

INTRODUCTION

The present study evolved from a seminar in African American literature I participated in several years ago. The seminar focused on a number of long-neglected nineteenth-century texts, three of which are examined here: *Our Nig; or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*. By "Our Nig" (1859), by Harriet E. Wilson; *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) by Frances E. W. Harper; and *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900) by Pauline E. Hopkins. In the wake of renewed interest in early black women writers, the fourth text I look at here, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (2002) by Hannah Crafts, was discovered in manuscript form and published after the seminar had been conducted. More than the race and gender issues, which may have led to their journey into obscurity but certainly propelled the revival of critical interest in all these texts, it was the ideological uses of religion that fascinated me the most. How does religious belief help shape a text and, in turn, how is the religion portrayed itself shaped by social forces, including race and gender, that underlie the text?

That a religion is not a timeless, unchanging ideology but instead subject to historical forces which influence how belief is structured, leading to new interpretations and syncretic beliefs, is a widely accepted fact today, at least in the academic world. Anthony F. C. Wallace, for example, has maintained that new religions are the result of cultural "revitalization movements," in which social pressure on a group or culture cause them to search for new "mazeways," or sets of beliefs, to relieve that pressure ("Revitalization" 266-67). Such a characterization would seem to apply to the Christianity in the two turn-of-the-century texts, *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces*, for in both religion is presented as an ideology that can unite and defend blacks against the era's racial violence, and many of the categories Wallace discusses as fundamental aspects of such revitalization movements—strictures against vice, obligations of friendship, and community responsibility ("Cultural Composition" 144-46)—are advocated here as well. Wallace, however, in a long list of religions begun as revitalization movements, including Christianity, never mentions African American Christianity, suggesting he might have believed black slaves taken to North America had adopted Christianity wholesale with very few changes. If so, it was a belief Wallace shared with many others at the time.

Debate as to whether any Africanisms had survived in black culture in North America lasted for a number of years, epitomized by E. Franklin Frazier, who took the view that none had, and Melville Herskovits, who argued for a strong residual influence. A consensus eventually emerged in the 1970s and 80s that neither position was tenable, and instead that black culture and its religion are both African and American, with the latter dominating. However, even as literary historians such as Wilson J. Moses identified a tradition of the black jeremiad in the nineteenth century that turned Christianity against white oppression and historians such as Eugene Genovese and John Blassingame analyzed the slave narratives as a source in interpreting slave religion, numerous scholars have recognized that an accommodationist strain existed simultaneously in the black community, leading the small black middle class at the turn of the century to accept a “patiently-suffering white Jesus” (Wilmore 140). In analyzing works from this milieu—which Harper’s and Hopkins’s respective novels represent—literary critics such as Sterling A. Brown, Robert Bone, and Dickson Bruce Jr. concur in this opinion. The light-skinned mulattos and the Christian values they espoused, it is argued, represent the Talented Tenth’s—W. E. B. Du Bois’s well-known concept—separation of themselves from the black folk masses. Most recent criticism focuses on gender issues and the mulatta heroine in these texts, attributing religious discussion to an acceptance of white middle-class standards. Uniquely black attitudes toward religion in the nineteenth century, it is implied, can be found only in sermons, spiritual and slave narratives.

This dissertation argues against such a supposition. Not only autobiographical sources illustrate the richness of black religious experience. I maintain that these four novels also do so, and in ways that can be distinguished from white Euro-Christianity. All four novels emphasize the religious lives of their protagonists—realized primarily *outside* the realm of an organized church—and black religious experience shapes some of the representational procedures in these texts. To varying degrees, the texts borrow motifs and some generic conventions from the nineteenth-century domestic novel and the antebellum slave narratives, and all were written for a black as well as white readership—which the slave narratives were not. The question of audience, combined with the fact that the authors, as far as evidence is available, retained a large degree of editorial control over the texts, sets these novels apart from the slave narratives and allows us something closer to an unmediated glimpse into an African American religious perspective.

This present study contends that these four novels portray an evolving sense of African American spirituality and that the use of religion is definably different from that of the slave narratives and the women’s domestic fiction of the mid-nineteenth century that they

borrow from. By use of religion I understand the choice of specific religious motifs and images and how they are interpreted and offered as solutions to individual and group problems, as well as how religion influences the formal aspects of the text such as character configurations and plot structure. In contrast to critics such as Houston A. Baker, who sees Harper's and Hopkins's novels as completely assimilative of Euro-Christian values, I interpret these texts as grounds where a synthesis of African American spirituality and Euro-Christian values and symbols are being contested.

In my thinking on the development of religions I am informed by Wallace's ideas on revitalization movements, although I do not apply here the specific pattern he proposed. Rather his concept of a culture "restructuring [...] elements and subsystems which have already attained currency in the society" ("Revitalization" 270) to relieve pressure on both individuals and groups provides a useful model for thinking about nineteenth-century African American Christianity as well as understanding how the four authors constructed their texts. Much as cultures take different ideas and beliefs, assembling them as tools and building blocks to meet the specific needs of their situation, these early black authors used different genres available to them to tell their stories. Indeed, Henry Louis Gates Jr. has proposed that *Our Nig* "is a major example of generic fusion in which a woman writer appropriated black male (the slave narrative) and white female (the sentimental novel) forms and revised these as a synthesis at once peculiarly black and female" (*Figures* 138). Similar observations have been made about the combination of the sentimental novel and the antebellum slave narrative— itself a form that evolved from spiritual narratives—in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) (Yellin 263) and of the two genres plus the gothic novel in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (Stauffer 53) so that pastiche can be considered one of the chief tools in mid-nineteenth-century African American women's writing. Therefore, in getting at the nature of religious portrayals in these four novels it appears justified to approach them from the aspect of genre. To what extent does the use of a particular genre influence how representations of religion are portrayed?

Religion is, of course, not wholly a matter of genre but also a result of historical conditions, in this case involuntary servitude (both slavery and indentured servitude) in the two antebellum texts and its aftereffects in the two post-Reconstruction novels. For this reason I approach these texts as well from an African American religious perspective. Much theological and academic work has been done since the Civil Rights movement to understand the meaning and practice of slave religion and to reinterpret Christianity in light of black experience. Foremost among theologians has been James A. Cone, whose *Black Theology and*

Black Power (1969) laid the groundwork for black theology, which focuses on the question of empowerment and how to use Christianity to fight racial oppression. In its original incarnation, however, black liberation theology tended to concentrate primarily on the contemporary world and Christian scriptures to the comparative neglect of original African American source materials as it privileged the issues of power and freedom over other aspects of spiritual life. Later developments in the field helped to correct this somewhat myopic tendency, including, to name but a few, Dwight Hopkins and George Cummins's *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongues: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* (1991) and Delores Williams's work on womanist theology, which takes a black female perspective.

While the four texts examined here are all by women, the primary focus in this study is not a feminist one, although naturally the role of gender cannot be disregarded and will be taken up at appropriate places. For this reason, rather than womanist theology I have selected another recent theory as a religious perspective to approach these texts from, Theophus Smith's concept of "conjuring culture." Smith's ideas have the benefit of taking both an historical and a bicultural perspective, integrating African and white American values into an African American vision of culture. Hypothesizing an African worldview—an observation buttressed by religious scholars and anthropologists who note an African tendency to conjunctive thinking (Raboteau 50) and to reject separating the temporal and spiritual realms (Levine 30), in contrast to a European approach to spirituality—Smith examines how Africans historically have used this perspective in conjunction with Christianity to create, or conjure, their own culture. While a philosophical approach or worldview and its continuity over time can be difficult to completely prove beyond a shadow of a doubt, especially at this distance in time, Smith provides numerous examples from a variety of fields and so makes a very strong case for this approach, one I wish to extend here to the field of literature. Indeed, the existence of a hybrid form of religion or spirituality that Smith's theory proposes parallels my assumption that the two literary genres were fused in at least the two antebellum texts, producing a new literary and religious blend along the way. It is the purpose of this study to better understand how these blends come together and how they differ from white-authored texts of the same era. Along the way, the study will of necessity deal with related issues in African American literature, including that of the near-white mulatta.

It is at this juncture, where debate on the meaning of religion and the mulatta in African American literature merge, that this study enters critical discussion. Differences on these two topics run essentially along the same fault lines, that of class and the question of assimilationism. Similar to his belief that "the early Negro novelist had the soul of a

shopkeeper” (15), adopting white, middle-class values and religious ethics in an attempt to assimilate at the expense of the black folk masses, Robert Bone sees black authors as readily adopting the white-created “mulatto characters for whom the reader’s sympathies are aroused less because they are colored than because they are nearly white” (23). This negative appraisal of the mulatto character stretches back in time to Sterling Brown, as Werner Sollors points out (223), and extends up more recently to Houston Baker, who has criticized Harper and Hopkins for “ignoring black Southern sounding” in favor of “a bright Victorian morality in whiteface” (32-33). On the other side, Hazel Carby opened the way for a reinterpretation of the mulatta by suggesting that the character is “a narrative device of mediation” (89). This positive revaluation has been followed up by critics such as Eve Allegra Raimon, who claims the mulatta was used to explore “contested versions of race and nation” (12) in the nineteenth century, and Teresa Zackodnik, who sees the mulatta as part of a “double-voiced discourse” that allows blacks to enter national debates, “contesting rather than mediating the bounds of racial and racialized gender identities” (xvii-xix). The present study aligns itself with Carby’s view of the mulatta and brings the question of religion to the discussion on the mulatta: it sees the near-white mulatta as an expression of a hypothesized African American spirituality.

The aim of the dissertation is thus to analyze the extent to which 1) adherence to generic conventions, 2) an African American worldview, and 3) historical factors such as involuntary servitude influenced the portrayals of religion in these four texts. The methodology is comparative, using close readings of the four texts against representative examples from the two genres and Theophus Smith’s theory from religious studies.

The first chapter deals with the domestic novel, examining religious portrayals and their ideological implications in this mid-nineteenth-century white women’s genre before comparing *Our Nig* and *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* to this standard. My assumption is that both Wilson and Crafts used this bestselling genre as one of the models for their only known literary creations. For the domestic novel, I use Nina Baym’s definition of “woman’s fiction,” a genre she identifies as dominating the book market from 1820 to 1870, after which it “permuted into children’s literature” (23). This same genre of “woman’s fiction” is also frequently referred to in scholarly literature as “exploratory novels” (Harris), “sentimental novels” (Dobson), or at times interchangeably as either “sentimental” or “domestic” (Tompkins). However, as Baym notes, these writers “often advertised their works as anti-sentimental” (xxix) and rejected the weak, helpless protagonists of the seduction novel in the Richardsonian sentimental tradition. They would have understood their works as sentimental insofar as the term “denotes public sympathy and benevolent fellow-feeling,” (xxx) which is

how many critics are using the term. While these works certainly are sentimental in appealing to feelings, I prefer to use the term “domestic” to avoid confusion and because these novels are “largely descriptive of events taking place in a home setting” and almost invariably conclude with marriage (Baym 26). As products of the mid-nineteenth century, these novels do incorporate the era’s tendency to evangelical emotionalism and aspects of the popular culture’s love of melodrama, but it is the emphasis on the woman’s perspective and the home which unites them.

Since popularity is an important criterion for the genre’s use as a model, I stick fairly strictly to Baym’s timeline and do not analyze either Harper’s or Hopkins’s novels against the domestic model in this chapter. I recognize that some critics, most notably Claudia Tate in an insightful study that identifies the importance of marriage as exercising a legal right for African Americans in the post-Civil War era, have suggested that the end-of-the-century black novelists borrowed from this earlier genre. Yet aside from a similar didactic intent, Tate offers no concrete proof that these writers “would have had greater access to” (66) such older works. While I note that some aspects of the older white genre bear similarities to the later black novels, such as telling the story of a young woman searching for economic independence and finding support in a small group that she herself elects to join, I see the decision to structure their texts along these lines as based on historical considerations and not on borrowed literary motifs. Wilson and Crafts, I conjecture, most likely were in need of a literary model to help sales, guide them artistically, or lend them literary authority; indeed, Crafts’s wholesale borrowings from Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853) show her as clearly aware of the availability of outside material. For Hopkins and Harper, however, the case is different; by the 1890s domestic novels had largely lost most of their popularity, and hence it would not be reasonable to search for such influences from the domestic novel. The slave narrative as model is another matter.

In the second chapter I look at authenticating strategies in the antebellum slave narratives, and propose adding religious portrayals to the list of authenticating strategies before proceeding to examine the appearance of this aspect in the four texts. Here, too, the slave narrative’s popularity accounts for it serving as a model, especially in the two earlier texts, although the antebellum slave narratives are also acknowledged as a literary template, consciously chosen owing to its racial background, for African American literature right up to more recent works such as Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). Ever since the genre’s acceptance as a credible historical source for understanding life in slavery, literary critics have looked closely at how the narrative

negotiated between the demands of asserting their own personal voice and serving the polemic interests of the abolitionist movement, which often sought to portray the slave as both human and a type. William Andrews's *To Tell A Free Story* (1986) is probably the most authoritative in this field, using linguistic theory to demonstrate a developing tendency over time for the narratives to introduce "self-authorizing declarative speech acts" that culminate with a few "novelized black autobiographers [who] take an increasingly revisionistic attitude toward authority of all kinds" (276). Although he does not address either *Our Nig* or *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, these two antebellum texts similarly occupy a position straddling autobiography and fiction: both possess presumed autobiographical elements—events in Wilson's novel in particular, such as the family depicted and the death of her son referred to in the text, have been verified—and portray incidents the author could never have witnessed or that are so improbable they must be fictionalized. Of interest here is how techniques developed specifically for the supposedly non-fictional genre of autobiography are imported into fiction. Yet borrowing portrayals of religious belief as an authenticating device is something all four novels do, with varying degrees of success. Additionally, in the two later texts the portrayals show a creative adaptation to the new post-war circumstances.

