desire to uphold traditional white values leads to the near-destruction of Howard and Marion's marriage. Only a genuine empathy for less-fortunate members of society is capable of making them anywhere near having true "human souls."

As part of her critique of the white family structure, Dunbar-Nelson does not leave out Howard. Though Howard is the most sympathetic character in the novella, he is still punished for falling for the myth and for attempting to perform the role of a white male protector of Southern womanhood. As previously mentioned, Howard idolizes Marion when he first meets her,

likening her to “a vestal set apart from the rest of mankind” and treating her accordingly (*Works* 9; vol. 2). Interestingly, Dunbar-Nelson does not portray Howard as abusive, hateful, or lascivious as white men are often portrayed in other texts by Dunbar-Nelson and her contemporaries. Rather, he is sensitive, romantic and even somewhat traditionally “feminine” in his characterization. For example, when we are first introduced to Howard, he is gushing over the beauty of the Southern sea at night, speaking of it “with a kind of breathless wonder” (*Works* 4; vol. 2). As he is talking to Marion, the narrator notes that “he talked recklessly, like a man whose brain is loosed from its everyday thrall of commonplace into a realm of fancy and poesy” (*Works* 5 vol. 2). As the novella continues, Howard is further established as a poetic, passionate man, characterized by “impetuous eagerness” (*Works* 16; vol. 2). He is even compared outright to a woman at several points, such as when he discovers his son’s disability and begins “sobbing low pitiful sobs as a woman might have done” (*Works* 45; vol. 2). One possible reason for this characterization is that it highlights Marion’s indifference and coldness. Howard’s eagerness causes him to overlook the signs that Marion’s reserved demeanor is problematic, believing it to be feminine demureness. Dunbar-Nelson writes her story so the readers become disenchanted with Marion only slightly before Howard does, revealing to them and to Howard that “true womanhood” is not nearly so desirable an ideal as they have been conditioned to believe.

Howard’s sentiment also disguises the sexism inherent in his treatment of Marion. From early on, Howard dictates what he wants Marion to be and to feel without listening to her. When he proposes, he tells Marion that because he singled her out, she “*must say yes*” (*Works* 12; vol. 2). He goes on to tell her that he needs her more than her mother and sister need her, saying, “It is my turn now, and I am going to insist that my claim is recognized” (*Works* 13; vol. 2). In referring to Marion as his “claim,” Howard’s proposal becomes decidedly less romantic and

more possessive and domineering. When Marion objects, saying, “You take it quite for granted that I love you,” Howard replies saying, “My own love is so overpowering that it must compel a return” (*Works* 13; vol. 2). Examined carefully, Howard’s pursuit of Marion is not done out of love as he insists, nor is his uncontrollable passion harmless or romantic; rather, he pursues her out of a desire to conquer and compel. Her timidity and quiet demeanor attract him as they make Marion easier to sway and control. Just as Marion fits his image of the ideal wife, so also does he try to play the complementary role of the patriarchal husband. In their marriage, he tries to get her to represent their family well to the local wives, to be a good mother, to appreciate his work and concern herself with his business while also maintaining their home. Though it is difficult not to feel sorry for Howard as his love for Marion appears genuine, particularly after the birth of their child, his love is nevertheless “overpowering” and “compelling,” and is based in terms of what he wants Marion to be. He views marriage as an emotional service and Marion as the one responsible for maintaining his happiness.

Howard does not only affect a superior position in his relation with Marion, but also does so with other women in the novella. When he first meets Grace Weaver, the sick young neighbor girl, she is sliding on the ice and he carelessly chides her multiple times for not wearing overshoes, when it is obvious from the girl’s reaction that she is too poor to afford them. The narrator offers a subtle commentary on Howard’s treatment of the girl, saying, “With the paternal solicitude of the large landowner in a small town he asked her questions and with a child’s frankness, she told all about herself” (*Works* 32; vol. 2). Howard is clearly in a position of power in the relationship between himself and Grace, and though he believes himself more magnanimous than Marion, his own charity is also deeply problematic, and as the narrator notes, paternalistic. For instance, as he contemplates how to help Grace, he feels guilty for being

surrounded by a “daily service on the dinner table; the swift, silent butler” and the “perfectly served meal” and as a result of not knowing how best to assist Grace, “groan[s] at his own helplessness” (*Works* 33; vol. 2). Howard is blinded by his own status and privilege. As a result, he does not even notice when Grace falls in love with him. The narrator again offers a subtle, sarcastic, critique, saying, “He had never stopped to analyze his feeling for the girl. She was not of his class and analysis in such a case is superfluous” (*Works* 34; vol. 2). To Howard, Grace’s economic status makes her nothing more than a charity case who could not possibly be a subject of love or desire; the thought of a relationship with her is absurd to Howard.

Though Howard’s status and role as a powerful white male causes him to be blind to the needs of the women around him, his emotional neediness reveals him to be deeply insecure. When Marion devotes herself to her child, Ross, Howard experiences a deep jealousy. A bond exists between Marion and Ross “such as Howard had dreamed might exist between him and his wife, but which is possible only between man and woman when the woman is mother to the man” (*Works* 43; vol. 2). This passage reveals that Howard does not desire a partner, so much as a mother-figure, making him little more than “a child seeking uncritical and undivided maternal devotion” (Meisenhelder 105).⁵ Indeed, as Marion hovers over Ross, Howard is said to “worshi[p] her as one would worship at the shrine of the Virgin” (*Works* 42; vol. 2). Howard’s desire for Marion is motivated by a childlike insecurity, ultimately revealing the white patriarchal ruler to be far less powerful and in control than he may imagine himself to be.

⁵ Meisenhelder is speaking of Jim Meserve, Hurston’s white male protagonist in *Seraph on the Suwanee* in this passage. Her argument concerning Jim, which I will discuss in my next section, applies equally well to George Howard.

Dunbar-Nelson suggests that Howard's nurturing and sentimental qualities are not inherently weak or problematic; rather, they become disturbing when they are used to disguise sexism and paternalism to gain power over women and people of lower economic status. When used in service of others, or out of a sense of genuine care and love, they are positive and necessary qualities as both Howard and Marion demonstrate.

While not without its flaws, Dunbar-Nelson's novella presents a fascinating critique of the ideal white family structure. A Southern lady of ancestral wealth and class marries a successful Northern businessman and all should end harmoniously in this post-Civil War sentimental narrative. However, Dunbar-Nelson inserts her own often-stated negative opinion of the Victorian woman into this narrative along with a larger critique of the white bourgeois family as a whole. She shows Victorian womanhood to be an absurd and impossible standard for women to live up to while blaming white men for believing it to be desirable. She also reveals the patriarchal male to be controlling and insecure, dependent on the image of the Victorian woman to maintain his own power. Though Howard and Marion reconcile at the end of the novella, their marriage is not what truly saves them; rather, it is their recognition of the humanity of those around them that redeems them.

Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*

A Modern Undine shares many startling similarities with Hurston's final novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, published in 1948. Plot details are evident, but what they also share in common is having been removed from the black women's literary tradition. While critics embraced Hurston's other novels during their recovery of her, especially *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Seraph on the Suwanee* was ignored at best and openly dismissed as a failure at worst. While it

was received positively at the time of its publication,⁶ early critics of the novel complained that it “is neither comic, nor folkloristic, nor about blacks” (Bell 128). Mary Helen Washington called it “an awkward and contrived novel, as vacuous as a soap opera,” and went on to speculate as to the reason for the novel’s failure, saying, “It was as though in abandoning the source of her unique esthetic—the black cultural tradition—she also submerged her power and creativity” (“Zora” 21). Significantly, both of these critiques note that the novel fails because it was not about blacks, and more specifically, that it did not feature “the black cultural tradition,” i.e., folklore. As duCille has argued, using *Seraph on the Suwanee* to do so, our understanding of black women’s writing has been limited by such approaches that privilege texts which fit a specific understanding of blackness, typically one that privileges a rural, folk aesthetic. While texts that fit this aesthetic are essential to the black women’s literary tradition, as my argument in the previous chapter demonstrates, it is equally important to recognize the work being done in texts that seem to fall outside of the mold. *A Modern Undine* and *Seraph on the Suwanee* are undoubtedly two such texts.

Critics since have taken issue with early responses to *Seraph*. Beginning in the mid 1990s, critics began reading the novel as undertaking a subversive attack on racist and/or sexist structures. Critics have variously suggested that Hurston was wearing the “trickster’s mask” in the novel (Meisenhelder 93) or that it “is structured as an extended joke” (Tate *Psychoanalysis*

⁶ For instance, one white male reviewer calls Jim a “hard-working go-getter, who wanted the best for his wife” and praises the novel as the story of “a woman saved, brought finally out of her feeling of insecurity that has crippled her life, by the wholehearted affection of a real man” (Brickell 19). As one can imagine, such reviews did not endear the novel to recent critics.

150). In one of the more groundbreaking works of criticism, Susan Meisenhelder argues that the novel “lays bare Hurston’s most thorough critique of the dominant culture, one that details the emptiness of its models of identity and relationships for black women and men” (92). Her reading focuses primarily on Jim as an all-powerful white male who exploits his black friends and oppresses his wife, Arvay. Other readings have since complicated Meisenhelder’s, examining the functioning of cultural appropriation in the text, or Arvay’s own complicity in the subjugation of those around her as a result of her privileged social position. My own reading continues the work of Meisenhelder’s, in that I also see the text as a critique of dominant white culture, though I do not want to completely dismiss critics’ gut-level discomfort with some of the text’s complexities. When recovering Hurston, Alice Walker complained that *Seraph* “is not even about black people, which is no crime, but *is* about white people for whom it is impossible to care, which is” (xvi). As I have argued with *A Modern Undine*, one of the most interesting and significant aspects of the text *is* Marion’s unlikability. As with Dunbar-Nelson’s text, I see *Seraph* as a subversive critique of the white middle-class family as an ideal, a model, and a norm. Hurston shifts from her project of collecting and representing black folklore to unveiling “white folklore,” in particular the traditions and myths that lead to the rise of the white middle class and the creation of the New South in the twentieth century.⁷ In *Seraph*, even more so than

⁷ I borrow the concept of “white folklore” from Shirley Moody-Turner, who uses the phrase to argue that Charles Chesnutt exposes these often-hidden customs and traditions in his work, particularly in *The Colonel’s Dream*. She notes that in a great deal of Chesnutt’s work, including his essays, short story collections, and novels, he, like Hurston, “constructs folklore as a shared process and interactive experience reflecting the ideas and belief systems not only of those being

in *A Modern Undine*, Hurston exposes the ways in which the social construction of white masculinity and womanhood engenders racial and economic structures of oppression. As Laura Dubek argues, the novel shows “race as a social construct and racism as a system of oppression inextricably linked to the production and perpetuation of an upwardly mobile, morally impoverished white middle class” (344). While Dunbar-Nelson’s novella maintains a satiric stance toward her characters (Marion in particular), thereby maintaining the critique, Hurston’s dedication to portraying relationships in the South in all of their complexity complicates our desire to read the novel as a straightforward joke.

Seraph begins with a description of the novel’s setting that frames the text—and Hurston’s project of critiquing white mythology—as a whole. It at once historicizes the novel, while noting the white residents’ own lack of concern with history; significantly, the narrator includes more critical asides in this opening than in most other parts of the novel. The narrator immediately notes that the Suwanee is “the river which Stephen Foster made famous without ever having looked upon its waters” (*Seraph* 1). Right away, the text draws attention to the 1851 minstrel song written by Foster that, not coincidentally, perpetuates the myth of the Old South and of the plantation as the “good old home” to which African Americans want to return. In the

represented but also of those doing the representing” (134). The “white folklore” he exposes “include[s] both the conscious enactments of idealized customs and traditions associated with the myth of the Old South and the less romanticized, but perhaps more deeply entrenched, customs and traditions that dictated race relations in the New South” (Moody-Turner 155-56). Hurston shares Chesnutt’s project in *Seraph* of exposing these white forms of folklore, so Moody-Turner’s terminology applies equally well to her.

lyrics to “Swanee River,” or “Old Folks at Home,” a song readers would have been familiar with, a slave pines for “de old plantation / and for de old folks at home.” The narrator’s jab at Foster’s lack of insider knowledge implicitly critiques his knowledge of Southern life, while also pointing out how racist myths, or “white folklore,” immortalized in the song, are all too often created and perpetuated.

