Reconstructing Womanhood

The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist

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For my parents

1

"Woman's Era"

Rethinking Black Feminist Theory

On May 20, 1893, Frances Harper addressed the World's Congress of Representative Women assembled as part of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. She encouraged her audience to see themselves standing "on the threshold of woman's era" and urged that they be prepared to receive the "responsibility of political power."[1] Harper was the last of six black women to address the delegates; on the previous two days Fannie Barrier Williams, Anna Julia Cooper, Fannie Jackson Coppin, Sarah J. Early, and Hallie Quinn Brown had been the black spokeswomen at this international but overwhelmingly white women's forum. Williams spoke of the women "for whom real ability, virtue, and special talents count for nothing when they become applicants for respectable employment" and asserted that black women were increasingly "a part of the social forces that must help to determine the questions that so concern women generally."[2] Anna Julia Cooper described the black woman's struggle for sexual autonomy as "a struggle against fearful and overwhelming odds, that often ended in a horrible death. . . . The painful, patient, and silent toil of mothers to gain a fee simple title to the bodies of their daughters, the despairing fight . . . to keep hallow their own persons." She contrasted the white woman who "could at least plead for her own emancipation" to the black women of the South who have to "suffer and struggle and be silent" and made her concluding appeal to "the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition."[3] Fannie

Jackson Coppin declared that the conference should not be "indifferent to the history of the colored women of America," for their fight could only aid all women in their struggle against oppression," and Sarah J. Early and Hallie Quinn Brown gave detailed accounts of the organizations that black women had established.[4]

It appeared that the Columbian Exposition had provided the occasion for women in general and black women in particular to gain a space for themselves in which they could exert a political presence. However, for black women the preparations for the World's Congress had been a disheartening experience, and the World's Congress itself proved to be a significant moment in the history of the uneasy relations between organized black and white women. Since emancipation black women had been active within the black community in the formation of mutual-aid societies, benevolent associations, local literary societies, and the many organizations of the various black churches, but they had also looked toward the nationally organized suffrage and temperance movements, dominated by white women, to provide an avenue for the expression of their particular concerns as women and as feminists. The struggle of black women to achieve adequate representation within the women's suffrage and temperance movements had been continually undermined by a pernicious and persistent racism, and the World's Congress was no exception. While Harper, Williams, Cooper, Coppin, Early, and Brown were on the women's platform, Ida B. Wells was in the Haitian pavilion protesting the virtual exclusion of Afro-Americans from the exposition, circulating the pamphlet she had edited, *The Reason Why: The Colored American is not in the World's Columbian Exposition.*[5]

The fight for black representation had begun at the presidential level with an attempt to persuade Benjamin Harrison to appoint a black member to the National Board of Commissioners for the exposition. The president's intransigent refusal to act led the black community to focus their hopes on the Board of Lady Managers appointed to be "the channel of communication through which all women may be brought into relation with the exposition, and through which all applications for space for the use of women or their exhibits in the buildings shall be made."[6] Two organizations of black women were formed, the Woman's Columbian Association and the Women's Columbian Auxiliary Association, and both unsuccessfully petitioned the Board of Lady Managers to establish mechanisms of representation for black Americans. Sympathetic sentiments were expressed by a few members of the board, but no appointment was made, and some members of the board threatened to resign rather than work with a black representative. Indeed, the general belief of the board members was that black women were incapable of any organized critique of their committee and that a white woman must be behind such "articulate and sustained protests."[7] The fact that six black women eventually addressed the World's Congress was not the result of a practice of sisterhood or evidence of a concern to provide a black political presence but part of a discourse of exoticism that pervaded the fair. Black Americans were included in a highly selective manner as part of exhibits with other ethnic groups which reinforced conventional racist attitudes of the American imagination. The accommodation of racial diversity in ethnic villages at the fair was an attempt to scientifically legitimate racist assumptions, and, as one historian notes, "the results were devastating not only for American blacks, Native Americans, and the Chinese, but also for other non-white peoples of the world."[8]

The Columbian Exposition was widely regarded as "the greatest fair in history."[9] The "White City," symbol of American progress, was built to house the exposition in Jackson Park on the shores of Lake Michigan in Chicago. It has been characterized by a contemporary cultural critic as simultaneously "a fitting conclusion of an age" and the inauguration of another. "It lays bare a plan for a future. Like the Gilded Age, White City straddles a divide: a consummation and a new beginning."[10] For black Americans it was "literally and figuratively a White City" which symbolized "not the material progress of America, but a moral regression—the reconciliation of the North and South at the expense of Negroes."[11] At the time, black visitors expressed their resentment at their virutal exclusion by renaming the fair "the great American white elephant" and "the white American's World's Fair,"; Frederick Douglass, attending the fair as commissioner from Haiti, called the exposition "a whited sepulcher."[12] The Columbian Exposition embodied the definitive failure of the hopes of emancipation and reconstruction and inaugurated an age that was to be dominated by "the problem of the color-line."[13]

To appear as a black woman on the platform of the Congress of Representative Women was to be placed in a highly contradictory position, at once part of and excluded from the dominant discourse of white women's politics. The contradictions which were experienced by these women and other black women who tried to establish a public presence in the nineteenth century will form the focus of this book. The arguments are theoretical and political, responding to contemporary black and white feminist cultural politics. The historical and literary analyses are materialist, interpreting individual texts in relation to the dominant ideological and social formations in which they were produced. The book has four major concerns.

First, in order to gain a public voice as orators or published writers, black women had to confront the dominant domestic ideologies and literary conventions of womanhood which excluded them from the definition "woman." This book traces these ideologies of womanhood as they were adopted, adapted, and transformed to effectively represent the material conditions of black women, and it explores how black women intellectuals reconstructed the sexual ideologies of the nineteenth century to produce an alternative discourse of black womanhood.

Second, this historical account questions those strands of contemporary feminist historiography and literary criticism which seek to establish the existence of an American sisterhood between black and white women. Considering the history of the failure of any significant political alliances between black and white women in the nineteenth century, I challenge the impulse in the contemporary women's movement to discover a lost sisterhood and to reestablish feminist solidarity. Individual white women helped publish and promote individual black women, but the texts of black women from ex-slave Harriet Jacobs to educator Anna Julia Cooper are testaments to the racist practices of the suffrage and temperance movements and indictments of the ways in which white women allied themselves not with black women but with a racist patriarchal order against all black people. Only by confronting this history of difference can we hope to understand the boundaries that separate white feminists from all women of color.[14]

Third, though Afro-American cultural and literary history commonly regards the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in terms of great men, as the Age of Washington and Du Bois,

marginalizing the political contributions of black women, these were the years of the first flowering of black women's autonomous organizations and a period of intense intellectual activity and productivity. An examination of the literary contributions of Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins and the political writings of Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells will reconstruct our view of this period. Writing in the midst of a new "black women's renaissance," the contemporary discovery and recognition of black women by the corporate world of academia, publishing, and Hollywood—marked by the celebrity of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison—I try to establish the existence of an earlier and perhaps more politically resonant rennaissance so we may rethink the cultural politics of black women.

Fourth, this book is also a literary history of the emergence of black women as novelists. To understand the first novels which were written at the end of the nineteenth century, one has to understand not only the discourse and context in which they were produced but also the intellectual forms and practices of black women that preceded them. I examine narratives of slave and free women, the relation of political lecturing to the politics of fiction, and a variety of essay, journalistic, and magazine writing. Consequently, this book is not a conventional literary history, nor is it limited to drawing on feminist or black feminist literary theories, but it is a cultural history and critique of the forms in which black women intellectuals made political as well as literary interventions in the social formations in which they lived.

During the period in which this book was conceived, researched, and written, two fields of academic inquiry emerged: black feminist literary criticism and black women's history. As a first step toward assessing what has come to be called black feminist theory, I want to consider its history and to analyse its major tendencies.