The third chapter takes up Smith's theory of conjuring culture, refining and extending his ideas on a "literary-conjurational strategy" (187) and then applying this perspective to the texts. While Smith's ideas help identify an African American perspective in the religious portrayals, use of another theory on religion and culture that Smith also draws upon will illuminate how the version of Christianity in the texts differs from mainstream, white Christianity of the era. Rene Girard's ideas on the relationship between violence and the sacred, as well as his definitions of a sacrificial and a non-sacrificial Christianity help demonstrate how black Christianity developed differently as a result of oppression. Thus, this chapter approaches black religion from two different angles, an African American and one that addresses religion from a more general perspective, in order to locate what separates these black texts from white religion and white portrayals of black religion. Illustrative of these dual approaches are the slightly differing, though not mutually exclusive, interpretations of the near-white mulatta that they use.

Chapter four continues the broader approach than just an African American perspective and analyzes biblical configurations in the texts. Such configurations are an explicit part of Smith's theory on how African Americans conjured a culture in the United States, but here the focus returns to the domestic and slave narrative genres. I examine the two

main configurations that appear in these genres, the suffering servant and the wilderness experience respectively, and discuss how these character and plot configurations were adapted to the four black texts. Use of these motifs in the two genres is closely linked to gender—female in the domestic, and male in the slave narratives—and their appropriation by black women writers immediately changes how these motifs are employed. In particular the racial aspect leads to a different understanding of the suffering servant and a different portrayal of Jesus in the four black texts, while both race and gender modify the slave narrative’s wilderness experience. In the two later novels, the forty-year distance in time to the slave narrative’s heyday in the 1850s leads to a reinterpretation of what the wilderness experience means, becoming by the turn of the century more closely linked to racial destiny.

The four novels selected determine here the choice of biblical configurations analyzed, for certainly other biblical motifs have a strong link to the black experience in nineteenth-century America. The figure of Hagar, for example, speaks to black women’s exploitation as concubines during slavery, and as Lawrence Buell notes, Crafts’s reference to Hannah as a bondwoman implicitly links her to Hagar, the only woman in the Bible named as such (16). While subplots in Crafts’s novel and *Iola Leroy*, as well as part of Sappho’s story in *Contending Forces*, do tell tales of sexual exploitation and concubines cast off, these are variations on a common story in anti-slavery literature and not tales explicitly configured on the biblical Hagar as happens elsewhere. Pauline Hopkins went on later to write a novel that took up the configuration, *Hagar’s Daughter. A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice* (1901–02), and it is a theme which did emerge in some domestic fiction, for example, E. D. E. N. Southworth’s *The Deserted Wife* (1850). Indeed, Janet Gabler–Hover has read such white domestic Hagar stories as an attempt by “white women authors and readers to imagine themselves in the role of sexual and political rebellion against patriarchy, but at the same time [they keep the figure] black enough to provide themselves with an escape hatch through which such rebellion could be safely disavowed” (9). However, for these four particular black-authored texts, I deem the suffering servant and the wilderness experience to be more central to the story than other biblical configurations.

The choice of these four texts, two from the 1850s and two from the 1890s, allows for a diachronic view of nineteenth-century African American literature as well. Strictly speaking, however, it is not appropriate here to speak of a literary tradition, since the two antebellum novels faded into obscurity until they were rediscovered in 1982 and 2002, respectively, and thus had no impact on the two much better known novels of the 1890s. Collectively, what all four do show are the changes over time as the authors apply Christianity

creatively to the historical circumstances they find themselves in while keeping certain interpretations. All do not arrive at the same conclusion about religious belief; indeed, the two antebellum novels end up on the exact opposite sides in the question of whether religious faith is necessary at all. In short, they demonstrate two possible religious responses to facing involuntary servitude. Additionally, all four novels signify—in Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s sense of the term—on the genres they borrow from, making clearer how the intended audience influenced how a genre portrayed religious belief.

This study is intended to add to the scholarship on Harper’s and Hopkins’s novels by focusing more exclusively on the theme of religion in the texts than has been done in the past. In the case of *Our Nig*, a work that has received much critical attention in the twenty-five years since its rediscovery, I side with those who interpret the protagonist’s conversion as incomplete and turn a more skeptical eye on the reasons why this occurs. Due to its relatively recent publication, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* has received scant attention to date, a fact this study hopes to help overcome.

Since the four novels were all written in the United States, spellings in the dissertation follow the conventions of American English. Where secondary sources use variants of American English spellings, these are maintained throughout the dissertation.

CHAPTER I

RELIGION IN BLACK AND WHITE:

TWO AFRICAN AMERICAN VERSIONS OF THE ANTEBELLUM DOMESTIC NOVEL

I/1 Introductory Remarks

For some, they were authors of novels, a genre that would lead its readers to immorality. For others, the novels they produced provided uplifting examples to young people. For Nathaniel Hawthorne, they were “a damned mob of scribbling women.” Incontestably, however, during the 1840s, 50s, and 60s, these writers—authors such as Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, E.D.E.N Southworth and Augusta Evans—were among the most successful best-selling authors nineteenth-century America produced.

Precise book sales figures for the mid-nineteenth century are hard to come by, but the best studies indicate that Hawthorne’s estimate of these novels selling “by the hundred thousand” vastly overstates the reality. Nevertheless, it was a novel from the sentimental or domestic genre that he derided—Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850)—that probably first broke the 10,000 mark in copies sold, and for the rest of the decade sales of domestic novels routinely outstripped anything published by Hawthorne, Melville or Thoreau (Geary 380). In the burgeoning book market of the era, novels written by white, middle-class women about young girls growing up and struggling to secure a place in the middle class were the books that sold. The profits that could be made here attracted many authors, for, as Mary Kelley’s research has shown, making a living was precisely the motivation for many of these writers. The commercial success of Sara Parton, Emma Southworth, and Caroline Hentz, among others, financially supported their families and spawned many imitators, a fact not lost upon contemporaries, as a remark in *The American Publisher’s Circular* noted in 1855: “One successful production—such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Lamplighter* or *Ida May*—called into existence from ten to forty trashy and stupid imitations of it” (qtd. in Geary 392).

Imitators of the era were not limited to white, middle-class women either, as Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) and Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*—a manuscript composed in the late 1850s but first published only in 2002—attest to. Critics such as Henry L. Gates Jr., who brought the existence of these two

texts to the attention of scholarly and general audiences, have noted how both African American authors borrowed heavily from the domestic novel, and the popularity of the genre almost certainly accounts for one reason why the authors leaned on it as a literary role model. In the case of Wilson, her stated goal of earning money with the novel to support herself and her son may also explain why she exploits this genre. Yet whether they chose domestic novels because this was the genre they were familiar with or because they hoped it would increase sales of their own novels, the use of a white, middle-class women's genre by black, lower-class authors raises a number of questions. How adequately can generic forms developed by white women convey the experiences of poor black women? To what extent do race and class color the generic portrayals when they are used in a different socio-economic context?

Many critics have addressed the question of generic borrowings in nineteenth-century African American literature. Gates sees the blending of the sentimental novel and the slave narrative, together with African oral traditions, as central to the creation of a black literature in America (*Figures* 138). Others have focused on Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) to show how Jacobs borrows from and then subverts the sentimental novel by ending her text not with marriage but with freedom (Smith 42). Comparatively little attention, however, has been paid to how religious elements of the domestic novel, a common theme in the genre, have been carried over into nineteenth-century African American novels. In this chapter I will compare portrayals of religious piety and the authorial strategies that underlie them in white domestic novels with the portrayals in the two African American-authored texts by Harriet Wilson and Hannah Crafts. In examining expressions of religious belief, I hope to gain a better understanding of the ideological functions of Christianity in both white- and black-authored texts and how they differ from one another. My contention is that by borrowing formulaic portrayals of piety the two African American writers have subverted a key element of the domestic novel, exposing how race and class influence the manner in which religious belief is interpreted.

I/2 Religion in the White Domestic Novel

In this section I will briefly survey the scholarship on this issue, exploring the major aspects of religion in the domestic novel that will be useful in analyzing the two African American novels. The definition of domestic novel I use is that set out by Nina Baym.

Before proceeding, I should clear up a sticky but important definition. In defining this white women's literary genre, twentieth-century critics have produced a variety of labels.

Nina Baym introduced the term “woman’s fiction” and broadly defined a plot structure which these novels embrace. Alternately, some critics use the term “domestic fiction,” while others refer to them as “sentimental novels.” The exact terminology is not simply a matter of academic quibbling, for the label “sentimental” has at times been used pejoratively to devalue these novels. In this chapter I will be referring to the genre as “domestic fiction” or “domestic novels” in order to avoid the stigma of the term “sentimental.” This of course does not mean that the novels are not sentimental or melodramatic in the sense of appealing to the readers’ emotions; indeed, in telling the story of a young girl—frequently an orphan shunted to the care of various guardians—and her development from childhood home to marriage and the establishing of her own domestic sphere, the emphasis is clearly on emotions over the intellect.

Defining the role of religion in domestic novels remains an open question in critical debate. Indeed, when the academic reappraisal of the genre began in the 1970s and 80s, one of the main issues revolved around their portrayals of religious belief and the appeal made with it to contemporary audiences. In a forceful denunciation of the domestic novel, Ann Douglas blamed the genre for the shift away from intellectually rigorous theological argument to an anti-intellectual, emotionally based view of religion, which ultimately paved the way for the mass consumer society that developed after the Civil War. On the other side, Jane Tompkins, using *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Wide, Wide World* as her prime examples, argued that many of the authors were advocating a Christian renewal of society, one that ultimately favored maternally oriented domestic values over a patriarchal, materialistic worldview. Attempts have been made to find a middle ground between interpretations of the genre as either socially reactionary or politically progressive, such as Susan Harris’s reading of the novels as “exploratory”—with plots revealing a potentially subversive working out of women’s possibilities sandwiched between conventional beginnings and generic endings. In general, these have tended to see religion as fulfilling a mediating role in the battle of the sexes, offering common ground for men and women to meet as equals in submission to God, or have sidestepped the question of religion altogether.

If any consensus exists regarding religion and women in nineteenth-century America, it is that the former was considered an inherently female domain and an essentially patriarchal belief system. The majority of critics accept the existence of an ideology the feminist historian Barbara Welter termed “The Cult of True Womanhood,” whose central tenets required piety, passivity, submissiveness, and domesticity of women (21). This ideology developed during the economic transformations of the nineteenth century when production shifted outside the

home, leaving women on the margins of the economy. The cult worked as a double-edged sword, providing women with a new role as protectors of the earlier religious values that men had abandoned for the marketplace, and acting as a mechanism to keep women in the home. Christianity itself is seen as a conservative force that preaches patriarchal values and teaches submission to a higher, read male, authority. While women writers are sometimes seen as using the Bible as a tool turned against the patriarchy (Tompkins), a bridge to build female friendships (Schnog), or as an interpretive primer to explore female rebellion (Trubey), Christian ideology itself is assumed to be socially conservative and ultimately repressive.

What many of these interpretations share is a reliance on *The Wide, Wide World* for examples. One reason, of course, is the novel's textual richness, but critics also often cite Warner's novel as a progenitor of domestic fiction and thus as archetypal (Trubey 61). However, wholly representative of the genre it is not. While Nina Baym clearly identifies an overplot that encompasses these novels, there is, as she notes, much room left for variation (33). How, for example, can one fully account for two such divergent characters as Warner's pious Ellen Montgomery and E.D.E.N. Southworth's irreverent, tomboyish Capitola brought together under one generic roof? To understand what religion represents in the domestic novels, one must therefore examine more than one highly religiously-charged novel; after all, Warner's novel was not the only bestseller of the era. The role models Wilson and Craft drew upon were the generic recipes the novels as a sum provided, not necessarily the individual novels themselves.

Indeed, as the imitators—both black and white, successful and unsuccessful—churned out their texts, economic and social forces combined to weld the texts into a loose genre, even as individual experiences, beliefs, and creative imaginations lead them to tell their own stories. The financial and market pressures that pushed the writers toward producing a formulaic genre requires little explanation. Somewhat less obvious is the influence of the Second Great Awakening in encouraging literary conformity. The religious revivals that swept the country in the first half of the century led to a splintering of denominations and the emergence of numerous new sects and groups. As the reading market fragmented along religious lines, it made little sense to alienate one's public by stressing a particular creed, such as a certain brand of Calvinism or Methodism. Much as the divisive issue of slavery was largely written out of domestic novels in the 1840s and 50s in order not to offend potential audiences—the notable exception being *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the novelistic reactions it provoked—ecclesiastical differences were routinely glossed over in favor of a more generic Christianity.

The broad contours of the religion portrayed in mid-century domestic novels thus mirror trends in the broader contemporary society and especially in the emerging middle class. Religion is Protestant, non-denominational, and evangelical in character. As Nina Baym notes, conversion and spiritual soul-searching occur outside the context of male-dominated institutions (42); camp meetings and revivals, probably because of their associations with a rougher, lower-class life style, appear, if at all, as a local color element. Instead, religious meditation takes place during the course of daily events and in the company of one or two peers or under the guidance of an older, benevolent mentor. This displacement of the institutional in favor of the individual and small groups of intimates reflects the trend toward individualism and finds further emphasis in the biblical references the novels often employ. Passages quoted tend to be those dealing with the individual's salvation, behavior, and relationship to God, such as the Psalms or Proverbs, and seldom concern the larger questions of group identity. Should this question arise, such as the issue of national affiliation, as it does for Ellen Montgomery in *The Wide, Wide World*, George Washington and other national icons are invoked rather than religious imagery from the Old Testament.