The introduction goes on to target the white residents of Sawley, the town in which the beginning of the novel is set, by noting that they rarely traveled outside of their town and that they were mostly made up of “men who had worn the gray of the confederacy,” and who, because “Reconstruction was little more than a generation behind,” suspected “Damn Yankees...of foraging around still looking for loot; and if not that, gloating over the downfall of the Cause” (*Seraph* 3). While Hurston has sometimes been accused of a lack of historicization in her novels, *Seraph* undoubtedly begins with a specific setting and historical contextualization, noting that the novel begins “in the first decade of the new century” (*Seraph* 1). She goes beyond merely pointing out the timeline of her novel, but also describes how its setting shapes the worldview of her characters. In a telling passage, the narrator observes,

Few were concerned with the past. They had heard that the stubbornly resisting Indians had been there where they now lived, but they were dead and gone. Osceola, Miccanope, Billy Bow-Legs were nothing more than names that had even lost their bitter flavor. The conquering Spaniards had done their murdering, robbing, and raping and had long ago withdrawn from the Floridas. Few knew and nobody cared that the Hidalgos under De Soto had moved westward along this very route. (*Seraph* 2)

The white residents of Sawley, though poor themselves, know little about how they have come to occupy the land on which they live. Not only do they not care about the past, but the language the narrator uses to indicate their feelings about that past is also telling. They know that the Indians were “stubbornly resisting,” thereby revealing how white settlers constructed themselves and their white descendants as entitled to the land; the actual history of Native American genocide has come to matter so little to the white residents that the narrator notes that the “bitter flavor” their names once invoked is fading into apathy. Notably, the narrator lays out a great deal of the history of brutal colonialism and oppression that allowed the white residents to live where they did in Florida while simultaneously pointing out that they were blind to their privilege and had forgotten or reconstructed history so as to make privilege through oppression seem like entitlement. In this way, Hurston’s characters in *Seraph* are similar to Marion: they have never had to think of the sources of their privilege. Hurston sets her readers up in the first pages of the novel to be wary of the myths that white society has created—of their simultaneous forgetting and repetition of histories of violence and oppression.

Arvay and her family, as poor “Florida Crackers,” hold on to the myths of the Old South. For instance, though the walls of Arvay’s home are decorated primarily with lithographs depicting Biblical scenes, a painting of General Robert E. Lee leading the confederate troops at Manassas takes “the place of honor, over the mantelpiece” (*Seraph* 29). Arvay’s own attitude toward racial and ethnic “others” reflects a mix of religious fervor and white supremacy, an outlook she guards vehemently for much of the novel. As a sixteen-year-old, she tells her church of her desire to be a missionary, to “warn [the heathens] of the dangers in which they stood in their ignorance” (*Seraph* 4-5). Her view is supported by the members of her community, who can only imagine “heathens” as being told of the dangers of hell, and cannot imagine the next

logical step of having to share heaven with them. The narrator states that the church members were pleased with Arvay's speech because "There had been nothing about the heathens of China, India and Africa wallowing around on the heavenly chairs...None of her hearers could have imagined such a thing" (*Seraph* 5). Hurston depicts Arvay's family and the residents of the turpentine-driven Sawley community as representatives of the Old South, driven by notions of religious fanaticism, racial purity, and nostalgia, in contrast to the industry-driven New South.

Similar to Dunbar-Nelson, Hurston reserves her harshest criticism for Arvay, though Hurston places Arvay in direct interactions with people of color to show not just the absurdity and hypocrisy, but the violence of these white women's insular viewpoints. Despite Jim's attempts to broaden Arvay's perspective once they move to Citrabelle, she struggles to shift her worldview. After Arvay drives the black family, the Kelseys, off of their land by being cruel to Joe Kelsey, a Portuguese family moves in. While the rest of the community considers the Corregio family to be white, the narrator states that their last name "made them foreigners, and no foreigners were ever quite white to Arvay. Real white people talked English and without any funny sounds to it" (*Seraph* 120). Arvay even considers Mrs. Corregio to be a "foreigner" though she was "a Georgia-born girl" because she believes "the woman had gone back on her kind and fallen from grace" (*Seraph* 120). Despite nationally shifting definitions of race and whiteness, Arvay holds firm to what the novel portrays as an outdated view, even shifting this traditional definition of whiteness to remove Mrs. Corregio, thereby securing her own position as a pure, white woman.

In one of the more disturbing scenes of the novel, Arvay indulges in a fantasy in which she imagines the Corregio women as sexual temptresses while she and her son are helpless, but righteous, victims. When she learns that her son, Kenny, is dating Felicia, one of the Corregio

daughters, Arvay is immediately threatened by what she perceives is an intrusion on her family's whiteness and wealth. She believes that Felicia and her mother plotted the relationship, wanting "to skull-drag [Kenny] into marrying Felicia and letting her handle all his money" (*Seraph* 241). In order to substantiate this image of the Corregio women, Arvay imagines herself "A soldier of the Cross, and a follower of the Meek and Lowly Lamb," while the narrator points out that "never once, in all these years, and hearing the expression as often as she had, [noticing] the contradiction of the term" (*Seraph* 241-42). To further illustrate Arvay's violent mentality clothed in Christian virtue, Arvay mentally "stripped [the Corregio women] bald-naked and mocked at them" because she imagines them the way Christian missionaries had portrayed natives, as unabashedly naked and "not fellow-humans, nothing of the kind" (*Seraph* 242). In Arvay's mind, they are "two naked huzzy' heathens trying to pass themselves off as folks, white folks at that" (*Seraph* 242).

Immediately after this mental shaming of the Corregios, Arvay shifts her vision to imagine them as performing their own strip-tease, designed to tempt her son, Kenny. She plays out this image in increasingly graphic detail in her mind, revealing the voyeuristic pleasure Arvay takes in it. After imagining Felicia "a'wringing and a'twisting herself with her naked legs" and finally mentally uncrossing them, the narrator says that "Arvay shook and shuddered at her home-made picture. It was horrifying to her, but strangely brought her comfort" (*Seraph* 243). Significantly, Arvay's daydreams are "home-made pictures," so they are not only a product of her own mind, but of the home, community, and nation in which she was raised. Arvay's imaginings are one example of "white folklore" in the novel; they have a long history, as the spectre of non-white, overly-sexualized women threatening the boundaries of whiteness have often been used to reinforce the purity and moral superiority of white women.

While it may seem from such moments in the novel that Hurston is critiquing “crackers” such as Arvey and promoting the vision of the New South as exemplified by Arvey’s husband Jim, the novel is not so straightforward. Jim represents the New South in his devotion to industry, to developing the land with a firm belief in the virtue of a bootstraps-mentality, and to better interracial relations. Historian Paul Gaston notes that the “New South” is a confusing and contested term, as its users agreed on little, including its timeline and goals. Gaston argues that it was a symbol “that expressed [the] passage from one kind of civilization to another,” from the worship of a glorious former aristocracy to the recognition of the need for a new order (25-56). Broadly speaking, he refers to it as a term that “may stand for whatever kind of society adopters of the term believe will serve the region’s interests best or promote their own ambitions most effectively,” whether that be industrialism, racial harmony, or Social Darwinism (Gaston 27). Early proponents of the New South, such as Henry W. Grady, who is considered the first person to use the term, took it to stand for “harmonious reconciliation of sectional differences, racial peace, and a new economic and social order based on industry and scientific, diversified agriculture” (Gaston 28). However, as Gaston points out, the Old South was not the only vision of the region based in myth; he notes, “it is important...to see [New Southerner’s] ideas not only as a program or new departure but also as elements in a total mythic configuration with a history of its own” (27).