It is now a decade since Barbara Smith published "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977), addressing the conditions of both politics and literature that she felt could provide the necessary basis for an adequate consideration of black women's literature.[15] Smith argued that since the "feminist movement was an essential precondition to the growth of feminist literature, criticism, and women's studies," the lack of an autonomous black feminist movement contributed to the neglect of black women writers and artists, there being no "political movement to give power or support to those

who want to examine Black women's experience." Hence, without a political movement there was no black feminist political theory to form a basis for a critical approach to the art of black women. Smith argued for the development of both the political movement and the political theory so that a black feminist literary criticism would embody "the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers" (170). To support her argument, Smith indicted a variety of male critics and white feminist critics for their sexist and racist assumptions which prevented the critical recognition of the importance of the work of black women writers.

In many ways, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" acted as a manifesto for black feminist critics, stating both the principles and the conditions of their work. Smith argued that a black feminist approach should have a primary commitment to the exploration of the interrelation of sexual and racial politics and that black and female identities were "inextricable elements in Black women's writings." Smith also asserted that a black feminist critic should "work from the assumption that Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition" (174). Smith was convinced that it was possible to reveal a verifiable literary tradition because of the common experience of the writers and the shared use of a black female language.

> The use of Black women's language and cultural experience in books *by* Black women *about* Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures. The Black feminist critic would find innumerable commonalities in works by Black women. (174)

A second principle that Smith proposed to govern black feminist critical practice was the establishment of precedents and insights in interpretation within the works of other black women. The critic should write and think "out of her own identity," asserted Smith, the implication being that the identity of the critic would be synonymous with that of the author under scrutiny. The identities that most concerned Smith were those of a black feminist and a black lesbian. The principles of interpretation that she employed, she hoped, would combine to produce a new methodology, a criticism that was innovative and constantly self-conscious of the relationship between its own perspective and the political situation of all black women. Black feminist criticism, in Smith's terms was defined as being both dependent on and contributing to a black feminist political movement (175). Convinced of the possibilities for radical change, Smith concluded that it was possible to undertake a "total reassessment of Black literature and literary history needed to reveal the Black woman-identified woman" (182–83).

Smith's essay was an important statement that made visible the intense repression of the black female and lesbian voice. As a critical manifesto it represented a radical departure from the earlier work of Mary Helen Washington, who had edited the first contemporary anthology of black women's fiction, *Black-Eyed Susans*, two years earlier.[16] Washington did not attempt to define, explicitly, a black feminist critical perspective but concentrated on recovering and situating the neglected fiction of black women writers and establishing the major themes and images for use in a teaching situation.[17] However, there are major problems with Smith's essay as a critical manifesto, particularly in its assertion of the existence of an essential black female experience and an exclusive black female language in which this experience is embodied. Smith's essay assumes a very simple one-to-one correspondence between fiction and reality, and her model of a black feminist critical perspective is undermined as a political practice by being dependent on those who are, biologically, black and female. For Smith, her reliance on common experiences confines black feminist criticism to black women critics of black women artists depicting black women. This position can lead to the political cul de sac identified by Alice Walker as a problem of white feminist criticism in her essay "One Child of One's Own."[18] Walker criticized the position taken by Patricia Meyer Spacks, in the introduction to her book *The Female Imagination*, where she justified her concentration on the lives of white middle-class women by reiterating Phyllis Chesler's comment: "I have no theory to offer of Third World female psychology in America. . . . As a white woman, I'm reluctant and unable to construct theories about experiences I haven't had." To which Spacks added. "So am I." Walker challenged Spacks's exclusive concentration on white middle-class writers by asking:

> Why only these? Because they are white, and middle class, and because, to Spacks, female imagination is only that. Perhaps, however, this *is* the

> white female imagination, one that is "reluctant *and unable* to construct theories about experiences I haven't had." (Yet Spacks never lived in nineteeenth-century Yorkshire, so why theorize about the Brontës?)[19]

Walker's point should be seriously considered, for a black feminist criticism cannot afford to be essentialist and ahistorical, reducing the experience of all black women to a common denominator and limiting black feminist critics to an exposition of an equivalent black "female imagination."

In 1982, Smith's manifesto was reprinted in a text which attempted to realize its project.[20] *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, was a text dedicated to the establishment of black women's studies in the academy.

> Merely to use the term "Black women's studies" is an act charged with political significance. At the very least, the combining of these words to name a discipline means taking the stance that Black women exist—and exist positively—a stance that is in direct opposition to most of what passes for culture and thought on the North American continent. To use the term and to act on it in a white-male world is an act of political courage.[21]

To state unequivocally, as the editors do, that black women's studies is a discipline is a culminating act of the strand of black feminist theory committed to autonomy. The four issues that the editors see as being most important in relation to black women's studies acknowledge no allies or alliances:

> (1) the general political situation of Afro-American women and the bearing this has had upon the implementation of Black women's studies; (2) the relationship of Black women's studies to Black feminist politics and the Black feminist movement; (3) the necessity for Black women's studies to be feminist, radical, and analytical; and (4) the need for teachers of Black women's studies to be aware of our problematic political positions in the academy and of the potentially antagonistic conditions under which we must work.[22]

However, in the foreword to the book, Mary Berry, while criticizing women's studies for not focusing on black women, recognized that women's studies exists on the "periphery of academic life, like Black

Studies."[23] Where, then, we can ask, lie black women's studies? On the periphery of the already marginalized, we could assume, a very precarious and dangerous position from which to assert total independence. For, as Berry acknowledged, pioneering work on black women was undertaken by white as well as black women historians, and black women's studies has a crucial contribution to make to the understanding of the oppression of the whole of the black community. Berry, then, implicity understood that work on black women should be engaged with women's studies and Afro-American studies. The editors acknowledged the contributions to the volume made by white female scholars but were unclear about the relation of their work to a black feminism. They constantly engaged, as teachers and writers, with women's studies and Afro-American studies, yet it is unclear how or whether black women's studies should transform either or both of the former.[24] The editors acknowledged with dismay that "much of the current teaching and writing about Black women is not feminist, is not radical, and unfortunately is not always even analytical" and were aggressively aware of the pitfalls of mimicking a male-centered canonical structure of "great black women." In opposition to teaching about exceptional black women, the editors were committed to teaching as an act that furthered liberation in its exploration of "the experience of supposedly 'ordinary' Black women whose 'unexceptional' actions enabled us and the race to survive."[25] *But Some of Us Are Brave* was a collective attempt to produce a book that could be a pedagogical tool in this process.

An alternative approach to black feminist politics is embodied in Deborah McDowell's 1980 essay, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," and in Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*.[26] McDowell, like Smith, showed that white female critics continued to perpetrate against black women the exclusive practices they condemned in white male scholarship by establishing the experience of white middle-class women as normative within the feminist arena. She also attacked male critics for the way in which their masculine-centered values dominated their criticism of the work of black women writers (186–87). However, the main concern of McDowell's essay was to look back at "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" in order to assess the development of black feminist scholarship.

While acknowledging the lack of a concrete definition for or substantial body of black feminist criticism, McDowell argued that "the theories developed thus far have often lacked sophistication and have been marred by slogans, rhetoric, and idealism" (188). Two very important critiques of Smith's position were made by McDowell. She questioned the existence of a monolithic black female language (189) and problematized what she saw to be Smith's oversimplification and obscuring of the issue of lesbianism. McDowell called for a firmer definition of what constituted lesbianism and lesbian literature and questioned "whether a lesbian aesthetic is not finally a reductive approach to the study of Black women's literature" (190).

Moreover, unlike Smith's asserting the close and necessary links between a black feminist political framework and a black feminist criticism, McDowell was concerned to warn feminist critics of "the dangers of political ideology yoked with aesthetic judgment" and worried that Smith's "innovative analysis is pressed to the service of an individual political persuasion" (190). McDowell made more complex the relationship between fiction and criticism on the one hand and the possibilities of social change in the lives of the masses of black women on the other and also doubted the feasibility of a productive relationship between the academy and political activism.