This is not to say that faith in the domestic novels has no social function. Inevitably, faith and learning to accept God's will are tools that help the protagonist achieve the genre's ultimate goal, maturity as an adult. Her maturity may be accompanied by marriage in the end, although this is not always the case, for—as many critics have noted—these novels' real plots involve exploring female self-sufficiency and growth into adulthood. In learning self-control through submission to God, the female protagonist also learns her social role and how women are expected to fit into the larger society. Whether or not this lesson is inherently repressive for women has been a matter of critical debate. Richard Brodhead sees religion as part of a mid-nineteenth-century discourse that seeks to coerce individuals into internalizing the dominant patriarchal values of society (91). Jane Tompkins, on the other hand, argues that “[b]y merging herself in the name of the highest possible authority, the dutiful woman merges her own authority with that of God's,” thus “bypass[ing] worldly (male) authority” (163). Yet whether one interprets a woman's act of faith as submission to worldly authority, an usurpation of power, or an acknowledgement of the limited options open to women of the era as Nina Baym asserts (18), common ground is found in recognizing that women saw religion through the lens of gender. When Ellen Montgomery's mother tells her that “though we *must* sorrow, we must not rebel” (Warner 12), “we” is understood primarily to be a collective female pronoun, not necessarily an all-embracing universal. Throughout the novels, biblical references to suffering are not metaphysical musings on the meaning of humanity's existence,

but appear time and again in the practical context of a woman's experience. Thus, religion serves to reinforce the ideology of domesticity, regardless of whether the latter is interpreted as repressive or empowering for women.

The tendency to view piety as a practical tool to reinforce a woman's prescribed role in society meant that doctrinal differences took a backseat to Christian values such as charity, forgiveness, and repentance. Now that the Second Great Awakening had allowed the individual to establish a direct relationship to God, the domestic novel saw salvation open to all individuals and divine grace coming to all who honestly sought it. Rather than arguing about original sin, the domestic novels portrayed heroines who could claim God's grace if they practiced charity, repentance, and Christian love. Hence, two of the most popular and most religiously oriented novels of the era, *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter*, although coming from the opposing Protestant camps of Presbyterianism and Unitarianism, end up "religiously similar" (Reynolds 121).

The emphasis on virtues also allows religion to be displaced in some domestic novels as an overt theme while still retaining the focus on religious values. Rather than wrapping the text in religious terminology, domestic authors could keep the virtues of humility and honesty in full view by critiquing public hypocrisy and the "fashionable world," both frequent targets in these novels. The aim did not have to be religious hypocrisy, as was the case in the slave narratives, although occasionally this specific form of hypocrisy could arise. In Marion Harland's *Alone* (1854), for example, a visit to a revival meeting becomes an opportunity to criticize public displays of piety by irreligious persons. This allows the characters to be portrayed in a positive light by contrast, and softens the edges of these otherwise very class-conscious persons. Simple virtues adhere to characters who look down on the emotional excesses of the lower classes.

A final important aspect of domestic religion are the asexual portrayals of religious figures. As Nina Baym notes, Jesus is commonly portrayed as a friend, and "God is called the father but more often he is spoken of as a parent, combining all parental functions in an androgynous image" (44). While G. M. Goshgarian maintains that religious overtones are mixed in with the incestuous relationships he sees in domestic fiction, it is important to note that an overt and conscious sexuality is largely absent from secular characters in the genre and never appears with any biblical figures. Erotic feelings are sublimated into an intense romantic longing and often tempered with references to the heroine's higher Christian love.

Nineteenth-century standards of decorum, of course, forbade any conflation of religious figures and sexuality, an act that certainly would have been considered blasphemy.

Yet in a genre where religious feeling can be strong and courtship frequently plays a major role, keeping the religious and erotic passions separate has the potential to be problematic. While Susan Harris points out that religion in domestic novels often provides a common ground which allows a couple to come together if “both parties submit first to God” (62), religion need not always dominate. Even in an era when evangelicalism stressed access to spirituality via emotions, religious feeling may not be stronger than repressed sexuality. The emotional intensity inherent in religious and erotic feelings could easily be fused together.

Virtually all critics, for example, remark how Ellen Montgomery is taught to love and submit to God by John Humphrey, the very man she herself learns to love and submit to. While God and Jesus are never eroticized in *The Wide, Wide World*, by the end of the novel it is clear that marriage to her mentor is Ellen’s reward for learning submission to God.

Susan Warner’s novel has drawn much critical attention in part because of the rich psychological portrayal of a young girl’s intense suffering and socialization, but also because it is widely viewed as the first best seller and spawned other similar domestic novels, such as Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter*. While it does represent one commercially successful approach to writing a domestic novel, other potential role models for African American domestic novels abound, including Southworth’s *The Curse of Clifton* (1852), Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* (1855), and Marian Harland’s *Alone* (1854), all of which approach religious themes in different manners. However, Warner’s novel does provide a useful reference point for mapping out an important tendency in religious portrayals in mid-century domestic novels, namely the degree of intensity in religious belief. This yardstick will be helpful in analyzing differences in the genre; however, this should not be understood as presenting a rigid category but rather as a continuum along which the novels fall. This yardstick will prove useful when I examine the two African American examples of domestic fiction.

The one extreme in the intensity of religious portrayals is marked by novels such as *The Wide, Wide World* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In these novels religion is central to the respective author’s purpose and defines the protagonists’ relationship to the social world around them. Stowe’s purpose was to effect a larger social change through religious appeals and, as Jane Tompkins claims, to “bring [...] about the day when the world would be ruled not by force, but by Christian love” (141), while Warner’s novel, from beginning to end, equates an individual girl’s arrival at emotional and social maturity with complete submission to God’s will. That some domestic novelists had been active in the temperance movement or, like the Warner sisters, also wrote religious tracts bears testimony

to their ideological origins in evangelical Christian organizations. Their texts are often saturated with an emotional piety and make religious conversion a central focus.

On the other end of the spectrum are novels such as E.D.E.N. Southworth's *The Hidden Hand*, where religion plays at best a secondary role. Religion was, of course, pervasive in nineteenth-century America, especially among the middle-class readership; indeed, Nina Baym states that only two novels of the era raise any doubts about God's existence (42). However, in keeping with the melodramatic tendencies of popular literature in the nineteenth century, some novelists relegated expressions of religious belief to scenes which became stereotypical. Such scenes are almost always moments of intense emotional conflict where the character has to consult his or her conscience, and the effect is either to highlight the emotional struggle or to underscore the character's innate goodness – or badness, as the case might be – and thus engage the reader's sympathy for the character. Such scenes include the decision to accept or decline a marriage proposal, the eviction of a widow from her home, the separation of a mother and child, or the ubiquitous deathbed scene. In *The Hidden Hand*, Southworth presents a heroine, a high-spirited tomboy who hitherto has shown little inclination to traditional, genteel female behavior, begging the villain toward the end to pray for forgiveness before she sends him to an apparent death – naturally, only in order to protect her virtue. At such moments the author appears almost cynically to be falling back on religion as a means of goading the reader into sympathy.

The vast majority of domestic novels, however, fall between these poles of zealous piety and emotional opportunism, though they almost always maintain the connection between religion and emotion. A novel that tends to religious intensity, for example, may make a love relationship rather than conversion the central issue, but it will make the heroine's piety the driving force that eventually unites the couple, as is the case in Caroline Hentz's *Ernest Linwood* (1856). Here, the protagonist's faith is a given, and she is even willing to forgo emotional happiness in favor of her piety; her unwavering faith is eventually rewarded by the return of her errant husband. According to Susan Harris, such plots “demonstrate [...] one strategy nineteenth-century Christianity provided for resolving the struggle between male and female quests for domination, that is, both parts submit first to God” (62).

Additionally, religion can also be used to contradictory emotional ends in novels anywhere along the scale of intensity. Religious feeling can be used either to express via comparison or to suppress via injunction a character's emotional state. *Ernest Linwood* provides a condensed example of such conflicting purposes when the heroine is enjoined by

her mother-in-law to tolerate her husband's jealous nature, for at such times a woman must "look up to God and be silent" (223). On the very next page, the holy nature of the mother-child relationship is invoked to express the mother-in-law's strong feelings and, by extension, to evoke the emotional empathy of the female readership. Religion is thus often seen to justify women's subordinate position to men in mid-nineteenth-century society, while simultaneously providing an outlet of expression. Its multifunctionality is largely independent of the intensity of the novel's religious portrayals.

In summary, religion appears to varying degrees in domestic novels, but the values underlying belief and the intended emotional impact on the reader remain essentially the same. In intensely religious novels conversion becomes synonymous with maturity, which is the genre's overarching theme. In novels where religious faith plays a less central role or conversion is not an issue, the virtues of humility, charity, and forgiveness—so central to the enterprise of obtaining self-control—remain in the foreground, yet are distanced from an ideological grounding in Christianity. At the far end of the spectrum references to religious belief tend to be limited to eliciting an emotional response from the reader. In other words, what is left common for all novels across the genre is a sentimental strategy of using religion to play on emotions, a strategy based on the assumption of shared beliefs between the author and the reader. Primary among these assumptions is the idea that religion is an emotional experience and that emotionally charged moments can be best understood and described in religious terms. Placing religion in the context of sentimentality, which "assumes that people are related by feeling rather than by status or circumstances," one may conclude that religion will act as a bridge between writer and readers across boundaries of race and class (Nudelman 945-46). Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, however, problematizes this sentimental connection.

I/3 Our Nig

These two texts stand out not only because they are the only two known domestic novels of the era authored by black women, but also because they focus on lower-class protagonists in a genre that was thoroughly middle class. Thus race and class are two very clear reasons why these two novels deviate at various points from the genre standards, yet despite these barriers, there are also good reasons for the authors choosing the domestic genre. One is that both texts—the story of a mulatto indentured servant in the North and a mulatto house slave in the South—take place on the margins of the middle-class world. The domestic novel is inevitably concerned with a young girl struggling to maintain her place in the middle

class—a place Frado and Hannah find just tantalizingly beyond their grasp. A second reason is that the genre was what both novice authors took as their model.

Of course, many critics have noted how both novels also borrow heavily from the slave narrative, with elements of the conversion narrative and the gothic novel in them respectively as well. With Wilson's novel in particular, the tendency has been to see this blending of genres as an autobiographic reconstruction that informs and signifies on nineteenth century racial attitudes in the North. In the course of this, critics have glossed over the esthetic problems with *Our Nig*, R. J. Ellis's comment being a case in point: "*Our Nig* may not always be elegantly written, but its sophisticated representation of a life of silencing demands our respect" (188). My point does not concern the respect due to Wilson—for it surely is earned—but rather that the "sophisticated representation" occurs precisely because of the esthetic failures. In borrowing conventions from the domestic novel—in particular the portrayal of religious belief—Wilson allows internal contradictions to slip into the text. Ultimately, however, these contradictions provide a critique of both religion and the domestic genre.

Given the large proportion of the novel dedicated to Frado's spiritual life, one would at first glance think that *Our Nig* falls toward the high end of spectrum on religious intensity. However, a closer look shows that Frado's spiritual life is compacted almost exclusively into the middle third of the novel, and the few remarks both before and after this section are stereotypical references designed to mark for the reader who is sympathetic and who is not. Additionally, the close of the roughly 40-page section of this 130-page novel is marked by what Elizabeth West terms "Frado's failed conversion" (21). In a situation unprecedented in domestic fiction, the protagonist rejects all future thoughts of God and religion:

Frado pondered; her mistress was a professor of religion; was *she* going to heaven; then she did not wish to go. If she should be near James, even, she could not be happy with those fiery eyes watching over her ascending path. She resolved to give over all thought of the future world, and strove daily to put her anxiety far from her. (104)

Two paragraphs later, as if to underscore the ineffectiveness of religious submission, Wilson provides Frado her sole triumph over her tormentor, Mrs. Bellmont. In a scene more physical than spiritual, Frado verbally confronts Mrs. Bellmont at the woodpile and threatens to withhold her labor if she is beaten. To further emphasize her rejection of religious values, Frado is shown two pages later displaying a most unchristian attitude in gloating over the death of her other great tormentor, Mary, Mrs. Bellmont's daughter. "S'posn she goes to hell,

she'll be as black as I am. Wouldn't mistress be mad to see her a nigger!" (107). In contrast to the conventions of the domestic novel, forgiveness is a virtue Frado never learns.

The change in Frado is all the more remarkable since the forty-page story of her quest to achieve religion bears many of the hallmarks of intensely religious domestic novels, such as *The Lamplighter* or *The Wide, Wide World*. Similar to these novels, in *Our Nig* a constellation of characters emerges to guide and test the protagonist along the path to religious enlightenment. Two mentors appear, Aunt Abby and James, to encourage and teach her at moments of spiritual confusion and weakness, while Mrs. Belmont and Mary serve to put Frado's resolve to the test. Yet Wilson manages these elements of the story differently from how the traditional domestic novel does and in ways that ultimately undermine the prospects for a religious conversion.