Jim is Hurston’s representation of this confusing portrait, this representative of a (not so) new mythology. He tells Arvey that the reason for his success is because he “shucked out to get in touch with the New South” in his bootlegging, shrimping, and development enterprises while his father and brothers obsessed over the Civil War (*Seraph* 203). In a letter to Burroughs Mitchell, Hurston’s white publisher, she told him that she was “attempting to give a true picture

of the South by showing Jim Meserve as a member of that liberal class...who believed in the benefits of the Union and advancement...In truth, the South presents a very confusing picture...High-mindedness and savagery side by side” (*Zora* 561). John C. Charles has argued that Hurston was entirely sincere in this letter and in her desire to write what he calls a “counter-narrative of the South” (“Talk” 21). He claims that Hurston *was* trying to promote a vision of the New South and inadvertently ended up writing a vitriolic indictment of Southern whites. In contrast, I see the novel as being more critical of white society, New and Old, than Charles gives it credit for. It should be remembered that Hurston was writing this letter to a white Northern male with the power to publish or reject her book. Hurston undoubtedly did try to present a more complex portrait of the South to counter its critics, which has at least partially led to some of the confusion over the novel. Hurston’s actual depiction of Jim is “a very confusing picture,” rather than a straightforward modern hero of the South. As duCille notes, his humor, liberal-mindedness, and strength is frustratingly appealing, even to feminist readers, and particularly in contrast with Arvey’s outright racism (131). In this way (and in many others), Jim is remarkably similar to Dunbar-Nelson’s Howard. In both texts, white women are the most self-centered, and obviously unlikable, while their husbands come across as romantic, confident, and devoted. As with Howard, however, Jim’s favorable outward personality masks its more sinister aspects; Hurston reveals the ways in which Jim’s “high-mindedness” is in fact exploitation, appropriation, and patriarchal oppression in a new form.

Historian Morton Sosna, in his study of Southern liberalism, notes that most Southern liberals in the first half of the twentieth century were professionals and teachers, but nevertheless “a diverse group whose views on the overriding race issue differed greatly” (ix). While the majority of Southern liberals criticized lynching and other such forms of violent discrimination,

they generally did not oppose Jim Crow.⁸ As one of the earliest Southern liberals, George Washington Cable, argued, “Blacks...needed the freedom ‘to earn the indiscriminate and unchallenged *civil*—not *social*—rights of gentility by the simple act of being genteel” (qtd. in Sosna 4). Cable’s emphasis on gentility rather than legal reform and the notion that social equality was a step too far characterized the work of many future Southern liberals. The goal of most Southern liberals was to uplift and empower blacks by enabling them to help themselves. Interestingly, Sosna distinguishes this approach, which he rightly describes as “patronizing,” from the kind of traditional Southern paternalism exercised by Jim in *Seraph* (19). He points out that newly formed groups of Southern liberals in the 1920s did not often include white landowners or businessmen (such as Jim), stating, “When members of this...group expressed concern for the problems of blacks, they generally did so from within the paternalistic tradition of helping ‘their niggers’ in times of trouble, a tradition [Southern liberals] fought against” (Sosna 27). So, though all Southern liberals could be said to still combine “high-mindedness and

⁸ Notably, neither did Hurston. However, it is important to note that Hurston opposed desegregation for very different reasons than most white Southern liberals. Likely because of her own upbringing in the all-black community of Eatonville, she placed a high value on black-centric communities such as hers. Hurston saw race pride and self-respect as arising from the segregation of races and from the sense of community and safety that black communities brought; in her opinion, desegregation efforts had more to do with political plotting than a genuine concern over equality. See her controversial 1955 article, “Court Order Can’t Make Races Mix.”

savagery side-by-side,” Jim’s brand of New South liberalism is one that even members of the “silent” Southern liberal class rejected as belonging more to the Old South than the New.

Jim is introduced as the descendant of plantation owners who lost everything in the Civil War. Despite the fact that he is financially no better off than Arvay’s “piney-woods cracker” family, the narrator notes that “Jim had a flavor about him. He was like a hamstring. He was not meat any longer, but he smelled of what he had once been associated with” (*Seraph* 7). Several critics have noted that Jim recreates a new plantation setting in their home in Citrabelle with himself as owner, Arvay as delicate white mistress and the Kelseys and Corregios as modern slaves.⁹ As Brannon Costello argues, “Jim sets out to parlay some of the skills, behaviors, and attitudes gleaned from his ‘associations’ with an idealized version of the Old South into economic gain and aristocratic standing” (22). Jim brings the mythology of the Old South with him into his version of the New.

One of the ways that Jim modernizes the plantation system for a New Southern setting is in his use of the “pet negro” system and his general exploitation of black labor. Jim gets along well with the local black population, enlisting their help through Joe Kelsey, who he also hires to run his whiskey still. When Jim first introduces Joe to Arvay, telling her he’s his “right-hand man,” the narrator inserts that she “was a daughter of the South. She knew exactly what to think from that” (*Seraph* 60). She asks Jim if Joe is his “pet,” and Jim responds, “Kee-reck! Different from every other Negro I ever did see. He’s remarkable. Honest as the day is long” (*Seraph* 60). Here, Hurston makes it clear that the “pet negro” system is a remnant of the Old South, both

⁹ See Brannon Costello and John C. Charles. In contrast to Costello, Charles reads Hurston’s attempt to portray an idyllic plantation romance seriously rather than ironically.

from Arvey's immediate knowledge and approval and from Jim's description of Joe as an exception among African Americans, the implication being that all others are dishonest and fit general black stereotypes. In her essay, "The 'Pet Negro' System," published in 1943, Hurston describes the complex system in an effort to complicate liberal Northern views of the South as marked by white supremacy and black oppression and poverty. It is an essay of careful distinctions in which she implicitly critiques paternalistic whites and their creation of "exceptional" blacks while using their "pet" for their own personal and political advantage; likewise, she admonishes the "pet" for finding the system "mighty cosy" and also for benefiting personally by "what was meant for the whole community" ("Pet" 915, 918). Ultimately, Hurston concludes, "Is it a good thing or a bad thing? Who am I to pass judgment? I am not defending the system, beloved, but trying to explain it. The lowdown fact is that it weaves a kind of basic fabric that tends to stabilize relations and give something to work from in adjustments" ("Pet" 919). In *Seraph*, Hurston points out the same problems with the paternalistic system, particularly its maintenance of unequal power relations; at the same time, the novel presents the image of "stabilized relations" between white and black, a portrayal that tends to make today's readers cringe.