McDowell's project was to establish the parameters for a clearer definition of black feminist criticism. Like Smith, McDowell applied the term to "Black female critics who analyze the works of Black female writers from a feminist or political perspective" but also departed from Smith's definitions when she extended her argument to state that

> the term can also apply to any criticism written by a Black woman regardless of her subject or perspective—a book written by a male from a feminist or political perspective, a book written by a Black woman or about Black women authors in general, or any writings by women. (191)

Thus, McDowell identified the need for a specific methodology while at the same time producing a very mystifying definition of her own. The semantic confusion of the statement gives cause to wonder at the possibiltiy that an antifeminist celebration of a racist tract

could be called black feminist as long as it was written by a black woman! Surely black feminist theory is emptied of its feminist content if the perspective of the critic doesn't matter.

Nevertheless, McDowell posed very pertinent questions that have yet to be adequately answered regarding the extent to which black and white feminist critics have intersecting interests and the necessity for being able to discern culturally specific analytic strategies that may distinguish black from white feminist criticism. McDowell also argued for a contextual awareness of the conditions under which black women's literature was produced, published, and reviewed, accompanied by a rigorous textual analysis which revealed any stylistic and linguistic commonalities across the texts of black women. She regarded the parameters of a tradition as an issue to be argued and established, not assumed, and warned against an easy reliance on generalities, especially in relation to the existence of a black female "consciousness" or "vision" (196). Like Washington, McDowell stressed that the "immediate concern of Black feminist critics must be to develop a fuller understanding of Black women writers" but did not support a "separatist position" as a long-term strategy and argued for an exploration of parallels between the texts of black women and those of black men. However, McDowell did not include the possibility of a black feminist reading of literature written by either white male or female authors, and while she called for black feminist criticism to ultimately "expand to embrace other modes of critical inquiry," these modes remain unspecified. In an attack against "critical absolutism," McDowell concluded by making an analogy between Marxism as dogma and black feminist criticism as a separatist enterprise, an anaolgy which did not clarify her political or theoretical position and confused her appeal for a "sound, thorough articulation of the Black feminist aesthetic" (196–97).

As opposed to the collective act of *But Some of Us Are Brave*, Christian has collected together her own essays written between 1975 and 1984. The introduction, "Black Feminist Process: In the Midst of . . . ," reflects the structure of the collection as a whole as the essays cover the period of the development of contemporary black feminist criticism. However, the book does not exemplify the history of the development of contemporary black feminist criticism but rather concentrates on situating the contributions of an

individual critic over the period of a decade. Christian's work has been concerned with establishing a literary history of black women's writing and has depended very heavily on the conceptual apparatus of stereotypes and images.[27] However, it is necessary to confront Christian's assertions that the prime motivation for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black writers was to confront the negative images of blacks held by whites and to dispute the simplistic model of the literary development of black women writers indicated by such titles as "From Stereotype to Character."[28] Christian's work represents a significant strand of black feminist criticism that has concentrated on the explication of stereotypes at the expense of engaging in the theoretical and historical questions raised by the construction of a tradition of black women writing. Indeed, in the introduction to *Black Feminist Criticism*, Christian herself raises some of the questions that are left unanswered in the body of her work so far but which are crucial to understanding or defining a black feminist critical practice:

> What is a literary critic, a black woman critic, a black feminist literary critic, a black feminist social literary critic? The adjectives mount up, defining, qualifying, the activity. How does one distinguish them? The need to articulate a theory, to categorize the activities is a good part of the activity itself to the point where I wonder how we ever get around to doing anything else. What do these categories tell anyone about my method? Do I do formalist criticism, operative or expressive criticism, mimetic or structuralist criticism? . . . Can one theorize effectively about an evolving process? Are the labels informative or primarily a way of nipping questions in the bud? What are the philosophical questions behind my praxis? (x–xi)

Christian, unlike many feminist critics, divorces what she considers to be sound critical practice from political practice when she states that what irks her about "much literary criticism today" is that "so often the text is but an occasion for espousing [the critic's] philosophical point of view—revolutionary black, feminist, or socialist program."[29] Thus, ten years after the term *black feminist criticism* was coined, it is used as the title of a book as if a readership would recognize and identify its parameters; yet, in the very attempt to define itself, even in the work of one individual critic, the contradictory impulses of black feminist criticism are clear. In a review of Christian's book, Hortense Spillers points to the ideological nature of the apparent separation between the critical project and its political dimensions:

> The critical projects that relate to the African-American community point to a crucial aspect of the entire theme of liberation. The same might be said for the career of feminist inquiry and its impact on the community: in other words, the various critical projects that intersect with African-American life and thought in the United States complement the actualities of an objective and historic situation, even if, in the name of the dominant ruling discourses, and in the interests of the ruling cultural and political apparatus, the convergence between intellectual and political life remains masked.[30]

What I want to advocate is that black feminist criticism be regarded critically as a problem, not a solution, as a sign that should be interrogated, a locus of contradictions. Black feminist criticism has its source and its primary motivation in academic legitimation, placement within a framework of bourgeois humanistic discourse. But, as Cornel West has argued in a wider context, the dilemma of black intellectuals seeking legitimation through the academy is that

> it is existentially and intellectually stultifying for black intellectuals. It is existentially debilitating because it not only generates anxieties of defensiveness on the part of black intellectuals; it also thrives on them. The need for hierarchical ranking and the deep-seated racism shot through bourgeois humanistic scholarship cannot provide black intellectuals with either the proper ethos or conceptual framework to overcome a defensive posture. And charges of intellectual inferiority can never be met upon the opponent's terrain—to try to do so only intensifies one's anxieties. Rather the terrain itself must be viewed as part and parcel of an antiquated form of life unworthy of setting the terms of contemporary discourse.[31]

This critique is applicable for a number of reasons. Black feminist criticism for the main part accepts the prevailing paradigms predominant in the academy, as has women's studies and Afro-Ameri-

can studies, and seeks to organize itself as a discipline in the same way. Also, it is overwhelmingly defensive in its posture, attempting to discover, prove, and legitimate the intellectual worthiness of black women so that they may claim their rightful placement as both subjects and creators of the curriculum.

Black feminist theory continues to be shaped by the tensions apparent in feminist theory in general that have been characterized by Elaine Showalter as three phases of development. To paraphrase and adapt her model, these would be (1) the concentration on the mysogyny (and racism) of literary practice; (2) the discovery that (black) women writers had a literature of their own (previously hidden by patriarchal [and racist] values) and the development of a (black) female aesthetic; and (3) a challenge to and rethinking of the conceptual grounds of literary study and an increased concern with theory.[32] Though it is not possible to argue that these different approaches appear chronologically over the last ten years in black feminist work, it is important to recognize that in addition to the specific concerns of black feminist theory it shares a structural and conceptual pattern of questions and issues with other modes of feminist inquiry.

Black feminist criticism has too frequently been reduced to an experiential relationship that exists between black women as critics and black women as writers who represent black women's reality. Theoretically this reliance on a common, or shared, experience is essentialist and ahistorical. Following the methodologies of mainstream literary criticism and feminist literary criticism, black feminist criticism presupposes the existence of a tradition and has concentrated on establishing a narrative of that tradition. This narrative constitutes a canon from these essentialist views of experience which is then placed alongside, though unrelated to, traditional and feminist canons. This book does not assume the existence of a tradition or traditions of black women writing and, indeed, is critical of traditions of Afro-American intellectual thought that have been constructed as paradigmatic of Afro-American history.

One other essentialist aspect of black feminist criticism should be considered: the search for or assumption of the existence of a black female language. The theoretical perspective of the book is that no language or experience is divorced from the shared context in

which different groups that share a language express their differing group interests. Language is accented differently by competing groups, and therefore the terrain of language is a terrain of power relations.[33] This struggle within and over language reveals the nature of the structure of social relations and the hierarchy of power, not the nature of one particular group. The sign, then, is an arena of struggle and a construct between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction; the forms that signs take are conditioned by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interactions. Hence, this book will argue that we must be historically specific and aware of the differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community. In these terms, black and feminist cannot be absolute, transhistorical forms (or form) of identity.

Reconstructing Womanhood embodies a feminist critical practice that pays particular attention to the articulation of gender, race, and class.[34] Social, political, and economic analyses that use class as a fundamental category often assert the necessity for white and black to sink their differences and unite in a common and general class struggle. The call for class solidarity is paralleled within contemporary feminist practice by the concept of sisterhood. This appeal to sisterhood has two political consequences that should be questioned. First, in order to establish the common grounds for a unified women's movement, material differences in the lives of working-class and middle-class women or white and black women have been dismissed. The search to establish that these bonds of siterhood have always existed has led to a feminist historiography and criticism which denies the hierarchical structuring of the relations between black and white women and often takes the concerns of middle-class, articulate white women as a norm.