If finding one's way to God is the key to emotional maturity, it is a step the domestic novel requires the protagonist to take alone. Thus, the mentor figure can guide the heroine only so far, and after having fulfilled this spiritual function they usually fade into the background or disappear completely. The consumptive Alice Humphreys, for example, dies when Ellen Montgomery is finally on the right path, and she can do no more for the heroine; the elderly Trueman Flint passes away after rescuing Gertrude in *The Lamplighter* and having given her a home and her first practical lesson in Christian love. His memory gives Gertrude strength in later life, although the final steps she must make alone. Similarly, in *Our Nig* one of Frado's religious mentors, James, suffers a lingering death, allowing for the stock deathbed scene, to which almost an entire chapter is devoted. But instead of fading away after the protagonist's conversion, here the mentor figure dies with the protagonist's salvation still in doubt. Much like Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, James exhorts those he will leave behind to find their way to God, yet Frado's reaction is visible and silent grief, with no indication of a spiritual transformation. Later, during her period of mourning, it is clear to the local minister that Frado still must "endeavor[...] to make Christ, instead of James, the attraction of heaven" (103). The sentimental aspect of the deathbed scene comes to the fore—tears are profusely shed—but it is devoid of its religious significance. The character may well have been too good for this world, but his death redeems no one.

Instead, Frado's tormentors continue to test her faith, her suffering alleviated only temporarily by her dramatic refusal to work in the woodpile scene. And this testing is unlike anything else in domestic literature. No domestic heroine undergoes the physical and graphically violent treatment Frado has to endure. Aunt Fortune never beats Ellen Montgomery, stuffs rags in her mouth or throws knives at her; instead, submission to earthly

tyrants is elicited through psychological means, such as dyeing the character's stockings gray or ignoring her wishes. In *Our Nig*, the physical punishment meted out more resembles scenes from the slave narratives than from domestic fiction. Here, mixing the two genres leads to something that happens in neither: the protagonist rejects Christianity.

If the mentor figure does not ultimately lead the protagonist to conversion, what function does he fulfill in the story of Frado? Some critics see James as part of a larger political critique of abolitionists, with "James' illness and his ineptitude as a religious instruction indicat[ing] the powerlessness of the abolitionist movement" (Breau 462). The juxtaposing of two good-willed but physically weak characters with Frado's two tormentors certainly allows for such a reading, yet textual evidence also suggests that James is primarily a foil to dramatize Mrs. Belmont's malignant nature. James's first appearance in the Belmont household brings a reference to Frado's attractiveness, a comment that shortly thereafter leads Mrs. Belmont to cut Frado's hair. His reappearance in the family a second time coincides with the beginning of Frado's religious instruction, albeit Aunt Abby initiates the process. Her instruction soon becomes a bone of contention between mother and son, with Frado suffering even worse physical punishment as a result. James's initial attempt to obtain equality at the dinner table is quickly followed by "a thorough beating, to bring up arrearages" (72) when her benefactor is out of sight, a pattern repeated in each subsequent stage of her religious development. The desire to go to church, attend a prayer meeting, or read the Bible all become grounds for whippings and beatings.

James's presence, in other words, and his attempts to guide Frado's moral development only increase the indentured servant's suffering. Every action James or Frado undertake bring about a reaction from Mrs. Belmont, and invariably this reaction receives as much or more narrative attention than the initial action. The son's ill health, for example, places such a burdensome workload on Frado's own physical wellbeing that "she was at last so much reduced as to be unable to stand erect for any great length of time" (81-2), a fact that provokes Mrs. Belmont's wrath. The former event is described in a long paragraph; "the unrestrained malice" of the punishment encompasses six paragraphs (82). Similarly, the depiction of Frado's Bible reading covers two pages, Mrs. Belmont's reaction to it nearly four. While space alone is not the sole criteria of an episode's importance to the narrative, it does indicate where the author wishes to focus the reader's attention. So while abolitionists' ineffectuality in the face of an absolute evil does receive attention, it remains secondary in importance to the portrayal of the evil itself and the suffering inflicted on Frado. The emphasis here is on gaining the reader's sympathy for the protagonist.

Religion functions thus as a thematic element which allows the author to move the narrative forward. Jill Jones makes much the same point when she notes how narrative development collapses after Frado's rejection of religion. For Jones, Christianity in the novel "is a means rather than an end. In order to maintain her protagonist, the narrator must create a struggle through which the character can define herself" (48). For this reason, "the narrator keeps circling back to Mrs. Belmont, and defining Frado's religious doubts in opposition to her" (49). While Jones thus clearly explains how Wilson uses religion to create a conflict which moves the plot forward and grants Frado a degree of subjectivity, she does not identify the source which Wilson borrows this element from, namely the domestic novel, nor the ideological freight that comes with it. In fact, in using this generic device, Wilson has turned it on its head. In the domestic novel, religion normally represents a means to personal growth and an acceptance of women's place in the domestic sphere, or it functions as a device to garner the reader's sympathy. In *Our Nig*, religion is used in the context of facilitating personal growth, yet this growth ultimately never occurs. It is also used as a tool to elicit sympathy, yet by casting aside religious conversion Wilson has broken an unspoken contract with the reader: she seeks sympathy for her protagonist on the basis of a shared ideology, Christianity, but she does not fulfill her end of the bargain when she allows her protagonist to reject religion.

A few critics have argued that Frado's religious commitment is genuine, yet in doing so they overlook obvious signs of unchristian behavior. William Andrews, for example, claims the question of faith is intimately linked to Frado's developing a sense of self-esteem and empowerment and that "[t]he ultimate contest in the novel centers on whether Mrs. Belmont's physical and spiritual persecution can blight Alfrado's sense of personal value before the ministrations of James Belmont and Aunt Abby can nurture a spirit of Christian self-regard in the young black woman" ("Introduction" 20). However, James dies with Frado's salvation undecided, and a subsequent dialog with Aunt Abby, who utters only one more sentence in the novel after this, revolves around the elderly woman's vain efforts to stop Frado uttering thoughts which were "not at all acceptable to the pious old dame; but she could not evade them" (107). Frado even contemplates poisoning Mrs. Belmont a short time after this and is hindered only by a vaguely defined "overruling Providence" (109). Whether this is a religiously inspired Providence is highly doubtful, given her previously unrestrained glee at Mary's death. Her "self-regard" stems from the physical confrontation at the woodpile, not from absorption of Aunt Abby's Christian beliefs. Later, Frado does embark on a program "to

enrich her mind,” but now “school-books were her constant companions” (115), not religious texts. Self-improvement takes place in a secular, not a religious context.

Similarly, Debra Walker King argues that Frado’s decision “to give over all thought of the future world” (Wilson 104) means only that she is “reject[ing] the Christian concept of life in death,” not Christianity itself, and that Frado’s “religion is one in which she meets God directly—while here on earth” (King 40). While such a reading seems plausible if the lines are read in isolation, in the context of Frado’s earlier and later very unchristian behavior this interpretation appears, at best, suspect. The only real evidence King offers to support her assertion is later reference to the Bible as Frado’s “greatest treasure” when she finally leaves the Bellmont home after her period of servitude is finished (117). Yet this ignores the sentimental overtones in this isolated mention of the Bible, held by a character moving out into the cold, cruel world. The Bible may be her “greatest treasure” simply because she possesses little else.

Problematic is also King’s suggestion that Frado’s encounter with a “willful” sheep works as a religiously tinged critique of racism (54). Certainly this incident “parodies the biblical parable describing a shepard’s lost sheep” (King 41), but subverting the parable undermines rather than reinforces Frado’s standing as a pious Christian, be it in this world or any other. While King is correct that a later reference back to this event when Frado is celebrating Mary’s death does “theoretically link [...] the two events” (King 41), she overlooks the positioning of the two episodes. By having these scenes bracket the story of Frado’s religious education, Wilson does little to convince the reader that the conversion has been successful; in fact, by presenting the religious education as a self-contained episode followed by a return to unchristian behavior, the text calls attention to the conversion as a failure.

King is correct in identifying Frado as “reject[ing] the hypocrisy ingrained in Mrs. Bellmont’s interpretation of Christianity,” (40) but she fails to offer any support for her contention that this is not also a rejection of religion. In fact, here Wilson is fusing two genres together, neither of which absolutely requires the text’s protagonist to be highly religious. King fails to identify the topic of religious piety, as used here in *Our Nig*, to be from the slave narrative and not from the sentimental novel which she claims Wilson is demystifying. Religious hypocrisy is used by domestic authors to identify characters as negative; slave narratives, on the other hand, commonly present a slave owner acting in direct contradiction of Christian values in order to expose the corrupting nature of slavery. When Wilson says of Mrs. Bellmont that “[s]he donned her weeds from custom; kept close her crepe veil for so

many Sundays, and abated nothing of her characteristic harshness” (100), she is echoing the language of the slave narratives and their stereotypic presentations of professedly pious slave owners being the most brutal. The language and characterization are borrowed from slave narratives, but used to paint a domestic figure as evil. In the slave narrative it is not necessary for the slave to be religious for this tactic to work—the institution of slavery and its effect on white slave owners is the target. In the domestic novel the protagonist can be characterized as pious simply to juxtapose her to the religious hypocrite, as occurs with the protagonist in *Ruth Hall*.

For Wilson, the important aspect of the religious question is not any particular interpretation of Christianity, but rather the hypocrisy this question can draw out. In turn, this hypocrisy moves the narrative forward and galvanizes the reader emotionally into sympathizing with the protagonist. Frado never makes the leap of faith that James and Aunt Abby urge; instead, she remains fixed on Mrs. Belmont’s interpretation of separate heavens for blacks and whites. Allowing Mrs. Belmont to define the religious debate is an effective strategy for highlighting the contrasts between good and bad characters, between an individual honestly struggling to discover her own beliefs and a hypocrite standing in her way. Were Wilson’s aims to attack the religious interpretation Mrs. Belmont represents, she would have allowed Frado to present an alternative or allowed others to more strongly develop a counter interpretation. But the one time James presents such a vision of religion that encompasses “all, young and old, white or black, bond or free,” the attempt shatters on Frado’s belief that “she was unfit for any heaven, made for whites or blacks” (85). In other words, the question is still formed in her opponent’s terms, but the grounds for not converting are clear. In the end, her rejection of religion is complete and not based upon color.

Early in the novel Wilson establishes the question of hypocrisy versus innate goodness as a central conflict. When Frado’s father proposes to her mother, Mag Smith, he does so with reference to the discrepancy between appearance and inner values. “I’s black outside, I know, but I’s got a white heart inside. Which would you rather have, a black heart in a white skin, or a white heart in a black one?” (12). In keeping with domestic ideology, it is inner qualities that matter here, as well as the contrast between what one sees and what one gets. This thematic appears throughout the novel in the form of the Belmont family’s public respectability and private brutality; Frado’s husband, who claims to be a former slave; the “professed abolitionists, who didn’t want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North” (129); and at the end in Frado’s own “devout and Christian exterior” (125). As Henry Louis Gates Jr. states in his introduction to the novel, the choice of words strongly suggests

that “Frado never truly undergoes a religious transformation, merely the appearance of one” (Introduction xlix). This turn of events seems to suggest that Frado herself has finally become a hypocrite, yet another explanation also lies close at hand.

Probably the most astonishing aspect of Frado’s spiritual education is how completely it comes to a close once her decision is made. In the remaining twenty-seven pages of the novel religious references are few and far between. The most revealing is the first made after the failed conversion: in light of Frado’s victory at the woodpile, the indentured servant decides “to assert her rights when they were trampled on; to return once more to her meeting, which had been prohibited” (108). Embedded in the context of asserting herself against Mrs. Belmont’s wishes, the comment suggests that religion is important not for its spiritual qualities but because it allows her to define herself by acting in opposition to someone else. Rather than merging herself with a greater entity or learning submission to a higher power, Frado uses the meeting to establish a will independent of her guardian. Additionally, she creates a social space for herself outside the Belmont household. That this social realm finds no further mention in the text indicates the lack of influence the meetings have in any other sense for the protagonist.

The remaining religious references appear almost solely in the stereotypic contexts that characterize the domestic novels. The next comes only when Frado finally leaves the Belmont household, and, as if to highlight how little she receives at her departure—a half dollar and one dress—Wilson states that a “Bible from Susan she felt was her greatest treasure” (117). When her health fails after some months on her own, Aunt Abby briefly takes her in and “minister[s] to her once more in heavenly things” (119); but given the strong possibility that her illness will prove fatal, this passage reads more like the prelude to a deathbed scene than one imparting spiritual conviction. Once sympathy for the protagonist has been evoked and cynical remarks from Mrs. Belmont heard, Frado’s health improves enough to allow her to continue on alone.

Finally, in the closing pages of *Our Nig*, long after her having given up on Jesus, religion is again interjected into the text. The remark that Frado’s “devout and Christian exterior invited confidence from the villagers” suggests not only that her belief has not been internalized but that it is only a ploy to gain a community’s acceptance. Yet such telltale clues and suggestive language Wilson drops entirely when she closes the novel with a direct address to the reader: “Reposing on God, she has thus far journeyed securely. Still an invalid, she asks your sympathy, gentle reader. Refuse not because some part of her history is unknown, save by the Omniscient God. Enough has been unrolled to demand your sympathy

and aid” (130). Combined as these comments are with a direct plea for sympathy on one hand and a supernatural buttressing of narratorial authority on the other, one can only assume that these are stereotypical references to religion characteristic of the domestic novel where belief is only of secondary importance.