Jim takes advantage of both Joe and the larger black population, using them to create his wealth and social position. Jim puts Joe in charge of his whiskey still, reaping most of the profits for himself. To convince Arvey of how much he's done for her, he tells her, "I went in with Joe stilling likker, and run a heavy risk of going on the chain-gang to get hold of enough money to put you up closer to where I felt that *my* woman ought to be" (*Seraph* 264). In order to protect and uphold his image of white womanhood—and his own position of patriarchal dominance—Jim risks Joe's freedom while pretending that he was actually the one in danger. Jim takes

advantage not just of his own “pet,” Joe, but of the larger black community, as well. In order to clear off the land and build his home quickly, he enlists the help of the “underground system in Colored Town that the whites did not know about” (*Seraph* 82). He pays them in moonshine, spices, and shotgun shells and does not ask when the workers take the scrap lumber for themselves. The black population is pleased with their pay, telling Jim at every opportunity that he is a “perfect gentleman” and offering to work for him more in the future. Jim knows the profit his land will eventually bring (and likely so does the black population who see it as a source of future employment), but Jim also clearly knows he got the better end of the deal as he “was laughing up his sleeve and wanted to take Arvay into the joke” (*Seraph* 82). Jim knows he holds the position of power, and delights in it while fancying himself a “gentleman.” When Arvay complains that the lumber is gone, Jim teaches her that “The help don’t look for ladies and gentlemen to trace up a thing like that” (*Seraph* 82). Adrienne Akins has an insightful reading of this passage, arguing that Jim is teaching Arvay how to perform a middle class identity as a “lady,” not a “cracker” in her relations with African Americans (35-46). A “lady” should be benevolent as well as wealthy enough not to care when poor African Americans take scraps that, to them, are quite valuable. I would add that the performance of this new middle-class identity faintly echoes an older, aristocratic identity as “ladies and gentlemen” with refined manners and disposable wealth—where the image of benevolence was maintained while exploitation lurked beneath its surface. Hurston is drawing attention to the ways in which Jim and Arvay’s performance of a middle-class identity maintains and transforms racist systems for the New South.

Similar to what Dunbar-Nelson did with Howard in *A Modern Undine*, Hurston critiques Jim’s treatment of Arvay and his valorization of Southern white womanhood; however, Hurston

also highlights the sexual violence and larger system of oppression that accompanies the creation of a powerful white middle-class. When Jim first meets Arvay, he tells her,

Women folks don't have no mind to make up nohow. They wasn't made for that. Lady folks were just made to laugh and act loving and kind and have a good man to do for them all he's able, and have him as many boy-children as he figgers he'd like to have, and make him so happy that he's willing to work and fetch in every dad-blamed thing that his wife thinks she would like to have. That's what women are made for... I'd like to get hold of one of the useless things to keep for a play-pretty. (*Seraph* 25-26)

At this point in the novel, it is difficult to tell if Jim is joking to get a rise out of Arvay, but his actions and later thoughts and conversations with Arvay show him to be completely in earnest. Jim insists that he alone can be Arvay's protector and provider, wondering at one point in the novel "what would become of the poor weak thing without the proper person to give her the right care?" (*Seraph* 105). Jim clears the swamp and runs his various businesses with Arvay in mind, believing her incapable of thinking for herself, all while expecting loving appreciation from her in return. However, as in *Undine*, this only creates in Arvay "an almost absurd indifference to her husband's affairs" as Arvay instead obsesses over her children's lives while her upbringing combined with her new privileged class position allows her to spend her time indulging in racist fantasized threats to her family (Dubek 346). Furthermore, Jim's treatment of Arvay only encourages her dissatisfaction and insecurity. An insecure person to begin with, Arvay initially believes that Jim's desire to have her as his trophy is too good to be true, but his multiple rapes of her and condescension leave her feeling more and more isolated and objectified as the novel goes on. During their final fight, she tells him, "the only holt I ever had on you was the way you

craved after my body. Otherwise, I felt you looking down on me all the time” (*Seraph* 262). In reply, Jim tells Arvey that he did everything for her because he saw her “like a king’s daughter out of a story-book with...long, soft golden hair. You were deserving, noble, and all I ever wanted to do was to have the chance to do for you and protect you” (*Seraph* 263). Just as Howard does with Marion, Jim attempts to create an aristocratic fantasy by setting Arvey up as the idealized image of white womanhood; this image causes Arvey to feel useless rather than protected or cherished. Furthermore, Jim’s treatment of Arvey leads to the continuance of systematic racist and economic oppression in the New South when he uses her as an excuse to exploit people he sees as being “beneath” them both.

At the end of the novel, Arvey learns to play along once she compares her new, privileged lifestyle with her former “cracker” existence, realizing the comfort of her position. As Dubek argues, Arvey “remain[s] both victimized by and complicit in social forces intent on maintaining white male supremacy” (351). After their fight, Arvey returns home to Sawley, mistakenly believing that she will find purity and simplicity in her former small town, but instead only finds poverty and greed. Disillusioned, she returns to Jim to play the role of the devoted, subservient spouse, finding comfort, safety, and even a kind of maternal power in that role. At earlier points in the novel, Jim vacillates between being a domineering patriarch who wants his wife to be a powerless, thoughtless “play-pretty,” and a little boy attempting to recreate a mother/child relationship with Arvey. The narrator states that “All of the agony of his lost mother was gone when he could rest his head on Arvey’s bosom of nights,” but, just as Marion does with Ross, Arvey reserves her mothering for her children early on in the novel (*Seraph* 105). By the ending, Arvey joins Jim on his boat to cook for him and his crew and wait for him to come to her bed. Once Arvey and Jim reunite, “Jim was gripping her shoulders so hard until it

hurt her, and trembling over his body like a child trying to keep from crying. Like a little boy who has fled in out of the dark to the comfort of his mother” (*Seraph* 349). As Meisenhelder notes, Jim’s identity is fragile, his performance of masculinity a show, and it must be reified by Arvay, whose own sense of selfhood is torn down repeatedly to reaffirm his own (98). Just as the boat, which is named after Arvay, “bowed in harmony with the wind and the sea... acting in submission to the infinite,” so too does Arvay “acknowledg[e] that that was the only way” (*Seraph* 349). Arvay accepts that her fate is to be determined by supposedly natural womanly obligations, with Jim acting as her captain. Rather than fighting this position as she would have done earlier, Arvay finds peace, thinking to herself in all seriousness, “Her job was mothering. What more could any woman want and need?...Jim was hers and it was her privilege to serve him” (*Seraph* 351).