This book works within the theoretical premises of societies "structured in dominance" by class, by race, and by gender and is a materialist account of the cultural production of black women intellectuals within the social relations that inscribed them.[35] It delineates the sexual ideologies that defined the ways in which white and black women "lived" their relation to their material conditions of existence. Ideologies of white womanhood were the sites of racial and class struggle which enabled white women to negotiate their subordinate role in relation to patriarchy and at the

same time to ally their class interests with men and against establishing an alliance with black women. We need more feminist work that interrogates sexual ideologies for their racial specificity and acknowledges whiteness, not just blackness, as a racial categorization. Work that uses race as a central category does not necessarily need to be about black women.

An emphasis on the importance of establishing historically specific forms of racism should also apply to gender oppression. It is not enough to use the feminist theoretical back door to assert that because racism and sexism predate capitalism there is no further need to specify their particular articulation with economic systems of oppression. On the contrary, racisms and sexisms need to be regarded as particular historical practices articulated with each other and with other practices in a social formation. For example, the institutionalized rape of black women as slaves needs to be distinguished from the institutionalized rape of black women as an instrument of political terror, alongside lynching, in the South. Rape itself should not be regarded as a transhistorical mechanism of women's oppression but as one that acquires specific political or economic meanings at different moments in history.

For feminist historiography and critical practice the inclusion of the analytic categories of race and class means having to acknowledge that women were not only the subjects but also the perpetrators of oppression. The hegemonic control of dominant classes has been secured at the expense of sisterhood. Hegemony is never finally and utterly won but needs to be continually worked on and reconstructed, and sexual and racial ideologies are crucial mechanisms in the maintenance of power. For women this has meant that many of their representative organizations have been disabled by strategies and struggles which have been race-specific, leading to racially divided movements like the temperance and suffrage campaigns. No history should blandly label these organizations "women's movements," for we have to understand the importance of the different issues around which white and black women organized and how this related to their differing material circumstances. A revision of contemporary feminist historiography should investigate the different ways in which racist ideologies have been constructed and made operative under different historical conditions. But, like sexual ideologies, racism, in its appeal to the natural order

of things, appears as a transhistorical, essentialist category, and critiques of racism can imitate this appearance.

This book is a contribution to such a revision, a revision that examines the boundaries of sisterhood, for the contradictions faced by the black women intellectuals at the Columbian Exposition continue to haunt the contemporary women's movement.

She challenged her audience to bear witness to her testimony that all black peoples faced an international crisis:

> The dawn of the Twentieth century finds the Black race fighting for existence in every quarter of the globe. From over the sea Africa stretches her hands to the American Negro and cries aloud for sympathy in her hour of trial. England, at this late day, begins to doubt the wisdom of her course in acknowledging the equality of the Negro race. In America, caste prejudice has received fresh impetus as the "Southern brother" of the Anglo-Saxon family has arisen from the ashes of secession, and like the prodigal of old, has been gorged with fatted calf and "fixin's."[22]

Within the context of the *Colored American Magazine*, Hopkins utilized her various capacities as journalist, editor, and author of fiction to validate black figures in history. The political trajectory of the history that she re-created and re-presented developed from an assertion of the presence of Afro-Americans within an Anglo-Saxon context, in *Contending Forces*, toward the classical reinterpretation of their own heritage in Africa.

The establishment of an African genealogy was the climax to Hopkins's consistent concern with questions of inheritance and heritage. Her definition of history was "an account of the deeds of men who have been the models and patterns for the great mass of humanity in past centuries even from the beginning of the world." Hopkins hoped that her writing could be such a model, a pattern to inspire political resistance and agitation against the threat of annihilation. Hopkins called for "a wild courage" and a "stoicism of the blood"; she was a black intellectual who considered her writing as part of, not separate from, the politics of oppression. "As a race," she stated, "we need the stimulus of books and tales of this 'cathartic virtue' more than any other literature we can mention."[23] For Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, her fiction was a cathartic response to the pessimistic vision of the limited possibilities of black existence on the western shores of the Atlantic.

8

The Quicksands of Representation

Rethinking Black Cultural Politics

The term *renaissance* in Afro-American cultural history has been almost exclusively applied to the literary and artistic production of intellectuals in Harlem in the years between the end of World War I and the depression.[1] But definitions of the Harlem renaissance are notoriously elusive; descriptions of it as a moment of intense literary and artistic production, or as an intellectual awakening, or as the period of the self-proclaimed "New Negro" are concepts that are not applicable only to Harlem or to the twenties.[2] This particular cultural moment has come to dominate Afro-American cultural history and overshadow earlier attempts of black intellectuals to assert their collective presence. However, the more assertive we try to be as cultural critics and cultural historians about what the Harlem renaissance was, what it was not, and when it occurred, the less sure we become about what made this moment of Afro-American cultural history unique. The staff of the *Colored American Magazine* considered their journal to be a tool in the creation of a black renaissance, an inspiration for "Theologians, Artists [and] Scientists" whose theories had grown dormant for lack of a channel of communication,[3] but no comparative cultural study has been undertaken to reveal the relationship between the intellectual activity of Boston at the turn of the century and Harlem in the twenties. Indeed, the Harlem renaissance is frequently conceived as a unique, intellectually cohesive and homogeneous historical moment, a mythology which has disguised the contradictory impulses of the Harlem intellectuals. I do not intend to argue the case that the Harlem

renaissance is purely an invention of the literary and cultural historian, although to a large extent this is the case; rather, I want to indicate the shift in concerns of the intellectuals of the twenties as opposed to the previous two decades by stressing the discontinuities and contradictions surrounding issues of representation.

I use the word *representation* in two distinct but related ways: as it is formally understood in relation to art and creative practices, and as it applies to intellectuals who understand themselves to be responsible for the representation of "the race," defining and constructing in their art its representative members and situating themselves as representative members of an oppressed social group. The relation of the black intellectual elite to the majority of black people changed drastically as a result of the migration north of Southern blacks. Before World War I, the overwhelming majority of blacks were in the South, at a vast physical and metaphorical distance from those intellectuals who represented the interests of the race. After the war, black intellectuals had to confront the black masses on the streets of their cities and responded in a variety of ways.

At the turn of the century in Boston, Pauline Hopkins and the staff of the *Colored American Magazine* assumed that their relation to the majority of black people was entirely unproblematic and unmediated. The *Colored American Magazine* unashamedly asserted that it could speak for and represent the unique historical experience of "the black people" and addressed them in these all-encompassing terms. These intellectuals did not doubt or question their position of leadership as members of the "Talented Tenth" speaking from the North to the majority of blacks who lived outside it. But after World War I, the large-scale movement of black people into the cities of the North meant that intellectual leadership and its constituencies fragmented. No longer was it possible to mobilize an undifferentiated address to "the black people" once an urban black working class was established.

This movement of masses of rural black Southern workers destined to become an urban proletariat was not immediately represented in fiction, but there was a distinct shift in who was represented as "the people." One possibility, in fiction, was that "the people" were represented as a metaphorical "folk," which in its rural connotations avoided and ignored the implication of the presence of black city workers. Zora Neale Hurston, for example,

who felt concerned that whites just did not know who blacks were, chose to reconstruct figures of "the folk" in her novels. Most literary criticism acknowledges this representation of the folk as "the people" but does not question the historical significance of Hurston's choice. On the contrary, the representation of "the folk" is usually regarded as an ahistorical literary convention that is a natural expression of the Afro-American experience.[4] But we need to recognize that the "folk" was neither an inevitable nor a natural selection. Many intellectuals, including Jessie Fauset, registered the gap between the immediate and disconcerting presence of the black masses and being a member of a black elite by representing this difference in class terms.