Thus, moving back and forth across the spectrum of religious intensity, Harriet Wilson validates her statement in the novel’s preface that she is writing out of need. Apparently searching for a formula for commercial success she latches on to the generic theme of religion, locating her novel not at a single point along the scale as the white writers did, but all up and down it. First avoiding discussion of religious themes, she later makes the conversion question the focus of the middle third of the novel. The high concentration of discussion about Frado’s faith in these forty pages is worthy of the most religiously intense domestic novels, yet even here are the telltale signs that religion is being deployed as a sentimental strategy to coerce readers into sympathy with the protagonist and against her tormentors. Finally, religion is rejected by the protagonist—an unheard of event in a domestic novel—and the question of faith dropped, to reappear only at stereotypic moments aimed to emotionally galvanize the readers into empathizing with Frado. In light of the reversion to the style of less religiously charged novels, the intent of the middle section of *Our Nig* becomes clear: religious belief was emphasized for the reader’s benefit.

One can, of course, debate whether religion was chosen out of commercial considerations or because it was a convenient vehicle for Wilson to tell her tale, yet it is undeniable that Frado’s story can only partly accommodate the pattern of white-authored domestic novels. Although *Our Nig* begins as the story of a young girl who has lost her mother and must grow up in a household with an antagonistic ersatz-mother, no white domestic novel has a heroine who is a servant. This condition will not allow Frado to explore economic independence, as Gerty does in *The Lamplighter* when she, like other domestic heroines, takes a teaching job, or to create an emotional space for her own development, as Ida does in *Alone* when she receives invitations to visit friends at distant homes or plantations, friends who themselves have servants. Acquiring the virtues religion teaches a heroine in a domestic novel will not help Frado out of her situation, for she is legally obligated to work in the family. What will free her is not the internalization of particular virtues to develop emotionally, but simply the passage of time. It is no wonder then that Frado’s conversion is a failure. For an indentured servant, religion as practiced by a middle-class woman is meaningless.

If religious virtues cannot facilitate maturity, then what can? *Our Nig* would seem to suggest the answer is direct confrontation. Frado's decision to withhold her labor in the woodpile scene marks her first clear step in establishing self-confidence and independence from Mrs. Bellmont. It is a scene reminiscent of Frederick Douglass's fight with Mr. Covey; yet whereas Douglass explicitly states that this physical defiance is what made him "a man," and tells his reader exactly how it defined his future relationship with the overseer, Wilson never follows up on the incident. Frado gains breathing room for a short while, but the incident appears to leave no lasting mark on the young girl or on her relationship with Mrs. Bellmont.

Why Wilson chose finally not to pursue this aspect of Frado's story will probably remain unclear. Possibly, as Jill Jones implies, Wilson saw no way to use this incident to develop the narrative tension and move the story forward (50). It may also be that Wilson recognized the inherent conflict between the physicality of open confrontation and the ideology of the domestic novel. Frado's failed conversion throws open the question of just how effective religion can be in the face of physical brutality, and to emphasize the possible impotence of religion by continuing the story of open conflict might have provoked a reaction against the author herself. So, instead, she may have been inclined to make the token religious references that are sprinkled throughout the novel's closing pages. However much twentieth and twenty-first century critics may prefer direct resistance, it was not what mid-nineteenth-century readers would expect.

1/4 The Bondwoman's Narrative

In *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Hannah Crafts takes a completely different approach to religion than Harriet Wilson. Rather than moving back and forth along the spectrum of religious intensity, Crafts firmly anchors the text on the highly pious end of the spectrum when, within the first few pages, the narrator meets an elderly couple who lead her "to the foot of the Cross" (10). Conversion is quickly accepted and never called into question, nor is accepting the dictates of God a matter of social or emotional maturity; religion is a given and all events are interpreted from the narrator's unyielding Christian perspective. Yet if Crafts is different from Wilson in taking an unquestionably religious stance, she is also similar in using the religion of the domestic novels differently than the white authors do.

The relatively recent discovery of Crafts's manuscript in 2002 has precluded the development of a large body of criticism on *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, but as time goes by

one can expect even more attention to be paid to the novel's domestic aspects than has been to date. Critics have acknowledged Crafts's debt to the slave narrative, gothic fiction, and sentimental literature, in particular her wholesale borrowings from Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, but it is the gothic element that has received probably the most interest. The fact that so little early black-authored fiction takes advantage of this genre, as well as the obvious parallels to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, help account for this attention, but a certain unease with Hannah's attitude to slavery and the novel's happy end are also evident. John Stauffer, for example, sees Crafts "articulat[ing] ambivalent and problematic attitudes toward freedom, which are part and parcel of her experimental style" (53), and suggests that this deviation from the slave narrative prevented publication of the novel during the author's lifetime. William Andrews has examined Crafts novel as a fusion of slave narrative and woman's fiction, identifying the novel's ending as unique in mid-century African American writing and labeling it a fantasy ending borrowed from the latter genre. One can interpret the ending positively as a re-visioning "African American women's rightful claim to marriage, home, work, and community in freedom" (Andrews, "Hannah Crafts's" 40), or as an "ironic reflection on the genre itself" (Buell 26), although a strong tendency today is to view a happy ending as a concession to the status quo and hence, like a text that doesn't unconditionally reject slavery at every turn, politically uncomfortable. Yet this unease can be overcome, I believe, by reading the ending as the culmination of a series of religious explorations that fuse a domestic motif with the moral question of slavery.

In an insightful essay, Dickson Bruce Jr. presents one of the best analyses of religious discourse in *The Bondswoman's Narrative*. Focusing on Hannah's experiences with Mrs. Henry, the kindly woman who nurses the slave back to health after an accident but refuses to buy her out of slavery because of a deathbed oath given to her father, Bruce links the discussions on moral behavior in the novel with the contemporary debates on formalism versus situationalism going on in the abolitionist movement. He argues that Mrs. Henry's adherence to her promise never to engage in buying or selling slaves is thus reminiscent of abolitionist debates about whether it was morally acceptable to make any such compromise with a sinful institution; taken together with the lawyer Trappe's argument that he is not responsible for laws he already found in place, Mrs. Henry's refusal to help represents a comprehensive critique by Crafts of a rules-based view of morality. In contrast to these characters, Hannah's moral responses are based "not on hard and fast rules but rather on an assessment of what, in a particular situation, seems right or wrong" ("Mrs. Henry's" 132). This approach to morality Bruce identifies as part of nineteenth-century sentimental

evangelicalism, which preached “a religion of the heart, one in which the love of God and love of others served as the only true bases for a Christian community” (“Mrs. Henry’s” 134).

I find, however, that Bruce’s interpretation raises a number of contradictions. If Hannah bases her actions only on the circumstances of a given situation, why does she then betray William’s presence in Mrs. Henry’s house when, as she admits, she has already “question[ed] the use, or necessity, or even the expediency of my instituting an espionage on the actions of one every way my equal, perhaps my superior” (Crafts 136)? Not joining Charlotte and William’s flight can be justified by a moral obligation to Mrs. Henry, but revealing to her benefactor that trouble is afoot goes beyond the call of duty to her hostess or to herself. And if Mrs. Henry’s refusal to assist Hannah suggests, as Bruce implies, that she is not an “empathetic character” (“Mrs. Henry’s” 134), why is she otherwise shown to be sympathetic to Hannah and the head of a clean, orderly, well-run household, the very connotation of a positive character in domestic literature? The answer, I believe, lies in understanding how Crafts is using a domestic motif to explore the implications of religious belief and behavior.

Life at Mrs. Henry’s “Forget me not” is only one in a series of very similar domestic tableaux that Crafts creates throughout *The Bondswoman’s Narrative*. The first is in the home of Aunt Hetty and Uncle Siah, who teach Hannah to read and to trust in God. Their cottage’s “smallness yet perfect neatness [...], the quiet orderly repose that reigned through all its appointments” (8) is strikingly similar to the “very plainly, yet neatly furnished” (60) house Hannah and Mrs. De Vincent find refuge in on their flight northward. Again, an elderly, religious couple inhabit this second cottage, which is a “sanctuary of sweet home influences, a holy blessed spot, so light and warm and with such an abiding air of comfort that we felt how pure and elevated must be the character if its inmates” (60). A domestic equality reigns in the couple’s relationship, the Bible-reading husband referred to as “father” but agreeing to all the wife proposes. They are essentially a mirror image of the Henrys at “Forget me not,” where the minister-husband exercises a benign patriarchal rule, catechizing the slaves on Sunday and otherwise remaining in the background. These households foreshadow the reappearance of Aunt Hetty in a new cottage toward the end of Hannah’s second escape attempt as well as her own marriage to a minister and life “in a neat little cottage” (237) that are revealed on the final pages.

All these scenes of domestic idyll bear great resemblance to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s portrayal of Tom and Chloe’s life together on the Shelby plantation in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, albeit Crafts describes religious white, not black couples. Stowe’s purpose, however, is

different than Crafts's: the religious and domestic bliss in chapter four of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, imitating Southern images of black happiness in a benevolent patriarchal system, has the propagandistic aim to show that this life is built on sand. Established early in the novel, domestic bliss never reappears again for Uncle Tom once Mr. Shelby is forced by financial circumstances to sell Tom. Instead, the domestic scenes he encounters become increasingly chaotic as Tom is sold further South, culminating in the sinful household run by the depraved Simon Legree. Domestic happiness, it appears, can only be realized through flight northward, for the true ideal is located in the Quaker household where George and Eliza Harris find temporary refuge.

Rather than presenting a variety of different households varying in orderliness and morality according to their proximity to slavery, Crafts describes essentially the same ideal household again and again with the differences marked by the moral choices the woman in the house makes. In Aunt Hetty and Uncle Siah's first home, the pious couple act out of the dictates of their conscience and teach Hannah to read and to believe. Morally opposed to slavery, they nonetheless do not agitate against it, but adopt the attitude that Hannah will also later assume, "to stand still and wait in faith and hope for the salvation of the Lord" (10). The reward they earn is persecution, as the institution of slavery bursts into their home one day in the form of an overseer. Initially banished for doing what their religion tells them is right, the couple will return in the end as a harbinger of Hannah's own domestic bliss, but not before the young woman encounters a number of other couples whose response to the moral dilemma of slavery vary by degrees. The second couple takes in Hannah during her flight with Mrs. De Vincent, but when confronted with the possibility that they may be harboring slaves, the wife prefers to remain ignorant. A conflict between Christian conscience and secular law is avoided by refusing to openly acknowledge the reality of the situation. But pretences offer no security to the fugitives, for slavery lives under the roof of this domestic idyll, this time in the guise of their persecutor, the lawyer Trappe. Closing one's eyes, Crafts suggests, will not alleviate the oppressed's suffering, even if one does otherwise act according to one's conscience.

The next scene of domestic bliss Hannah encounters comes in the story of Mrs. Wright, whom she meets in jail some months later. Another "kind good-hearted soul" whose "woman's heart was brimful of love and kindness for all, but most especially for the oppressed and afflicted" (81-2), Mrs. Wright lands in jail for actively helping a young girl escape from a slave trader. The price for directly opposing the system—in disregard for laws prohibiting helping fugitive slaves, she cuts the young girl's hair herself and leaves home to

escort her in a carriage on her flight—is forfeiting the domestic happiness she had. Her husband and children die while she is in prison, her house and property are sold off, and she is left to live in a dream world. Indeed, by portraying Mrs. Wright believing the prison her luxurious mansion, Crafts suggests that slavery has turned her domestic heaven into an illusion. Living according to her “duty, love, religion, humanity” (82) in a slave state, Mrs. Wright is told to see slavery as beautiful, and as a result recreates the jail as a palace and the guard as her groom. Although labeled a “victim of mental hallucination” by the narrator, her closing words lucidly describe the conundrum that has led to her collapse; in the unmistakable terms of nineteenth-century evangelicalism it is the dilemma of whether to listen to the laws of the heart or the laws of society, “to profess approbation where you cannot feel it, to be hard when most inclined to melt” (84).

A fascinating aspect of Mrs. Wright’s story is how closely it parallels the events of Hannah’s own childhood and presages her later escape. The slave girl Ellen is “suffered to visit Mrs. Wright whenever she pleased” (82), much as Hannah was allowed to pay visits to Aunt Hetty as a child. In re-working Hannah’s story, Crafts is exploring both what could have happened to Aunt Hetty and the implications of intervening in the world rather than relying on faith as the elderly couple had. At this stage the reader is left to ponder whether insanity was the couple’s fate as well, yet the indication is also given that Mrs. Wright has chosen a slightly different path. Portrayed as acting according to her heart yet never described as being as religious as the other woman, Mrs. Wright physically seized the initiative in helping a slave escape. In contrast, Aunt Hetty and Uncle Siah go quietly when the overseer bursts in upon them and then banishes the couple. Crafts emphasizes “the calm, sedate countenances of the aged couple, who were all unmoved by the torrent of threats and invectives” (12) to demonstrate the contrast between inner peace based on religion and the physicality and violence of the outer world. By the end, complete faith in God and the values of the heart will be shown to be the successful strategy for achieving the domestic idyll and reconciling the contradiction between worldly and religious authority.