Despite Arvay’s contentment, Meisenhelder points out that Arvay’s relationship to Jim is “one in which a dehumanized Arvay ‘look[s] up’ in gratitude to her husband; the understanding he yearns for is a relationship in which Arvay knows her place, ‘standing under’ her husband” (Meisenhelder 98). Jim’s love for Arvay is not a love between equals. Similar to Howard’s seemingly romantic declaration to Marion that his love “must compel a return” (*Works* 13; vol. 2), Jim tells Arvay that “Love ain’t nothing else BUT compellent (*Seraph* 154). Arvay’s return to Jim at the end of the novel is not a reconciliation to be applauded, but a submission disguised as a woman’s free choice and best option. It is for this reason that the end of the novel is so disturbing. As the “seraph” in this novel, Arvay is a woman worshipping at the feet of her god (Meisenhelder 98) In contrast, the reconciliation in *A Modern Undine* is downplayed as the emphasis is placed instead on Marion as the soulless undine discovering her own humanity. In

Seraph, Hurston's sarcastic narrative asides disappear by the end of the novel and the smoothness of Arvay and Jim's new relationship is depicted unproblematically.

Critics have most often read the ending of the novel as either critical of white patriarchy or as a disappointing concession on Hurston's part, in an attempt to appeal to white readers and potential Hollywood producers. Meisenhelder reads the ending as ultimately critical of white family structures, comparing them to Hurston's depictions of happy black couples in her other works of fiction. Read with a critical eye, Arvay is complicit with the perpetuation of Jim's power and her own victimization, ideas which are more obviously criticized at earlier points in the novel. However, since Arvay's only other choice is to revert to her "cracker" lifestyle (a path she triumphantly overcomes in the novel), her decision to return to Jim is depicted as the lesser of two evils. With Jim, Arvay overcomes her own former insecurities and self-pity (qualities Hurston abhorred), being able to state confidently to Jim, "I was born with all I ever needed to handle your case" (*Seraph* 347).¹⁰ Arvay's choice of Jim's New South mythology is better than remaining stuck in the past. It is a New South that Hurston portrays not uncritically, but she is not entirely condemnatory either. Never the believer in overnight change and progress, Hurston's ending appears to show a New South that is deeply problematic, but one where "The lowdown

¹⁰ In a letter to her editor discussing her reasons for writing *Seraph*, Hurston asks, "Have you ever been in close contact with a person who had a strong sense of inferiority? I have, and it is hell" (*Zora* 558). She goes on to speak of women more generally, stating that modern marriages suffer because wives feel abandoned and inferior to their successful husbands. She argues that "The sufferers do not seem to realize that all is needed is a change of point of view from fear into self-confidence and then there is no problem" (*Zora* 558).

fact is that it weaves a kind of basic fabric that tends to stabilize relations and give something to work from in adjustments” (“Pet” 919).

Conclusion

While Dunbar-Nelson critiques the backwardness of Victorian Womanhood in the twentieth century in *A Modern Undine*, Hurston critiques the continuing backwardness of the New South. Both fascinatingly locate the source of such examples of anti-modernism with the social construct of whiteness and the idealization of the middle class patriarchal family. In doing so, they are able to provide a counternarrative against popular representations of black culture and folklore by associating white folklore, myths, and ideals with a deeply contradictory and non-progressive worldview—a worldview that is not only oppressive of others, but also ultimately self-destructive. In both texts, the characters’ attempt to maintain idealized roles keeps them from meaningful, human interactions with one another and the world around them.

Despite each texts’ insights into the dysfunction of idealized white bourgeois families, the models for which black families were (and still are) criticized for not being able to emulate, *A Modern Undine* and *Seraph on the Suwanee* are all-too-often left out of the black women’s literary tradition. As critics, we return to the question: Why would two black women, invested in writing about the lives and experiences of black folk in their other works, turn their attention to white characters? The reasons we have issues with these novels appear to be two-fold. First, we assume that black women are supposed to write only about black people (or worse, are only capable of writing about other blacks). As I argue in this chapter, Dunbar-Nelson and Hurston are able to indirectly address standards that deeply impacted the lives of African Americans by writing directly about white families. Our second issue with these texts is also something I have attempted to address in this chapter: we assume that novels by women will be critical of men, not

of other women. The fact that both of these texts depict white women in such an obviously unflattering manner while white men are likable, and even pitiable, is difficult for critics of black women's literature to accept. There are several possible reasons why Dunbar-Nelson and Hurston may have made this decision. As I have noted in my earlier chapters, both writers are especially critical of New Negro Womanhood in their other texts. For Dunbar-Nelson and Hurston, it was a dangerous standard for black women to aspire to, as it removed them from their cultures and communities, dividing black women along lines of class, region, and color. By writing about white women, particularly middle-class Victorian women such as Marion, or Southern women set up by their husbands as blonde storybook princesses such as Arvay, Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson are able to critique the source of New Negro Womanhood. They are able to reserve their sarcasm and unflattering portrayals for white women rather than black women. As I noted earlier, Dunbar-Nelson was critical of white Southern women in at least one of her essays. This approach is not without precedent, as is evidenced by Anna Julia Cooper's famous essay, "Woman Versus the Indian," in which she calls out white feminists for their overt racism.

Perhaps more disturbing for modern readers and critics than unflattering portrayals of white women is Dunbar-Nelson's and Hurston's seemingly flattering portrayals of white men. Both writers depict white masculinity in a manner that may seem initially contradictory for a black writer. The men in their novels are, at least on the surface, loving fathers, passionate husbands, and dedicated providers and protectors of their families. However, these exact qualities are what Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson suggest are most damaging, not only to their own families, but to their communities. To protect his firm, Howard engages in a suspicious business merger and then abandons his wife and child rather than face jail time. Jim exploits his laborers

and risks their own jail time to make a larger profit for himself. Both claim to love their wives, saying that all they do is for their happiness when their romantic gestures always hide a threat beneath their surface. Howard's threat is that Marion is his "claim" and therefore has no choice but to love him in return; Jim goes so far as to rape his wife multiple times over the course of their marriage. Idealized, patriarchal white masculinity, even its seeming benefits and its justifications for its own existence (i.e., protection, order, even romance), mask some of its most sinister aspects.

While *Seraph* is the more substantial and complete of the two texts in terms of plot, and focuses more on the impact of the idealized white family structure on other races, it could be argued that *Undine*'s critique of the inhumanity of the white bourgeois family is better sustained. In attempting to simultaneously defend and critique the New South, Hurston creates a narrative that feels ultimately conciliatory toward the direction the South was moving in the mid-twentieth century. Arvay goes from being an outright racist "cracker" to a paternalistic New South plantation mistress; she even embraces a role as a mother-figure to her own husband. While not the same empowering shift that Hurston's black women characters sometimes make, she nevertheless depicts Arvay's change as an improvement. In contrast, Marion rejects her identity as a seraph, "a vestal set apart from the rest of mankind," and instead becomes a human being on the same level as all the rest (*Works* 9; vol. 2). Regardless of the complexities and complications of each text, both suggest that white performances of power, whether on the part of men or women, keep them from meaningful, human interactions with one another and the world around them. Both texts, though they feature white characters, expand our understanding of the black women's literary tradition and of the notion of an "authentic" black literature. These texts prove

not only the creativity and diverse capabilities of black women writers as early as 1900, but they challenge our own critical expectations of what black literature looks like.