The concept of the "New Negro" of the Harlem renaissance has become a conventional way of referring to these literary and artistic intellectuals, but this limited contemporary application of the term has emptied it of the radical working-class meaning that was established by the group of intellectuals, leaders, organizations, and journals which were devoted to "economic radicalism." For radical intellectuals like Asa Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, editors of the *Messenger*, the "New Negro" was "the product of the same world-wide forces that have brought into being the great liberal and radical movements that are now seizing the reins of political, economic and social power in all the civilized countries of the world."[5] The editorial continued to assert that the "'New' Negro 'unlike the old Negro' was not to be 'lulled into a false sense of security with political spoils and patronage.'"[6]

This issue of patronage provides another point of contrast between the literary intellectuals of the twenties and their predecessors in Boston. The young black artists in the Harlem of the twenties were acutely aware of a high degree of reliance on the patronage of white individuals and organizations.[7] But the staff of the *Colored American Magazine*, like the economic radicals of the twenties, made specific attempts to avoid such a situation of dependency. As they stated after the first year in print, "there has been no attempt to seek the aid of philanthropists, although we feel that there have been many less deserving projects which have been lavishly supported in that way."[8] The issue of the acceptability of patronage and its role in defining and limiting what could be represented was of intense concern to the intellectuals of both

cultural moments. But what differentiated most clearly the crisis of representation of the twenties from the intellectual assurance of the turn of the century was the relation of the intellectual to "the people."

In 1900, Pauline Hopkins and the staff of the *Colored American Magazine* assumed a hegemonic position as representatives of black people, calling themselves "the mouth-piece and inspiration of the Negro race throughout not only this country, but the world."[9] After World War I and the migration, the role of intellectuals became problematic in two ways: there was no longer a unitary "people" who could be represented, and the variety of intellectual practice—literary, political, and cultural—became increasingly separated. The Colored Co-operative Publishing Company was a collective attempt to hold together the practices of literature, art, and political agitation for social change. But, by the twenties, black writers sought artistic autonomy for their cultural practices and products and separated themselves from the task of writing for the uplifting of the race as a whole. From the point of view of the urban black worker in the twenties, he or she could look toward a range of other representatives which included black union organizations, economic radicals, or Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association.

Within this increasingly fragmented discourse of "the people" and intellectual leadership, I want to situate an analysis of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, published in 1928.[10] Traditional Afro-American literary and cultural criticism has failed to adequately consider the significance of the work of Larsen and Jessie Fauset.[11] Both writers have at times been dismissed as minor figures, mere background to a major event, the Harlem renaissance. In contrast, Zora Neale Hurston has been seen as a distinct literary figure.[12] Hurston, as I have indicated, epitomized the intellectual who represented "the people" through a reconstruction of "the folk" and avoided the class confrontation of the Northern cities. Fauset and Larsen, however, wrote more directly out of this urban confrontation, though each developed strategies of fictional representation that indicated their very different responses to their class, racial, and sexual position as black female intellectuals.

Fauset responded to an emerging black urban working class by a mediation of her authorial position as a class perspective. She represented in her fiction a middle-class code of morality and behavior that structured the existence of her characters and worked as a code of appropriate social behavior for her readers.[13] Fauset's intellectual contribution was the development of an ideology for an emerging black middle class which would establish it as being acceptably urbane and civilized and which would distinguish it from the rural influx.[14] Unlike earlier women novelists, Fauset did not consider the aftermath of slavery and the failure of Reconstruction as a sufficient source of echoes and foreshadowings for her representation of the emergent black middle class who needed a new relation to history. Fauset represented this new history through a generational difference, a difference figured as a recognition of the need for the protagonists to revise the irrelevant history of their parents, a history tied to the consequences of slavery.

Deborah McDowell, in her introduction to the new edition of Fauset's *Plum Bun*, pleads for a sympathetic consideration for the progressive aspects of Fauset's novels, especially in relation to her implicit critique of the structures of women's romance.[15] However, I would argue that ultimately the conservatism of Fauset's ideology dominates her texts. In *The Chinaberry Tree*, for example, which focused on two women, the movement of the text is away from the figures of isolated unmarried mothers and daughters supporting themselves through their own labor, toward the articulation of a new morality and community in which black women were lifted from the abyss of scandal and gossip, which threatened to overwhelm them, by professional black men who reinserted them into a newly formed and respectable community as dependent wives. The individual and collective pasts of the female characters led them to flounder in the waters of misdirected desires; their history was anarchic and self-destructive. The future, within which the women could survive, was secured when they were grounded, protected, and wrapped around by decent men. In order to represent a new, emergent social group, Fauset by necessity had to sever ties with the past; the characteristics of the new class were those of individual success and triumph over ties to and previous interpretations of history. To signal the depth of this new fictional strategy, consider Pauline Hopkins's use of history to raise questions of inheritance and heritage that were crucial to her political perception. Who Hopkins's characters were and what they were to become was to be

understood in relation to their ancestors. The quality of these ancestors and the nature of their past actions had specific ramifications for the present: the consequences of history were Hopkins's fictional future. In stark contrast, in *The Chinaberry Tree*, Fauset constructed a chaotic and irrelevant history to which the heroes, not the heroines, brought a new order and meaning. The new middle class both emerged from and changed previous history and its interpretations; the forces of previous history alone could not provide a basis for its future. Fauset adapted but did not transcend the form of the romance. It is important that her work did reveal many of the contradictory aspects of romantic conventions of womanhood, but her imaginary resolutions to what were social contradictions confirmed that women ultimately had to be saved from the consequences of their independence and become wives.

In stark contrast, Nella Larsen in *Quicksand* refused the resolutions offered by this developing code of black middle-class morality at the same time as she launched a severe critique against the earlier but still influential ideology of racial uplift. The *Quicksand* of 1928 did not just explore the contradictory terrain of women and romance; its sexual politics tore apart the very fabric of the romance form.

At the beginning of the novel, Helga Crane, the protagonist, was a teacher at Naxos, a black school in the South which appeared to be a combination of Atlanta, Fisk, and Tuskegee. Dissatisfied with what she saw to be a process of repression, the stunting of intellectual growth and creativity, Helga resigned her job in a stormy interview with the new president, a Dr. Anderson. She returned to Chicago, where she had grown up, but was unable to find a job and eventually traveled to Harlem as secretary to a famous "spokeswoman for the race." In Harlem, she lived with a woman called Anne Grey, worked in a black insurance company, and was an observor of the renaissance. Helga was disdainful of the ideology of racial uplift, critical of Anne's continual preoccupation with the problems of the race, and disparaging of the hypocrisy of the emerging black middle class. This class, she felt, condemned white racism while imitating white middle-class behavior and adopting their values and moral codes. Feeling that she was again being stifled, Helga determined to leave Harlem and used a legacy from a white uncle to visit her Danish aunt in Copenhagen. Helga lived in

Europe for two years, where the appreciation she had so desired was lavished on her. However, though pampered, Helga realized that she was being treated like an exotic object, admired only as a representative of the primitive and sensual. Experiencing a desperate need to be again among black people, she sailed to Harlem for the wedding of Anne and Dr. Anderson, intending to make only a temporary visit but staying long after the wedding. Helga recognized a long-repressed sexual attraction for Anderson, and in response to his encouragement determined to finally acknowledge her sexuality and sleep with him. Anderson's awkward rebuff shattered Helga's new acceptance of her sexual self, and when she accidentally met a hedonistic Southern preacher in a storefront church, she slept with him. She returned to the South as the wife of Rev. Mr. Pleasant Green, blind to all except the sensual aspect of their relationship. Helga planned to uplift the women and instruct the children of this community of Southern folk, but instead repeated childbirth degraded and oppressed her. She nearly died giving birth to her fourth child, and the novel ends with her fifth pregnancy which means her certain death.