While such complete reliance on religious belief—to the point of accepting slavery—is hard for the modern reader to fathom, it is an integral part of the highly religious domestic novels. Jane Tompkins has pointed out how nineteenth-century society believed in the power of an individual’s religious virtue to effect a larger social change, and she has shown how religious beliefs segregated the spiritual from the physical world, favoring salvation of the soul over that of the body (154). The latter is precisely what occurs in *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* when Hannah goes willingly with her captors from the forest hut she has hidden in

with Mrs. De Vincent, when she reveals herself as a slave to Mrs. Henry, or when she betrays William's presence in Mrs. Henry's home. The highest good for Hannah is not physical well-being—though she does of course wish for that too—but obeying her moral obligations and living in submission to God's will. To the twenty-first-century reader the idea of not seizing any given opportunity to escape from physical subjection is foreign and her seeming acceptance of her plight makes us uncomfortable. But the code of the religious nineteenth-century domestic novel values internal struggles over the physical, as is characterized by Ellen Montgomery's mother when she tells her daughter, “[t]hough we *must* sorrow, we must not rebel” (Warner 12).

It is within the privileging of the inner world over the acting in the physical world that one must understand Hannah's apparent acquiescence to slavery. Yet Crafts does not adhere to the wholesale submission and martyrdom of Stowe's Uncle Tom, for she is not creating a Christ-like figure whose death will redeem others, but a practical guide to survival in the tradition of the domestic novel. What separates Crafts's novel from the intensely religious novels authored by whites is that she does not equate conversion with maturity. Instead, with a belief in God a given, the real question is not maturity but testing the limits before God requires the individual to rebel.

The line is not yet crossed in the domestic scene Hannah finds herself in after leaving the jail. Indeed, Mrs. Henry's “Forget me not” represents a fusion of domestic ideal and slavery that appears at first to mitigate the latter's ugliest aspects. Yet a harsher form of slavery on the next farm where William works and Mrs. Henry's oath that bars Hannah entering “Forget me not” reveal the incompatibility of the domestic idyll and slavery. Mrs. Henry's moral choice is a variation of Trappe's sister's decision to close her eyes and ears to slavery's existence. Mrs. Henry recognizes that the two cannot morally coexist, but her refusal to intervene—intended to end her own involvement with slavery—only increases the suffering of another and does not bring about an end to slavery itself. Domesticity and slavery are so intertwined in “Forget me not” that any moral choice emerges as the wrong one.

Mrs. Henry's refusal to compromise leads Hannah to the situation in which she will have to make a moral decision about her own domestic life. Confronted with the prospect of an enforced conjugal life in the slave huts of the Wheeler plantation with a man who is anything but a minister—or even religious—Hannah finally decides to flee for her own sake. She undertook her earlier flight with Mrs. De Vincent out of Christian duty to help others; now she runs away to obey her duty to God. The stage has been set for this decision through two elements: the first one is Hannah's earlier comments on the obligation of the slave not to

have marry, have children, and thus increase human suffering; the second is the series of domestic tableaux Hannah encountered and their image of what domestic happiness can be. When confronted with the promiscuous conditions in the disorderly slave huts, where women and children sit haphazardly on the ground, women and men beat each other and fall over children, Hannah meets the exact opposite of the domestic idyll and realizes that she must flee. The guidance she finds in randomly opening the Bible to the story of Jacob fleeing Esau convinces her that God ordains and supports her flight from “a crime against nature” (207).

The reward Hannah receives for trusting in God’s grace and protection is to meet Aunt Hetty again, who provides refuge and the advice that leads to establishing a domestic idyll of her own, namely to flee to New Jersey where she eventually meets her husband and is reunited with her mother. If this happy end sounds like a fairy tale, it is precisely because the story has already included fairy tale elements which have been leading up to this ending. The fairy tale quality of the novel goes beyond simply the happy-ever-after quality of its ending or that it borrows heavily from a genre which often produces Cinderella-like tales. Characters in Crafts’s novel are often doubled and starkly drawn in either all-good or all-bad terms, just as in fairy tales. As Bruno Bettelheim reminds us, this trait in fairy tales allows children to identify and make clear decisions about which human qualities they wish to imitate; the tales thus prove extremely effective in guiding children in their moral development (16). Additionally, fairy tales externalize inner conflicts and present children with various solutions that allow them “to develop [their] own solutions when [they] consider what the story means for [them] and [their] inner conflicts at this point in [their] lives” (Bettelheim 33). A similar phenomenon is occurring here in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. When Crafts repeats the same scene again and again, varying the choices the characters make, she is presenting Hannah with the domestic situation Hannah herself would like to enter. Before she can, however, she has to see the various options and understand the consequences of the choices made. In order for her moral development to occur and the happy end to finally descend, she has to consider what these stories tell her. She can put her faith in God, pretend slavery does not exist, actively oppose it, or seize the moral high ground in withdrawing from all contact with it. In the end, she discovers the first option is the most suitable and throws herself completely on God’s mercy on her second flight northward.

Crafts, of course, is not telling a simple fairy tale, though elements of the genre can be found in her recreations of the domestic tableau. Instead, she is borrowing the all-good or all-bad character portrayals of the fairy tales and domestic novels and playing with them in a slightly different fashion. Fairy tales appeal to children because the doubled characters allow

them to subconsciously explore different aspects of a single personality, either their own or a parent's (Bettelheim 16). Here, Crafts doubles the situation in order to interrogate the different sides of a seemingly all-good character, the wife in the domestic idyll. Whether it is a character or a situation, the result is the same: Hannah will come to the realization—never explicit one in the text but subconsciously as a fairy tale works for a child—that moral decisions are ambiguous and never quite cut and dried. A decision that seems to lead to good may in fact carry other consequences as well. In asking herself the child's fairy tale question, "Who do I want to imitate?" she will choose her earliest teacher, Aunt Hetty.

Though it is beyond the scope of this article to pursue Crafts's use of this technique, it is worth briefly mentioning here that doubling is not limited in the novel to domestic cottages. Crafts frequently re-creates characters, such as Hannah's confidantes Lizzie and Charlotte, constellation of characters, such as the fleeing couples Charlotte and William, and Jacob and his sister, and manorial houses, such as Lindenwood—which appears twice—and the Wheeler plantation. Similar patterns and values are attached to all of them, of which the last grouping is of particular interest. In keeping with a middle class suspicion of ostentatious wealth, the large plantations are portrayed negatively. Secrets are hidden within their large houses, corridors and wings are set off limits, mistresses and their children sequestered behind false doors. Invariably, unhappiness falls to the owners of these mansions, while in contrast small, clean cottages that provide an easy overview house contented and pious inhabitants. Where nothing is hidden, no hypocrisy exists. The architectural styles in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* are consistent with an ideology that links middle-class domesticity with a religious life.

In the end, all the choices Hannah has made appear to be fully in accord with the cult of true womanhood, which demands that women be pious, pure, submissive, and domestic. She has opted from the outset for a religious life, been submissive to her masters, mistresses, and practically everyone else in the novel, escaped only in order to maintain her purity, and valued throughout the middle-class domestic life she receives as at the end. Given that Hannah is a mulatta, this should make *The Bondwoman's Narrative* a fairy tale of another sort, for critics such as Hazel Carby have argued that slavery denied black women access to the cult of true womanhood and that antebellum "configurations of black women existed in an antithetical relationship with the values embedded in the cult of true womanhood, an absence of the qualities of piety and purity being a crucial signifier" (32). One could then read Crafts's novel as an attempt to write against the dominant ideology and re-define it for black women.

However, one can also see Crafts's novel as pointing out a fundamental contradiction in the cult itself.

Feminist critics tend to view all four tenets of the cult of true womanhood as mutually reinforcing and ultimately conspiring to subordinate middle-class white women to men. Yet for all Hannah's self-denying behavior—especially the willingness to accept slavery that so unsettles modern critics—Crafts uses her protagonist to express the limits of submissiveness, limits which her piety places on her. Thus when the threat to her purity finally triggers Hannah's flight, it is a religiously sanctioned act. Throughout the novel she has prepared her readers for this decision by referring to God as the ultimate authority, capping it off with the observation that marriage is “a holy ordinance” (205) and implying that worldly authority should not destroy marriage's sanctity. For Hannah, submissiveness to worldly authority becomes a test of her religious piety, but ultimately submission to religion is the highest good. This contrasts directly with Welter's understanding of submissiveness solely in a secular sense, with religion functioning as a supporting ideology to teach women to place their desires second to men's. Welter suggests that that religious work was a safe arena that would not make women less submissive or domestic, but Crafts's text shows that taking religious faith to its logical extreme will not produce a completely tame and compliant woman.

In essence, Crafts's portrayal of the limits of submissiveness reinforces a point Nina Baym has already made about the cult of true womanhood. One of the few critics to reject Welter's theory, Baym points out that the ideology is not applicable to this literary genre since “[s]ubmissiveness, though sometimes a strategic imperative, was precisely what the stories were making problematic” (xxxix). All domestic fiction, from the most religious to the least, presents a protagonist resisting some form of authority as part of the process of emotional growth and establishing some form of independence. *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, like all domestic works, explores the limits of submissiveness and allows the protagonist both victories and the final reward of a domestic life and a marriage in equality. Adding the experience of slavery to the domestic overplot, Crafts shows the incompatibility of the cult of true womanhood's two chief tenets, submissiveness and piety, with each other.

I/5 Conclusion

Coming from opposite ends of the religious scale, *Our Nig* and *The Bondwoman's Narrative* are about as far apart from each other as each also is from the antebellum era's other African American domestic novel, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

(1861). Taken together, the three novels display a wide range of responses to the question of religious belief. Whereas Wilson's protagonist fails to succeed in her spiritual struggle and Crafts portrays a thoroughly pious heroine, Jacobs presents a believer who negotiates her way through the travails of a slave's existence, sometimes adhering to Christian tenets, sometimes bending them. Indeed, the forthright manner in which Jacobs draws attention to differing moral standards for black and white women, arguing that readers should consider the peculiar conditions black women face and judge them accordingly, has received a tremendous amount of critical interest in the past twenty-five years. The appeal to both feminist and African American critics has been how Linda Brent's decision to have children out of wedlock complicates nineteenth century moral arguments about women and adds race to the equation, effectively presenting the case for a de-centering of standards about moral and sexual behavior. This fits in well with the critics' more modern—and postmodern—attitudes, yet this should not by contrast prejudice us against Crafts's text, which takes a more rigid—and less modern—approach to moral behavior. Though relativizing moral standards as Jacobs does may have greater appeal to intellectuals today, obviously some in the mid-nineteenth century could and did envisage other successful responses to slavery. Crafts's religious attitude to solving her character's dilemma should not be confused either with Harriet Beecher Stowe's depiction of Uncle Tom, itself highly criticized both at publication and in the years since. The white-authored story of Uncle Tom shows a black slave pious to the point of martyrdom, a fate Crafts rejects for her protagonist out of religious considerations.

The wide range of responses to the question of religious belief in these three black-authored novels should come as no surprise, since any individual response to religion is ultimately a purely private matter. What is interesting, however, is how the question of race and slavery color all the black portrayals of religious belief and force them to differ from the white domestic novels, particularly as regards the relationship between conviction and romantic passion.

In the white-authored novels, religious belief or conversion is equated with attaining emotional maturity, which is often expressed in terms of a romantic interest and usually rewarded with matrimony. Ellen Montgomery, for example, must first submit to God and worldly authority before she can even hope to marry her "brother," John, and Gerty in *The Lamplighter* has to learn selflessness and prove it by jumping into a river to save her rival before she can gain the hand of her future husband. The genre's linkage of evangelical emotionalism, the demand for self-denial, and romance is briefly stated in Marion Harland's *Alone* when, in the beginning stages of her spiritual struggle, the novel's heroine realizes that

“willful deception had been her snare; instead of studying his heart, she had judged it by her own” (225). Only through Christian self-denial—focusing on others rather than on one’s self—can the goal of romantic success be achieved. In the black novels, however self-denial is linked neither to romance nor to a religious imperative, but is seen instead as necessarily enforced by a condition of servitude. Indeed, the situation of the protagonists relocates the main focus of the black novels; they are not about internalizing the need for self-denial but about achieving the domestic ideal in the face of a denial of the self by external forces. Religion becomes therefore not a matter of emotional growth, since emotional maturity is not the goal of the story. The struggles of the protagonist are external, not internal as with the white domestic heroines, and so the religious conflicts are not about adapting the self to the outside world, but adapting the outside world to religious beliefs. The results of these struggles are as varied as the spiritual struggles of different individuals: Jacobs asks the world to re-write moral standards, Crafts removes her protagonist to a different part of the world, and Wilson presents a failed conversion.

A remnant of the religious patterns from the domestic novels remains after the black writers have adopted the genre to their situations, and that is the link between religion and romance. In the white novels the metaphor of the family is used in both religious and familial contexts, with the two often overlapping so that a couple first become “brother and sister” and only then, after recognizing God as their mutual father or parent, can the two come together as a couple. In black fiction the existence of paternalistic slavery or indentured servitude complicates the equation. As the most intensely religious of the black novels, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* insists the most strongly on maintaining the familial relationships in both religion and love. In this novel, all the couples of the domestic ideal live in relationships of essential equality, although a benign male dominance is often evident, the clearest evidence coming from Trappe’s sister, who calls her husband “father” because “it seems so natural like” (60). A threat to the marital relationship recurs throughout the text in the form of a male who attempts to usurp the authority of God by dictating who couples with whom. Some disavow their responsibility for these acts, such as the lawyer Trappe, who argues he is just doing what the law permits, or the slave traders he deals with, who are again just carrying out the orders of others, yet Crafts does not condone the existence of a Father- or God-less universe where romantic relationships are arbitrarily arranged. Equally sinful are males such as Mr. Cosgrove, who lives like a “Turk in a haram” [sic] (172), choosing his concubines from the slaves. The most unnatural of all is when a woman, Mrs. Wheeler, attempts to play

God in the same fashion and autocratically selects a mate for Hannah. It is at this point that Hannah must rebel and restore the God-given order by running away.