Conclusion

Despite calls for greater diversity and inclusion within the academy, the fate and value of African American literature still seems unsettled. Even the question of what African American literature is still plagues scholars. Recently, Kenneth Warren has instead posed the question, “What *Was* African American Literature?” Warren’s answer is that African American literature only existed during the years of Jim Crow segregation, from about the end of Reconstruction to the end of the Civil Rights era. His thesis is that African American literature as a cohesive tradition (and not merely a set of isolated writings) came about as a reaction and challenge to Jim Crow segregation. According to Warren, racism, subordination, and inequality oriented African American writers in this era, forcing them to define and write a literature for themselves since they had little political or social power to affect change. He states, “black writers knew that their work would in all likelihood be evaluated instrumentally, in terms of whether or not it could be added to the arsenal of arguments, achievements, and propositions needed to attack the justifications for, and counteract the effect of, Jim Crow” (10). He adds that these writers were preoccupied with writing literature that was a credit to the race as a whole. To solidify his argument, Warren cites James Weldon Johnson’s claim, “I judge there is not a single Negro writer who is not, at least secondarily, impelled by the desire to make his work have some effect on the white world for the good of his race” (qtd. in 10). Warren acknowledges that there were some writers who rejected Weldon Johnson’s premise and insisted that their writing had little or nothing to do with either their own race or the “status of the black race” in general, but he claims that “the mere insistence was an acknowledgment of the pressure of these expectations” (13). Therefore, according to Warren, all African American literature was a reaction to white racism—this was, in fact, its defining feature—and the tradition would not have existed without it.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Zora Neale Hurston are certainly two writers who Warren would have included under the category of authors who merely insisted they were unaffected by race. My own argument is quite similar to Warren's in this respect; while Dunbar-Nelson and Hurston have both claimed to write literature that was interested in their characters as individuals first and foremost, and they were not concerned with how race impacted those characters' lives, I hope to have shown how the texts of both of these women were unavoidably shaped by social and historical conditions, including race. Several of Dunbar-Nelson's stories even deal directly with the effects of Jim Crow on the lives of her characters, as I argue in my second chapter. Dunbar-Nelson's own opinions on the purpose and value of African American literature appear to be conflicted at times, and it is useful to examine Warren's thesis in light of her statements. In the same February, 1926 column I cited in the introduction in which Dunbar-Nelson echoes Du Bois, she laments similar to Weldon Johnson, "Each and every one of us is, of necessity, a propagandist. We are forced by cruel challenges to explain, show our wares, tell our story, excuse our shortcomings, defend our positions" (*Works* 125; vol. 2). Dunbar-Nelson appears to be making an argument quite similar to Warren's: try as they might to be anything else in the Jim Crow era, African American writers had no choice but to use their literature to combat racism and represent the race. However, she goes on to claim, "The real novel about, by and for the Negro will be written only...when we learn to tell a story for the sake of the artistry and the sheer delight of a good tale, without an eye for the probable effect of the story on the consciousness of the white man" (*Works* 125; vol. 2). In contrast to Warren, Dunbar-Nelson believed that "real" African American literature could not exist under the shadow of racism. In her formulation, African American literature would not be defined by a challenge to white

supremacy, but by some other unnamed quality that would still distinguish the work as “about, by and for” African Americans.

This project attempts to demonstrate what Dunbar-Nelson believed: African American literature—more specifically the black women’s literary tradition—is defined by more than simply a reaction to whiteness, as Warren claims. As Aldon Lynn Nielsen states in his review of Warren’s book, “It is one thing to acknowledge that many black American writers harbored hopes that their work would convince the larger American polity of something, and it is quite another to posit this as the primary motivation for the literature’s very existence (Edwards and Benn Michaels)” First, it is important to recognize that each of the writers I discuss were responding not just to Jim Crow, but to other writers, white and black. Dunbar-Nelson and Hurston’s texts each resonate with the work of writers such as Hopkins, Harper, Matthews, and Cooper. While it could be argued that Dunbar-Nelson and Hurston revised and critiqued the work of these earlier writers with the goal of creating a “better” representation of African Americans, or at least one that appealed more to white audiences in their respective eras, this is hardly the case. Both Dunbar-Nelson and Hurston went beyond challenging these earlier writers’ approaches to literature and their treatment of race by building on their work, borrowing from it and responding to their representations of region, class, gender, and sexuality. While Dunbar-Nelson wrote with a similar sentimental aesthetic as Harper and Hopkins, she chose to highlight the culture of the New Orleans region in which she was raised. This had the effect of speaking back (even if indirectly) not just to damaging white stereotypes of Southerners, but to Harper and especially Hopkins’ own portrayals of Southern black folk culture, and black women in particular. Hurston likewise challenged earlier representations of New Negro Womanhood in her fiction, using folklore as a lens through which to do so, as Dunbar-Nelson had. Furthermore, a

great deal of Hurston's work was devoted to preserving black folklore, and in the process, engaging in an artistic/academic debate with other folklorists. Hurston was concerned not just with how to best represent the black race, but on the circulation and value of folk culture generally.

Secondly—and this is a point to which I have already alluded—each of the writers I discuss in these chapters had the goal of giving voice to black *women's* lives and experiences, which have certainly been shaped by more than the history of Jim Crow. We cannot conceive of black women's literature without considering the intersectional nature of their work. Harper and Hopkins, for example, wrote about black women's political activity in a way that no black man had. Each of them gave their women characters platforms (even if they were domestic ones) to discuss issues pertaining to not just the race, but black women in particular. Hopkins dealt with issues of morality and shame, going beyond denouncing the white exploitation of black women to reprimand members of the African American community for not offering much-needed support and understanding to women who had experienced sexual violence. Dunbar-Nelson continued this work by depicting white and Creole women, some of whom were struggling to survive because of exploitation, bad relationships, or economic disadvantage. At the same time, the writers I discuss also show women as active agents in their own empowerment, and not mere victims of white supremacy: Iola rejects a wealthy white suitor, Sappho reclaims her child, Manuela seeks out a Voodoo priestess, and Caroline saunters through Harlem with an axe.