In *Quicksand*, Larsen embodied the major aspects of what I have referred to as the crisis of representation of the period. She was unable to romanticize "the people" as the folk or to accept the world view of the new black middle class. Helga explored the contradictions of her racial, sexual, and class position by being both inside and outside these perspectives. Larsen was able to represent such duality by making her protagonist an alienated heroine. She was, at various points in the text, alienated from her sex, her race, and her class. Alienation is often represented as a state of consciousness, a frame of mind. Implied in this definition is the assumption that alienation can be eliminated or replaced by another state of consciousness, a purely individual transformation unrelated to necessary social or historical change. Helga does question the possibility that her recurrent dissatisfaction with her life could be due to her state of mind and that if she could change her attitudes she could be happy. But against this Larsen placed an alternative reading of Helga's progress, that her alienation was not just in her head but was produced by existing forms of social relations and therefore subject to elimination only by a change in those social relations. That Larsen incorporated this alternative

definition of alienation in her text has political significance, for the representation of alienation as a state of mind reduces history to an act of thought and leads to a political conservatism. If people cannot change their conditions, only how they feel about them, they can only legitimize and approve the status quo, and social criticism becomes irrelevant.

Larsen in *Quicksand*, however, represented the full complexity of the modern alienated individual. *Quicksand* is the first text by a black woman to be a conscious narrative of a woman embedded within capitalist social relations. In the opening pages, Helga was represented as an isolated figure but a consumer, a character initially defined through the objects that surround her. Though Helga was a teacher and Larsen described a school, she utilized the language of the factory and the ideology of Taylorism in her creation of Naxos. Alienated from her work, she experienced no emotional or intellectual sustenance from her teaching. Like a small, insignificant part in a big machine, Helga made no difference and felt that an essential part of her and the students' humanity was denied in favor of the production of uniformity:

> [Naxos] had grown into a machine. It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's inefficiency. Life had died out of it. It was . . . only a big knife . . . cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern. Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process, for it tolerated no innovations, no individualisms. (9)

Students were described as products, automatons who goose-stepped in massed phalanxes (28). Consciously created as subject to an industrial time and discipline, the dullness of the outward appearance of everyone at Naxos was represented as being symbolic of the acceptance of their oppressed social condition. Within this order, Helga was an expression of powerlessness, the alienated individual who could not change her social condition and felt only a sense of individual failure.

The critique of Naxos as a black college was a critique of the policy of racial uplift and of black intellectual leadership. As a product of Fisk herself, Larsen was directing a bitter attack toward black educators as race representatives. She detached her protagonist from their narrow-minded adherence to the dictates of white Southern expectations of Negro passivity and separated her from their class perspective. Helga had neither a community nor a network of black kinship. She had no black family and thus lacked the connections which Larsen condemned for being so important to black middle-class society, a society that Larsen represented as being as exclusive as its white counterpart. This critique of the black middle class was continued in the section of the novel set in Harlem. In direct contrast to Fauset, Larsen did not feel that the middle class were the guardians of civilized behavior and moral values. Harlem intellectuals were criticized for two major acts of hypocrisy: their announced hatred of white people and deprecation of any contact with white society while imitating their clothes, manners, and ways of life, and the proclamation of the undiluted good of all things Negro which disguised a disdain, contempt, and amusement for the actual culture and behavior of the majority of black people. Larsen used Helga, who was both black intellectual and member of the middle class but stood outside both, as a figure who could question the limits of middle-class intellectual pretension.

Larsen augmented this questioning of the representative nature of a black elite and accentuated Helga's social displacement by her particular use of the figure of the mulatto. The mulatto, as I have already described, is most usefully regarded as a convention of Afro-American literature which enabled the exploration in fiction of relations which were socially proscribed.[16] The mulatto figure is a narrative device of mediation; it allows for a fictional exploration of the relationship between the races while being at the same time an imaginary expression of the relationship between the races. One mode of representing this social tension is the "passing" novel, in which the protagonist pretends to be white, exemplified by Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Larsen's second novel, *Passing*.[17] But in *Quicksand* this option was refused. Larsen's particular use of the mulatto figure allowed her protagonist to be both inside and outside contemporary race issues. Helga was simultaneously critical of what she regarded as an all-pervasive concern with race problems and subject to racism. The section of the novel set in Copenhagen confronted directly the question of the representation of blacks by whites. Helga's portrait was painted by a leading Danish artist, who

created an animalistic, sensuous creature on his canvas. Larsen displaced to Europe an issue of central concern to the intellectuals of the Harlem renaissance: white fascination with the "exotic" and the "primitive." Outside the black community, Helga became a mere object for white consumption.

Social relations which objectified the body permeate the text. Helga herself was represented as a consumer, a woman who defined a self through the acquisition of commercial products, consumer goods, and commodities. As a woman, she is at the center of a complex process of exchange. Money was crucial to Larsen's narrative, structuring power relations, controlling social movement, and defining the boundaries of Helga's environment. Money replaces kinship as the prime mediator of social relations: Helga's white uncle sent her money as he could not afford to acknowledge her relationship to him. This money allowed her social movement; she bought her way out of a Jim Crow car and eventually out of Harlem. In Chicago, Helga spent money, buying and consuming rather than facing her desperate conditions. While the possession of money disguised her real social predicament, the lack of money forced degradation and the recognition that in the job market her social position as a black woman was narrowly defined as domestic worker.

Although money permitted Helga's movement within the text, the direction of her journey reproduces the tensions of migration into a structure of oppositions between country and city. Helga's first movement in the text is from South to North, from the rural outskirts of Atlanta to industrial Chicago. Immediately upon arrival in Chicago, Helga became one of a crowd. Her initial identification was with the anonymity of the city, where she had the appearance of freedom but no actual home or friends. This anonymity brought brief satisfaction and contentment, while Helga could maintain her position as consumer, but she discovered her vulnerability as an object of exchange when her money ran out. Larsen represented the city as a conglomeration of strangers, where social relations were structured through the consumption of both objects and people. The imagery of commerce and this process of exchange dominated the text as it moved to New York and Copenhagen. This polarity between rural and urban experience frames the text; in the closing pages, all cities are finally abandoned and Helga is metaphorically and, the reader is led to assume, literally buried in the rural South.

Helga was a consumer, but as a woman she was also potentially a consumable object. Larsen's representation of sexual politics delineated the dilemma of the woman's body as a commercialized object. Helga's sexuality was not only objectified in relation to art, but when she failed to get a job as a maid in Chicago she had offers of money for sexual services. Helga, as an unmarried woman, was brought to a recognition of her exchange value which denied her humanity while cementing her fragile dependence on money. Larsen represented the ideologies of consumerism, of capitalism, and of sexuality as being intimately connected, and in the process of this critique she revealed the inability of the structure of the romance to adequately express the experience of women while she also posed a challenge to the readers' expectations of the form of the novel.

Larsen stressed the contradictory nature of the search for a female self by refusing the romance and structuring the relation of the individual to the social formation through the interconnection of sexual, racial, and class identity. The conclusion of the text offered no imaginary resolutions to the contradictions Larsen raised. As readers, we are left meditating on the problematic nature of alternative possibilities of a social self. Consider the metaphor of quicksand; it is a condition where individual struggle and isolated effort are doomed to failure. Helga's search led to the burial, not the discovery, of the self. The only way out of quicksand is with external help; isolated individual struggle ensured only that she would sink deeper into the quagmire. The question that remains is, to what social group does Helga attach herself in order to be saved? Unlike Fauset, whom I have described as an ideologue for an emergent middle class, Larsen found it impossible to portray the experience of the black middle class as representative of the race. The black bourgeoisie was attacked on many levels: for its hypocrisy, for its articulation of the race "problem," and for its moral and aesthetic code.

But Larsen did not consider the crisis of representation facing Harlem intellectuals only in terms of class. Her particular use of the figure of the mulatto allowed Larsen to negotiate issues of race as they were articulated by both white and black. However, Larsen's

representation of both race and class are structured through a prism of black female sexuality. Larsen recognized that the repression of the sensual in Afro-American fiction in response to the long history of the exploitation of black sexuality led to the repression of passion and the repression or denial of female sexuality and desire. But, of course, the representation of black female sexuality meant risking its definition as primitive and exotic within a racist society. Larsen attempted to embody but could not hope to resolve these contradictions in her representation of Helga as a sexual being, making Helga the first truly sexual black female protagonist in Afro-American fiction. Racist sexual ideologies proclaimed the black woman to be a rampant sexual being, and in response black women writers either focused on defending their morality or displaced sexuality onto another terrain. Larsen confronted this denial directly in her fiction. Helga consistently attempted to deny her sensuality and repress her sexual desires, and the result is tragedy. Each of the crises of the text centered on sexual desire until the conclusion of the novel, where control over her body was denied Helga and her sexuality was reduced to its biological capacity to bear children. Helga's four children represented her entrapment as she was unable to desert them; her fifth child represented her certain death.