Harriet Jacobs does not discuss romantic relationships in terms of siblings, opting instead to present the choosing of sexual partners in the context of compulsion versus free choice. She shares Crafts's concern with a woman's right to freely choose a mate and also makes it the fulcrum of her novel's plot, but presents it as a secular, not a religiously mandated decision. Her novel is domestic in that it claims a woman's right to establish a domestic sphere and uses the tension created by trying to fulfill this goal to move the plot forward, yet it comes much further down the scale of religious intensity than *The Bondwoman's Narrative*.

Adapting the genre's religion without the conviction, *Our Nig* reveals the most about the white genre's tension between religion and romance. Domestic novels, especially the religious ones, often portray the young protagonist as infatuated with her religious mentor, requiring her first to separate the love for God and love for man, and to understand the former as a precondition for the latter. Marion Harland summarizes this succinctly in *Alone* when her protagonist suddenly realizes that "he had tried to lead her, a wayward child, to the paths of happiness; and she had seen nought but the hand that pointed the way" (225). Harriet Wilson has Frado similarly conflate spiritual and erotic longings, but never brings Frado to fully separate the two.

"Come to Christ" he urged, "all, young or old, white or black, bond or free, come to Christ for pardon; repent, believe."

This was the message she longed to hear; it seemed to be spoken for her. But he had told them to repent; "what was that?" she asked. She knew she was unfit for any heaven, made for whites or blacks. She would gladly repent, or do anything which would admit her to share the abode of James. (85)

Here the text is fairly explicit about Frado's religious motivations. She's willing to learn the language of religion if it will let her reach her adolescent desires. At other points, even characters outside the Bellmont family recognize that her earthly desires are guiding her spiritual longings. After James's death Frado is still unable to recognize the difference: "She retired at night to mourn over her unfitness for heaven, and gaze out upon the stars, which, she felt, studded the entrance of heaven, above which James reposed in the bosom of Jesus, to which her desires were hastening" (99). The last relative pronoun appears to have the proper referent, especially for a domestic novel, yet one can wonder. Is her heart striving for Jesus or James? In confusing earthly lover with spiritual savior, the text offers perhaps inadvertent

support for Alfred Habegger's belief that sex lurks behind all conversations in Victorian literature. "Sexual energy is at the heart of women's novels; rather than sex simply lending interest to religious iconography, it was the text's real creed" (Harris 63). Thus, by borrowing a romantic plot convention from the domestic novel yet not following it to its usual conclusion, the text brings out what the white genre kept hidden below the surface, namely, that erotic passion fuels religious desires.

Finally, like Harriet Jacobs, neither author could completely conform her texts to the conventions of the domestic novel because the situation of their protagonists did not conform to the genre. For all the hardships and limitations middle-class white women faced in nineteenth century America, survival and a measure of control over their environment were possible if they learned to live by the Christian virtues the domestic novels taught. For the indentured servant Frado, no amount of patience, forgiveness, or charity can deliver her from the temporal hell she lives in, and so her conversion fails. For the slave Hannah, obedience and kindness are already a way of life, and the solution that Crafts shows is the opposite extreme, to submit completely to God's will and learn when it tells her to reject worldly authority. These are not texts where one learns how to fit into a particular society, but how to get out of a peculiar one. This may entail complete rejection of traditional religion or unshakeable acceptance, but either way it requires a different one than the white domestic novel offers.

One is tempted to explain the differences in the black novels as products of personal experience, and indeed critical research on all three texts initially focused on establishing autobiographical accuracy, to separate fact and fiction. Yet the question of an author's religious beliefs remains a personal one and probably not ascertainable at this distance in time. Hannah Crafts appears to have been a highly religious individual, although it is clear that she is also fictionalizing events. Some hope to discover more about this mysterious author may be drawn from the fact that researchers have recently uncovered information about the last decades of Harriet Wilson's life, an author similarly presumed to have left no trace behind. Long assumed to have vanished from the public sphere before the Civil War, P. Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald H. Pitts have uncovered her fairly public and successful career as a spiritualist lecturer and medium in Boston up to the end of the century. However, even this discovery dramatizes how difficult it is to draw conclusions about a person's religious beliefs. Although spiritualism carries a stigma of fakery charlatans preying on the gullible, sincere belief in it would indicate a preoccupation with one's religious or inner life, and indeed many prominent Americans of the era subscribed to this belief system. Yet all this

is complicated by the fact that people were apparently drawn to spiritualism for very different reasons: some had been religiously oriented abolitionists, others were probably attracted by the technological advances of the era that seemed to support spiritualism, and many came to take up contact with dead family members (Foreman and Pitts xxxix). In short, a specific religious preoccupation or inclination cannot be based solely upon membership in this movement. It is far better to rely on literary tools and to assume an author's right to blend fact and fiction, and to orient her work on generic models.

Domestic fiction, however, is not the only genre at work in these two novels. In addition to the goal of establishing a domestic realm, both texts tell the tale of a young black woman trying to escape from involuntary servitude. Therefore in the next chapter I will analyze the religious elements of the slave narrative and the ways both these novels conform to and deviate from the genre's conventions. At the same time, I will try to tease apart the domestic point of view from the demands of the slave narrative.

CHAPTER II

MAKING RELIGION AUTHENTIC: SLAVE NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN FOUR NINETEENTH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVELS

II/1 Introductory Remarks

Not only are they [antebellum slave narratives] important as sources of information concerning the slave's view of slavery, not only are they significant as historical relics—examples of nineteenth-century America's taste, culture, and issues—not only did they play an influential role in the history of the United States, but they were also perhaps the single most important development in Afro-American literature, [...]" (Foster 154)

Accepted today as axiomatic, Frances Smith Foster's 1979 comment summarizes the reevaluation the slave narratives underwent in the 1960s and 70s, as well as their importance for historians, sociologists, and literary critics. Since then, we have come to a better understanding of how this nineteenth-century genre relates to and helped lay the groundwork for twentieth-century novels such as James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and a similar appreciation of how African American autobiography evolved up until the Civil War, culminating with the narratives of Frederick Douglass and others, has also been achieved. Many factors have influenced the development of African American literature, but we realize better now how the importance of finding and attempting to assert one's voice in a hostile society has been one of the constants in both early African American autobiography and in twentieth-century black fiction.

In addition to the historical literary links between nineteenth-century and modern black writing, scholarly work has also focused on the evolutionary steps that occurred in the transition from autobiography to fiction, to the point where the slave narrative can be seen both as one of the literary models for later black literature and as a transitional text. Among others, Jean Yellin, for example, has pointed out the personal and political considerations that led Harriet Jacobs to publish her 1861 autobiography in novelized form under a pseudonym (271). William Andrews has analyzed the changes wrought by adding dialogue to antebellum autobiography (*To Tell a Free Story* 265-91) and how the "'free use' of authentication conventions" helped establish a new narrative voice in antebellum fiction ("Novelization" 33). Yet before any of this work was done, historians such as John Blassingame and Eugene

Genovese first went about establishing these texts' veracity. Only after the authenticity and general reliability of many narratives were determined did the literary analysis of these autobiographies get underway.

Full authenticity of any autobiographical writing would, of course, be impossible to establish, but many of these antebellum texts carried the additional burden of also being published for propaganda purposes. Numerous slave narratives appeared between 1830 and 1861, in abolitionist journals, in pamphlets, and about one-hundred as short book-length publications (Sekora, "Slave Narrative" 101), but the most famous of these—including narratives by Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, and William Wells Brown—were published with the support of abolitionist societies. White Northerners read slave narratives primarily as a means of informing themselves about slavery, not necessarily to learn about slaves as individuals or to be converted to a cause; yet in reading these texts they were confronted in varying degrees with both intentions. Slave narratives were thus inherently ideological texts serving a specific political purpose: they strove to win support for the abolition of slavery by simultaneously going, as one contemporary put it, "right to the hearts of men" (qtd. in Andrews, *TFS* 5) and appearing as reliable as possible. They aimed as well to tell the individual slave's own tale, yet frequently this goal took backseat to the immediate political task. Long after the abolitionist societies had closed down, the stigma of being propaganda hung over the slave narratives.

The veracity of the antebellum slave narratives was not just a question for twentieth-century historians, such as Ulrich B. Phillips, who claimed that they "were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authority is doubtful" (209), but also for their original audience. At the time they were written the slave narratives faced challenges by Southern slave owners angry at the implicit and direct attacks on their way of life, and the skepticism of Northern white audiences, whose racism often predisposed them to question whether blacks were capable of being entirely truthful or even being able to write in the first place. As a consequence, the first black authors—and their sponsors, editors, or amanuenses, where such assisted in shaping the text—developed strategies from the very beginning to authenticate the texts in the eyes of their readers.

Authenticating strategies, in other words, were woven into the very fabric of the slave narratives as these texts coalesced into a genre with recognizable patterns and conventions. Since the slave narratives, as historical documents, served as a model or a template for many early African American literary works, it is not surprising that some of these authenticating strategies found their way, consciously or unconsciously, into a number of these texts.

In this chapter I will focus on two evolutionary moments in the African American novel and examine how portrayals of religious belief were adapted from the slave narrative. Specifically, I propose to extend the list of authenticating strategies uncovered by other critics to include the religious portrayals of blacks themselves, and then I will examine how the portrayals change as the need for authenticating the text changes during these two distinct moments in African American literature: first, in the 1850s, during the initial development of black fiction, in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* and in Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*; and then in the 1890s, during the second major period, the nadir, in Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* and in Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*.

II/2 Authenticating Strategies and the Slave Narrative

Early African American autobiography drew heavily upon the Indian captivity narrative and spiritual or conversion narrative, relying on the reader's familiarity with these genres as a way of validating their authenticity. In the earliest narratives from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries race is largely written out of the text; for example, John Marrant's ethnicity "is almost totally subsumed under his generic identity as [a] Christian pilgrim" (Andrews, *TFS* 45). Rather than openly challenge their readers' notions on prevailing racial, social, or religious concepts, these narratives presented black individuals in white literary forms and showed them accepting white values. As Frances Smith Foster notes, "[t]heir emphasis was upon a theme more easily identified with by all heirs to a Judeo-Christian philosophy, the struggle for existence as strangers in an inhospitable land" (44).

It was in the thirty years leading up to the Civil War, when abolitionists recognized the propaganda value of the narratives and began encouraging and sponsoring many of the narratives, that the slave narrative coalesced into a more distinct and recognizable genre. James Olney presents probably the best and most concise summary of the generic conventions that developed, which included, among other trademarks, a title that makes the claim "Written by Himself," testimonials written by prominent whites that vouch for the existence of the slave and truthfulness of the facts presented, an opening sentence that reads "I was born . . .," an account of the ex-slave's parents, tales of whippings inflicted upon the writer and/or on other slaves—in particular female slaves—an account of how the slave learned to read and write, hypocritical Christian slaveowners who are invariably described as the most brutal

owners, and the successful escape attempt (152-53). Two parallel purposes can be readily discerned behind the use of these conventions: to authenticate the accuracy of the narrative and to galvanize the reader's emotions into support for the abolitionist cause. With the goal the destruction of a very specific social and economic institution based on race, the color of the narrator became a central issue. These dual strategies went hand in hand with one another. First, the humanity of the slave had to be established so as to make him worthy of the reader's empathy; then the sentiments of the reader had to be touched.

Religion could be used to effect both these ends. In the first case, portraying the narrator as religious and worshipping the same Christian God implicitly established his humanity and equality with the reader. Often the narrator made this explicit, as Harriet Jacobs does, quoting a white preacher she heard once: "Your skin is darker than mine; but God judges men by their hearts, not the color of their skins" (111). This could also be accomplished with irony, as William Wells Brown does when describing the case of a slave named Delphia, who is whipped mercilessly by her master and of whom he adds laconically at the conclusion of the description: "She was a member of the same church as her master" (*Narrative* 39). The second branch, the sentimental strategy, took on two separate forms. On the one hand, the slaveholder might be shown prohibiting any sign of piety or denying the slave access to worship services, as happens to Henry Bibb, who, when upon returning from secretly attending a prayer meeting, is told by his wife that his master has ordered he "should suffer the penalty, which was five hundred lashes, on my naked back" (120). In a variation on this pattern, Henry Box Brown mused on what could have become of him had his mother not secretly taught him "the principles of morality": "[i]t is really a wonder to me now, considering the character of my position that I did not imbibe a strong and lasting hatred of everything pertaining to the religion of Christ" (3). Such observations appear calculated to evoke in the reader pity for the slave or outrage at the slaveholder's behavior. Practically universal, on the other hand, was the portrayal of the professedly Christian slaveowner who prayed on Sundays and whipped slaves mercilessly on the other days of the week. Frederick Douglass summarizes this hypocrisy succinctly in discussing his own experiences: "[t]he pious and benign smile which graced Covey's face on *Sunday*, wholly disappeared on *Monday*" (*My Bondage* 241). To emphasize the corrupting nature of the institution and the reader's own precarious relationship to it, occasionally recently arrived Northerners might also be inserted into this role and shown backsliding into brutality. Either way, provoking religious outrage in the reader was an effective strategy; it won the reader for the abolitionist cause by letting him slip into the role of religious redeemer. Helping end slavery would

satisfy the missionary impulse by helping the black slave and could prevent one's neighbor or fellow countryman from leaving the narrow path.