These writers were intervening in the African American, American, and Women's literary traditions; they were responding to black men, white women and their fellow black women writers and thinkers. We must therefore think of literary traditions and the black women's literary tradition in particular as an intersectional, non-linear project that includes a

variety of black women's voices. While Hopkins explicitly states in the introduction to *Contending Forces* that she saw herself as contributing to the formation of a specifically African American literature, it would be difficult to say that each of the writers I discuss saw themselves as actively or only trying to create a literary tradition. Hurston and Dunbar-Nelson prided themselves on their individuality and though each freely gave their opinions, they resisted being spokespeople for "the race." In 1926, Dunbar-Nelson tellingly changed the title of her newspaper column from the more representative "From a Woman's Point of View" to the decidedly more individual "Une Femme Dit," or "One Woman Says," implying that she is representing no woman's opinion but her own. In an article in this new iteration of her column, she responds to a white man who complained that African Americans can never agree amongst themselves. She responds brilliantly, saying,

We have unlearned the lesson of the planters and grown to have racial self-respect. We have learned the beauty of the color brown, and the glory of the heritage black. We know the thrill of a faith in a future, and the joy of a glorious and ever-widening horizon of all that goes to make up a racial solidarity. But—we have honest differences of opinion, and if we are honest, we will express them.

(*Works* 173; vol. 2).

Dunbar-Nelson recognized that in order to have a "racial solidarity," a recognition of individual voices and "honest differences of opinion" was inevitable and even necessary. At the same time, she expresses a firm belief in such a solidarity based in a recovered past and shared heritage; furthermore, it is a solidarity fueled by the imagination of future possibilities and common goals, not simply a response to oppression. Dunbar-Nelson insisted on retaining her individuality, but she also recognized her indebtedness to other writers and thinkers, as is evident from this

project's epigraph in which she notes that those artists "who have made for a permanent place in the aristocracy of literature" are indebted to the past as well as their own present (Dunbar-Nelson "Poet Scientist" 1). Literary traditions then are not encompassed of a group of people all reacting to the same historical condition, but of a group of individuals intervening in multiple issues across a variety of genres, joined by "common political and intellectual projects across [their] differences" (Mohanty 136).

Warren's book is of course just one example reflecting how we might think about canon construction. Certainly many other critics have dedicated their work not to limiting what counts as African American literature, but to expanding the category. For example, scholarship on Dunbar-Nelson has increased in recent years and presentations on her texts have become more common at conferences. My own project seeks to aid in this recovery effort. As I argue in my introduction, however, recovery and tradition formation is a fraught, if necessary enterprise. Though my project focuses on Dunbar-Nelson's use of folklore and her relation to already canonized authors, I do not argue that she deserves a place in the black women's literary tradition simply because she values folklore or because her writing forecasted Hurston's. Rather, Dunbar-Nelson's work is important because of the unique voice she adds to the tradition and the light she sheds on our critical understanding of Harper, Hopkins, and Hurston, among others. Reading Dunbar-Nelson encourages us to reflect on why we have recently come to value the overtly political texts of Harper and Hopkins. A study of her short stories may lead us to rediscover short stories by other authors, canonical and not, lost in newspapers and magazines; Dunbar-Nelson's short stories certainly can be said to shed light on Hurston's comparatively neglected short fiction. Examining the work of Dunbar-Nelson leads us to question how we treat writers such as Hurston who are firmly situated in the black women's literary tradition—why, for

instance, we place greater value on her novels than her stories, her folklore than her white-life fiction, and how we have come to construct Hurston as a spontaneous genius.

More work needs to be done, however. Hundreds of pages of Dunbar-Nelson's unpublished stories, sketches, journals and letters exist in the archives at the University of Delaware, none of them digitized. A great deal of it sheds light not only on her work that is currently published, but on the era in which she wrote. For instance, her correspondence with soldiers as well as fellow members of the Women's Committee of the Council of National Defense would be useful for contextualizing her controversial play, *Mine Eyes Have Seen*. These same documents would be valuable for understanding the complex position of African Americans during World War I. Work on Dunbar-Nelson's texts could also contribute to other recovery projects, inspiring them or helping us to better understand their significance. How many other black writers, for instance, have written white-life fiction? As a case in point, Gretchen Gerzina of the University of Massachusetts recently discovered a white-life novel by African American author, Sarah E. Farro. The novel, *True Love*, was published in 1891 and garnered enough attention at the time to be featured in the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition. However, the novel has since all but disappeared from history, likely because it featured white characters in the era of didactic sentimental domestic race fiction. Furthermore, Farro set her novel in England and modeled it after English writers she likely admired and new best. How Farro's white life fiction compares to Dunbar-Nelson's and even the later work of Hurston would be a worthwhile study, perhaps one that encourages us to redefine what the black women's literary tradition can or should include.

Continuing to recover new texts by established writers or lost ones changes our assumptions about what black women's literature is and about the lives of the women who wrote

them. As critics, we have a responsibility to pass down the work of these writers to future readers and scholars, to preserve the voices and perspectives of these women, and to encourage future generations of scholars to continue contemplating the definition and value of black women's literature in the twenty-first century.

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M.A., Marquette University, English Literature, May 2009

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PUBLICATIONS

"Quinine Pills and Race Progress: Alice Dunbar-Nelson and the Black Women's Literary
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African American Literature
Feminist Theory
Folk Culture and Aesthetics
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TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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Graduate Instructor, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2009-2014
Graduate Instructor, Marquette University, 2007-2009

COURSES TAUGHT

Literature Courses

English 215 (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee): Introduction to English Studies
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Writing Courses

English 170 (Carroll University): Writing Seminar
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AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

MMLA Women's Caucus Travel Scholarship, 2015
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Graduate Student Travel Award, 2012
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Chancellor's Graduate Student Award, 2009
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Teaching Assistant Fellowship, 2009-Present
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SCHOLARLY PRESENTATIONS

Conference Presentations

"'He will be what you like': Science, Nature, and Race in Stephen Crane's *The Monster*,"
Midwest Modern Language Association Conference, Columbus, OH, November 14, 2015
"Fixed Places and Liminal People in Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces*," Society for the
Study of American Women Writers Conference, Philadelphia, PA, November 7, 2015
"'Be yourself unknown': Masking in the Fiction of Alice-Dunbar Nelson," Midwest Modern
Language Association Conference, Milwaukee, WI, November 9, 2013
"Resisting the Constraints of Domestic Race Fiction in Alice Dunbar-Nelson's *The Goodness
of St. Rocque*," American Literature Association Conference, Boston, MA, May 25, 2013
"Trauma and the Ethics of Witnessing in H.D.'s *Sea Garden*," Northeastern University
English Graduate Student Association Conference, Boston, MA, April 1, 2012

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Graduate Student Assistant, Grant Proposal Development, Office of Sponsored Programs,
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"Fresh Perspectives: Connecting English 101 and 102," Composition Forum, UW-Milwaukee,
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"Interrogating Whiteness in First-Year Composition," Professional Development Conference,
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"Reflective Writing in First-Year Composition," UWM-Marquette University First-Year
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"Blind Grading and Instructor Bias," UWM-Marquette University First-Year English
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SERVICE

Online Teaching Mentor, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2012-2013
Teaching Assistant Mentor, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2010-2012
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CERTIFICATES

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