Larsen offered her readers few avenues of resolution. Liberation through money that allowed Helga to explore Europe—the "Old World," white "civilization"—as an alternative to the United States was rejected as a viable alternative. The figure of the mulatto allowed Larsen's protagonist to ask why her future should be yoked to a despised social group, but living in a white world was no alternative. Readers are left with the unresolvable. Harlem was simultaneously represented as a black city which appeared to allow for the unfettered possibilities of black cultural expression and as a cage or ghetto. The novel closes with a representation of "the folk," but they were not represented as a positive alternative to the black urban elite. The rural community was bound together through its allegiance to the black preacher, Helga's husband, who appeared as an Old Testament patriarch. Unlike Hurston's folk, who were represented as embodying in their culture and language the unique "truth" of the Afro-American experience, Larsen's representation of the folk was as the deluded. Their religion, the core of their

existence, was the great illusion which robbed them of the crudest truths. In a passage of bitter denunciation, Helga concluded that religion

> ailed the whole Negro race in America, this fatuous belief in the white man's God, this childlike trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in "kingdom come." . . . [It] bound them to slavery, then to poverty and insult, and made them bear it unresistingly, uncomplainingly almost, by sweet promises of mansions in the sky by and by. (297)

In the country, among the folk, Helga felt only suffocation and a great loathing. It was the moment of her greatest oppression and degradation. Chained to her children, she was engulfed by the quicksand while she dreamed of "freedom and cities."

It is important that Larsen returned her readership to the urban landscape and refused a romantic evocation of the folk, for in this movement she stands as a precursor not only to Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison but to a neglected strand of Afro-American women's fiction. In the search for a tradition of black women writers of fiction, a pattern has been established from Alice Walker back through Zora Neale Hurston which represents the rural folk as bearers of Afro-American history and preservers of Afro-American culture. This construction of a tradition of black women writing has effectively marginalized the fictional urban confrontation of race, class, and sexuality that was to follow *Quicksand*: Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946); Dorothy West's *The Living Is Easy* (1948); Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1951); and the work of Toni Morrison.[18] Afro-American cultural and literary history should not create and glorify a limited vision, a vision which in its romantic evocation of the rural and the folk avoids some of the most crucial and urgent issues of cultural struggle—a struggle that Larsen, Petry, West, Brooks, and Morrison recognized would have to be faced in the cities, the home of the black working class.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Frances Harper, "Woman's Political Future," in May Wright Sewell, ed., *World's Congress of Representative Women* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1894), pp. 433–37.

2. Fannie Barrier Williams, "The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women of the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation," in Sewell, *World's Congress*, pp. 696–711.

3. Anna Julia Cooper, "The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women of the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation," in Sewell, *World's Congress*, pp. 711–15.

4. Fannie Jackson Coppin, and Sarah J. Early and Hallie Quinn Brown, "The Organized Efforts of the Colored Women of the South to Improve Their Condition," in Sewell, *World's Congress*, pp. 715–17, 718–29.

5. Ida B. Wells, ed., *The Reason Why: The Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: by the author, 1893).

6. Report of Mrs. Potter Palmer, President, to the Board of Lady Managers, September 2, 1891 (Chicago), cited in Ann Massa, "Black Women in the 'White City,'" *Journal of American Studies* 8 (December 1974): 320.

7. Ibid., p. 329.

8. Robert W. Rydell, "The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893: Racist Underpinnings of a Utopian Artifact," *Journal of American Culture* 1 (Summer 1978): 253–75.

9. David F. Burg, *Chicago's White City of 1893* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1976), p. 75.

10. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 209.

11. F. L. Barnett, "The Reason Why," in Wells, *The Reason Why*, p. 79; Elliot M. Rudwick and August Meier, "Black Man in the 'White

City': Negroes and the Columbian Exposition, 1893," *Phylon* 26 (Winter 1965): 361.

12. Rudwick and Meier, "Black Man in the 'White City,'" p. 354; Frederick Douglass, "Introduction," in Wells, *The Reason Why*, p. 4.

13. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprint New York: Fawcett World Library, 1961), p. 23.

14. Hazel V. Carby, "White Woman Listen: Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in Seventies Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), pp. 212–35.

15. Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *Conditions: Two* 1 (October 1977), reprinted in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), pp. 168–85. References are to this edition; page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text.

16. Mary Helen Washington, ed., *Black-Eyed Susans* (New York: Anchor Press, 1975). The first contemporary anthology of black women's writings, fiction and nonfiction, was Toni Cade, ed., *The Black Woman* (New York: New American Library, 1970).

17. See also Mary Helen Washington, "Teaching Black-Eyed Susans: An Approach to the Study of Black Women Writers," in Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982), pp. 208–17.

18. Alice Walker, "One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s)," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1983), pp. 361–83.

19. Ibid., p. 372.

20. See also the introduction to Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983).

21. Hull et al., "The Politics of Black Women's Studies," in *But Some of Us Are Brave*, p. xvii.

22. Ibid.

23. Mary Berry, "Foreword," Hull et al., *But Some of Us Are Brave*, p. xv.

24. My position is that cultural studies is not disciplinary, nor does it seek to be a discipline even in the sense that American studies, Afro-American studies, or women's studies are interdisciplinary; rather it is a critical position which interrogates the assumptions of and principles of critical practice of all three modes of inquiry. As a practitioner of cultural studies notes: "The relation of cultural studies to the other disciplines is rather one of critique: of their historical construction, of their claims, of their omissions, and particularly of the forms of their separation. At the same time, a critical relationship to the disciplines is also a critical stance to their forms of knowledge production—to the prevalent social relations of research, the labor process of higher education." Michael Green, "The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies," in Peter Widdowson, ed., *Re-Reading English* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 84.

25. Hull et al., "Politics of Black Women's Studies," *But Some of Us Are Brave*, pp. xxi–xxii.

26. Deborah McDowell, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," *Black American Literature Forum* 14 (1980), reprinted in Showalter, *The New Feminist Criticism*, pp. 186–99. References are to this edition; page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text. Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985).

27. See also Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980).

28. Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism*, pp. 1–30.

29. Ibid., pp. x–xi.

30. Hortense Spillers, "Black/Female/Critic," *Women's Review of Books* 2 (September 1985): 9–10.

31. Cornel West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," *Cultural Critique* 1 (Fall 1985): 116–17.

32. Showalter, "The Feminist Critical Revolution," in *The New Feminist Criticism*, pp. 3–17.

33. This argument is drawn from V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973). Volosinov was a Soviet theorist associated with the circle of Mikhail Bakhtin.

34. I am particularly drawing on that aspect of cultural studies which has analyzed issues of race and the study of black culture. A key figure is Stuart Hall. For many years the director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, he has written a number of major theoretical essays on culture and ideology, including: "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," *Media, Culture, and Society* 2 (1980): 57–72; "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies," in Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran, and Janet Woolacott, eds., *Culture, Society, and the Media* (New York: Methuen, 1982), pp. 56–90; "Culture, the Media, and the 'Ideological' Effect," in James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woolacott, eds., *Mass Communications and Society* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), pp. 315–48; "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular,'" in Ralph Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory*, History Workshop Series (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981); "A 'Reading' of Marx's *1857* Introduction to the Grundrisse," *CCCS Stencilled Papers* 1 (1973); "Rethinking the Base/Superstructure Metaphor," in John Bloom-

field, ed., *Class, Party, and Hegemony* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), pp. 43–72. Hall's work on race that has been particularly influential includes: *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978); "Pluralism, Race, and Class in Caribbean Society," in *Race and Class in Post-Colonial Society* (Paris: UNESCO, 1977), pp. 150–82; "Racism and Reaction," in *Five Views of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1978), pp. 23–35; "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), pp. 305–45; "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media," in George Bridges and Rosalind Brunt, eds., *Silver Linings: Some Strategies for the Eighties* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1981) pp. 28–52. Younger scholars influenced by Hall and the work of C. L. R. James include the authors of *The Empire Strikes Back* (see note 14 above) and Paul Gilroy, "Managing the 'Underclass': A Further Note on the Sociology of Race Relations in Britain," *Race and Class* 22 (Summer 1980): 47–62; Paul Gilroy, "You Can't Fool the Youths . . . Race and Class Formation in the 1980s," *Race and Class* 23 (Autumn 1981/Winter 1982): 207–22; and Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black In The Union Jack* (London: Hutchinson, 1987). For collections of essays by C. L. R. James, see *The Future in the Present* (London: Allison and Busby, 1977); *Spheres of Existence* (London: Allison and Busby, 1980); *At the Rendezvous of Victory* (London: Allison and Busby, 1984); and his cultural history of cricket in the West Indies, *Beyond a Boundary* (1963; reprint London: Stanley Paul, 1980). In the United States there is the related work of Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983); Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminister Press, 1982); and Cornel West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual" see note 31; John Brown Childs, "Afro-American Intellectuals and the People's Culture," *Theory and Society* 13 (1984): 69–90; John Brown Childs, "Concepts of Culture in Afro-American Political Thought, 1890–1920," *Social Text* 4 (Fall 1981): 28–43; and Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979), which fuses black intellectual tradition, cultural studies, and western Marxism.

35. The phrase is taken from Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance."

Chapter 2

1. This observation was first made by Angela Davis in her seminal essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar* 3 (December 1971): 3–15.

2. Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), p. xiv.

3. John Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 224.

4. Ibid., pp. 173, & 154.

5. The exception to this comment is Jacqueline Jones's splendid history, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985). Future feminist and Afro-American historiography will be transformed by this account of black female workers. See also Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).

6. See Minrose C. Gwin, *Black and White Women of the Old South: The Peculiar Sisterhood in American Literature* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), pp. 45–109.

7. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860," *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Columbus: University of Ohio Press, 1976), pp. 21–41.

8. Ibid., p. 21.

9. Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (1938; reprint New York: W. W. Norton, 1972).

10. Ann Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. x.

11. Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, p. 6.

12. Ibid., p. 8.

13. Ibid., p. 37.

14. Ibid., p. 15.

15. Spruill, *Women's Life and Work*, p. 220.

16. Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," p. 23.

17. Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, p. 94.

18. Caroline Lee Hentz, *Eoline, or Magnolia Vale* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1852), p. 53.

19. Metta Victoria Victor, *Maum Guinea and Her Plantation Children* (New York: Beadle and Co., 1861), p. 120.

20. Spruill, *Women's Life and Work*, p. 232.

21. Barbara Berg, *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism, The Woman and the City, 1800–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 84.

22. For further discussion of the influence of the literary figure of the Southern belle, see: Irving H. Bartlett and C. Glenn Cambor, "The History and Psychodynamics of Southern Womanhood," *Women's Studies* 2 (1974): 9–24; John C. Ruoff, "Frivolity to Consumption: Or, Southern Womanhood in Antebellum Literature," *Civil War History* 18 (1972): 213–

to the Early Greatness of the African Race and the Possibility of Restoration by Its Descendents, with Epilogue (Cambridge, Mass: P. E. Hopkins & Co., 1905).

19. There is confusion about Hopkins's editorial role on the *Colored American Magazine*. William Braithwaite, in "Negro America's First Magazine," *Negro Digest* (December 1947): 21–26, refers to Hopkins's editorial influence; see note 7, Chapter Six herein. Dorothy Porter also refers to her "editorship" though is unclear about dates, in "Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins," in Rayford W. Logan and Michael Winston, eds., *Dictionary of American Negro Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), pp. 325–26. See also Walter C. Daniel, *Black Journals of the United States* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), pp. 123–30, who acknowledges the confusion but lists Hopkins as editor from November 1903 to September 1904 in his history of publication. Perhaps the strongest evidence of her editorial influence lies not in verifiable dates but in the text of the *Colored American Magazine*.

20. Pauline Hopkins, "Toussaint L'Overture," *Colored American Magazine* 2 (November 1900): 10, 24.

21. Ibid., p. 10.

22. Pauline Hopkins, "Heroes and Heroines in Black," *Colored American Magazine* 6 (January 1903): 211.

23. Ibid., p. 206.

Chapter 8

1. The three major contemporary texts are Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900–1950* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982); Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Vintage, 1982). The term has recently been used to describe contemporary black cultural production, particularly black women novelists who are linked to this first renaissance by the figure of Zora Neale Hurston; "a second black literary Renaissance, in which women are taking a significant part, seems well under way," according to Mary V. Dearborn, *Pocahontas's Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 61.

2. Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1925; New York: Atheneum, 1970).

3. "Announcement," *Colored American Magazine* 1 (May 1900): 2.

4. For the best account of the relationship among the various intellectual attitudes toward black culture during this period, see John Brown Childs, "Afro-American Intellectuals and the People's Culture," *Theory and Society* 13 (1984): 69–90, an informative and stimulating analysis of the vanguardism inherent in concepts of intellectuals as the "Talented Tenth," in Alain Locke's and Charles Johnson's approach to folk culture, and in Chandler Owen's and A. Philip Randolph's socialist "New" Negro. See notes 2 and 5, this chapter.

5. *Messenger* (August 1920): 73, quoted in Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker* (New York: Antheneum, 1969), p. 389. See also Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 98; William H. Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925–37* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), pp. 21, 98; and Theodore G. Vincent, ed., *Voices of a Black Nation: Political Journalism in the Harlem Renaissance* (San Francisco: Ramparts Press, 1973).

6. *Messenger*, p. 73, quoted in Spero and Harris, *The Black Worker*, pp. 389–90.

7. See, for examples of the conflicts over patronage, the second edition of Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, Robert E. Hemenway, ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home: An Autobiography* (1937; New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970); and Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (1940; New York: Hill and Wang, 1963). Hughes's second autobiography, *I Wonder As I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (1956; New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), opens with the acknowledgment of the loss of his patron.

8. R. S. Elliot, "The Story of Our Magazine," *Colored American Magazine* 3 (May 1901): 44. The journal did eventually have a black patron, Colonel William H. Dupress, to whom it was sold for debt. See Walter C. Daniel, ed., *Black Journals of the United States* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 125.

9. Elliot, "The Story of Our Magazine," p. 44.

10. Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928; Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1969). Page references to the latter edition will be given parenthetically in the text.

11. Compare the responses of Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958); Arthur P. Davis, *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900–1960* (1974; Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981); and Addison Gayle, Jr., *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1976), with the black feminist critique of Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* (Westport,

Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), and the recent reconsideration of Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset as ethnic writers in Dearborn, *Pocahontas's Daughters*.

12. And as the "founder of the tradition of contemporary black women writers." She is considered by all the critics cited in note 11, but the two people most responsible for the critical acclaim accorded Hurston's work are Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), and Alice Walker, who wrote the foreword to Hemenway's text and edited *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . : A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1979). Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1934); *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1935); *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1937); *Tell My Horse* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1938); *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1939); *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1942); *Polk County, a Comedy of Negro Life on a Sawmill Camp* (unpublished, 1944); *Seraph on the Suwanee* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1948).

13. Jessie Redmond Fauset, *There Is Confusion* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1924); *Plum Bun* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1928); *The Chinaberry Tree* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1931); *Comedy American Style* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1933).

14. Fauset's middle-class code, however, was not merely imitative of white middle-class behavior, of which she could be extremely critical; rather, she tried to describe a particularly black middle-class ideology which was more moral and more civilized than the white racist society in which it existed.

15. Deborah E. McDowell, "Introduction: A Question of Power or the Rear Guard Faces Front," in Fauset, *Plum Bun* (1929; reprint London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. ix–xxiv.

16. See Chapter Four, pp. 88–90.

17. Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929).

18. Ann Petry, *The Street* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946); Dorothy West, *The Living Is Easy* (1948; Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982); Gwendolyn Brooks, *Maud Martha* (1951; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953); Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972); *Sula* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973); *Song of Solomon* (New York: New American Library, 1977).

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