Chief among the authenticating strategies was, of course, the use of testimonials. So prevalent were they in all texts—as preface, appendix, or both—that John Sekora pointedly reminds us that “the story of a former slave was thus sandwiched between white abolitionist documents” (“Black” 497). Robert Stepto has even suggested that the degree to which the narrative integrates the authenticating documents can be considered a marker of the text's literary quality. While early on latent racism fueled the suspicion about a text's reliability, it was the controversy surrounding the accuracy of James Williams's narrative in 1838 that led to authentication becoming a central issue in the publication of all slave narratives. More strategies had to be devised in order to provide an extra dimension of authenticity. Specific names and locations, bills of sale, references to the Nat Turner revolt all gave the feel of authenticity and an extra-textual referent to establish the text's veracity. I would argue that the referent did not always have to be concrete either; simply adhering to the reader's expectations or preconceived beliefs about abstract topics like race could also be understood as a kind of authenticating strategy. Such a strategy would not objectively confirm the truthfulness of the text, though if it confirms what the reader believes to be true it functions much the same way as an objective authenticating strategy in the reader's mind. In other words, it would make the text appear reliable to the reader. Obviously, this method of confirming a text's accuracy is not without its own—epistemological and moral—problems, as in fact the very case of James Williams makes clear. William Andrews points out that the text's amanuensis, the nationally recognized poet James Whittier, attested to the narrative's veracity based not upon any objective, corroborating facts, but because Williams appeared to him to be “a believable narrator” (*TFS* 88). Williams, like James Ball in his ghostwritten narrative published a year earlier, met the expectations of the abolitionist editors as to how a truth-telling black man behaves, with “his emotional restraint, reticence about personal feelings and judgments, and apparent propensity to forgive and pity” (89).

In other words, the Williams case dramatizes how white abolitionists fell victim to their own notions of what George Fredrickson has termed romantic racialism. A form of paternal racism, this concept views blacks as child-like, innocent, and possessing a natural affinity for religion. The Christian values of the era—self-sacrifice, forgiveness, charity—were thus embodied by blacks, the most famous literary example being Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom*. Should a white person encounter a black who displayed these features, either in person or in a text, they would be predisposed to trust the figure. Hence, we can

speak of an authenticating strategy when we discover that the majority of slave narrators displayed protagonists with these kinds of features.

At this point it is important to remember that the historical accuracy of the slave narratives is not being brought into question. Indeed, it would be impossible at this point in time to accurately assess the depth of a slave narrator's religious faith, or whether he was telling a white amanuensis or editor what the slave believed he or she wanted to hear. James Olney has already demonstrated in a number of instances, for example, in the narrative of Henry Box Brown, how the editor's language in the preface carried over into the body of the narrative, and that this recurs so frequently that whenever the preface states that the "unvarnished truth" is coming, the language will be anything but unvarnished (166). What is important is not the specific truth of any one assertion nor who exactly is shaping the text, but the simple fact that the assertion is being shaped to meet the expectations of its ultimate consumers, a white audience.

One should also keep in mind that the truths represented in the slave narratives are not necessarily representative of slave culture in general. By their very nature, the antebellum slave narrators were not representative slaves, for it took tremendous determination, resourcefulness and strength to be one of the very few out of the millions of enslaved African Americans to escape. When reading through the antebellum narratives, one can easily get the impression that most slave narrators were themselves religious, some perhaps more deeply than others, and that if the vast majority of slaves were not religious, this was simply because many of the slaveholders prevented it. Recent scholarship, however, places this belief in doubt. Albert Raboteau finds that church membership in the postbellum era reached approximately one-third of the African American population (209), while Daniel Fountain, in analyzing conversion reports in all slave narratives—the number of postbellum narratives swamps the antebellum narratives by a ratio of 40:1—places the size of the Christian community in the antebellum South at one-fourth of the black population (145). This discrepancy between the impression conveyed by the antebellum narratives and the historians' assessment of the pervasiveness of Christianity may have been caused by any number of factors: the nature of the fugitive slaves themselves, the selection process carried out by abolitionists seeking slave narrators, the support of churches in publishing spiritual autobiographies by ex-slaves, or the desire of the slaves to tell their editor/publishers what they wanted to hear. That pressure existed to conform to prevailing standards of Christianity, however, is beyond doubt, as the 1845 narrative by Frederick Douglass, the most outspoken black narrator of the era, indicates. Apparently warned that his comments on religion could be

misconstrued, Douglass felt compelled to include an appendix in which he explicitly states that the criticisms “apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper” (153).

The shaping of the slave narratives to meet reader expectations is also evident in areas beside religion. Narrators such as Moses Grandy, Lundsford Lane, and Josiah Henson all present themselves “as an exemplar of the traditional Protestant work ethic, worthy of the admiration and sympathy of northern, middle-class America” (Andrews, *TFS* 112). Frederick Douglass conforms his narrative partly to the Benjamin Franklin tradition of the self-made man, describing the desire to learn reading and writing. William Craft is representative of the many slave narrators who published in Great Britain, with his more open critique of northern race prejudice and his heaping of praise on the English for their more enlightened attitudes. In continuing his story beyond arrival in the North, Craft is clearly both highly cognizant of his audience’s nationality and ingratiating toward them: toward the end of his narrative he asks God to bless American abolitionists who are working “to cleanse their country’s escutcheon from the foul and destructive blot of slavery” and hopes that “may God ever smile upon England and upon England’s good, much-beloved, deservedly-honoured Queen, for the generous protection that is given to unfortunate refugees of every rank, and of every color and clime” (94). Such comments fell on an audience positively predisposed to these observations; as Audrey Fisch notes, contemporary reviews in the British press often constructed the slave narratives as “an indictment of America and a vindication of English superiority” (24). All these generic patterns encourage the readers to see blacks as essentially equal to themselves and as sharing the same values. Religious portrayals, on the other hand, have the added dimension of appealing to the white readers’ subliminally racist belief in how he thinks blacks naturally are: safe, child-like, and forgiving.

In the rest of this chapter I will examine how religious portrayals were, or were not, integrated into the four novels as authenticating strategies. Ranging from the implicitly racist appeal of romantic racialism to the attempt at establishing a consubstantiating relationship with the reader by erasing differences in religious practices, these literary strategies were borrowed with varying degrees of success in both the pre- and post-war periods; neither the antebellum nor the nadir novels were uniformly successful in employing the slave narratives devices.

II/3 *Our Nig*

Right off, in its extended title, *Our Nig; or, Sketches in the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North, Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*. By “*Our Nig*”, Harriet Wilson’s text announces itself as a form of the slave narrative. Strictly speaking, of course, it is not, as the inclusion of “Free Black” and the reference to the Northern setting indicate. Yet it is perfectly logical for Wilson to draw on the genre for authority; her novel is unique in the antebellum era in focusing on a black indentured servant in New England and at the same time parallels the fate of millions of African Americans then enslaved in the South. Should her purpose have been to realize a profit to support herself and her child, as she herself states in the preface, then to borrow elements from two of the most popular genres in the 1850s, the domestic novel and the slave narrative, would have made good business sense, especially in advertising the connection in the title. Also from an artistic and practical point of view much speaks in favor of leaning on the slave narrative. Beginning with Henry L. Gates Jr., many critics have noted how *Our Nig* appears to be “an autobiographical novel” (Introduction xxxvii), and what better model to draw upon than popular contemporary black autobiography, the slave narrative. Even if the broad outlines of her story suggest a closer parallel to the domestic novel—violent though the novel is—the slave narrative could also be used to help establish authority and authenticity, and thus act as a counterweight to the fictional format of a novel. Some measure of authenticity would have been useful, since at that point only three other novels had been published by African Americans in North America.

Aside from the title, *Our Nig* employs another prominent authenticating device from the slave narrative, namely, the appended letters. At first glance, these three letters appear to function in the same fashion as similar letters in the slave narrative, but upon closer examination two major differences emerge, both with wider ranging implications. In slave narratives the authenticating letters are written by prominent whites, usually males, who attest to the veracity of the narrative. A committee of well-known persons was required to counter challenges to Henry Bibb’s narrative, and the nationally famous abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips wrote letters that prefaced Frederick Douglass’s 1845 narrative. The authors of the letters appended to *Our Nig*, however, are unknown, the last not even supplying a name, only initials. Although P. Gabrielle Foreman and Reginald Pitts have recently provided suggestions for the identities of the three, even the professional genealogist Pitts could not discover a Margareta Thorne in mid-century New England. What

authenticating value could the letters accrue if their authors disguise their own identities, publishing the letters under pseudonyms or initials? Did Wilson simply borrow the convention but in the end decide, since she was publishing what was ostensibly a novel, that the authenticating device could be fictionalized as well? The situation gets even murkier when we look at the second major difference, namely, what the letters actually say.

Appended letters in the slave narratives tend to fall into one of two categories: either they attest to personal knowledge of the ex-slave's existence and personal character, or they present general arguments against the institution of slavery, claiming that the experiences the narrative relates are representative. The former may or may not testify to the veracity of specific incidents; however, especially taken together with bills of sale and advertisements for slave auctions that are often included, they read like legal documents. The letters at the end of *Our Nig* do not fall clearly into either of these categories; with slavery not an issue, the three letters stay on a personal level and avoid legalistic language, though all identify racial attitudes and unchristian behavior as the prime cause of the author's suffering. The third letter follows the slave narrative testimonials the closest, claiming a general acquaintance with the author, while the first two go on not only to corroborate the incidents described at the end of the novel, but to actually elaborate and expand upon them. Rushing quickly to a close, the novel condenses the events after Frado's liberation from the Bellmont household, her illnesses, moves from city to city, courtship, marriage, birth of a son, and abandonment into some fourteen pages, only to have the appended letters go back and fill in the details of some of these events. The events related—for example, the author's move into a poorhouse—do little to provide extra-textual evidence for the novel's veracity, but seem instead to follow a sentimental strategy. The letters do not function as buttresses for the text but instead appear to enter into a dialogic relationship with the body of the novel.

This relationship is most noticeable when one looks at how religious references permeate the three letters and how they creep into the close of the text. As noted in the previous chapter, Frado's religious conversion is a failed one; after "resolv[ing] to give over all thought to the future world" (104), the protagonist displays a remarkably unchristian lack of forgiveness toward her tormentor and almost no pious behavior. Later, during the rapid rush to the conclusion, an occasional reference to God or the Bible appears, placed at strategic moments that are possibly meant to appeal to Christian readers' sentiments. When read in conjunction with the appended letters, however, another possibility begins to take shape: the references may have been made to anticipate and accommodate her sponsors' piety.

It is vital to keep in mind how little is still known about the exact conditions under which this black-authored text finally reached the printing press in the antebellum era. John Sekora urges us to remember that whites controlled the editing process and owned the publishing companies that turned out many of the slave narratives, and so we should not forget that these “black message[s] will be sealed in a white envelope” (“Black” 502). *Our Nig* represents one of the few black-authored texts which contains no indication of a white editor or any mention in the appended letters that help was at all given in shaping the text. Nonetheless, we know nothing of the negotiations that led to the publication of Wilson’s novel. In the only study to date that examines the publishing history of *Our Nig*, Eric Gardner suggests that “the book was produced as an act of charity” by the book’s printer, George Rand (232). Given her impoverished circumstances that both the end of the text and the appended letters allude to, it seems likely that either this was the case or a sponsor was found to cover the printing costs. Potentially, any or all of the letter writers could have been benefactors, and rather than alienate a sponsor Wilson may well have adapted her text to the circumstances.

With these observations, I do not wish to imply cynicism on Wilson’s part. In crafting what most critics agree is a fictionalized autobiography—references to Wilson/Frado’s son, for example, in the preface, the body of the text, and appended letters match in age, race, and family name with the death certificate discovered during Henry L. Gates Jr.’s research—Harriet Wilson appears, as far as one can tell, not to have unduly brutalized the facts surrounding her life. The recent discovery of her post-publication career as a medium in the spiritualist movement indicates that she was, like her character Frado, greatly interested in spiritual matters. Indeed, it seems to clear up what happened to this interest after she abandoned the more traditional path of conversion and admittance to a church. She simply does what all writers of fiction and autobiography do, consciously or unconsciously: she repackages the truth to meet the expectations of her fictive readers.

In fact, in consciously shaping her text with an eye to the appended letters, Wilson follows a literary tradition that Robert Stepto has identified in the slave narratives. Stepto evaluates the literary quality of a narrative based on how well the authenticating materials are integrated into the narrative itself; Henry Bibb’s narrative he uses an example of a text where the tale itself and the authenticating documents perform only minimal interactions, the latter framing the former. More sophisticated narratives, Stepto claims, are drawn toward each other “by some sort of extraordinary gravitational pull or magnetic attraction” (“I Rose” 237). In the case of Frederick Douglass’s 1845 text, the narrative integrates and subsumes the appended letters, while William Wells Brown’s 1853 narrative, published together with excerpts from

his speeches and his own novel, *Clotel*, becomes part of the authenticating strategy itself. Harriet Wilson's novel represents a version of the sophisticated use of authenticating documents, with the body of the text and the appended letters reaching out to meet and support each other. The letters expand on the events in the novel's rushed conclusion, filling in precisely these gaps—the career as a straw sewer, the story in the poor house, the details about her son—that the novel has only skimmed over. The religious references in the novel's hasty closing work not only as a sentimental strategy, but also set the stage for the authenticating letters' testimonials to Wilson/Frado's Christian character. Religious belief becomes the ground upon which the novel meets its authenticating documents.

The religious dialogue established between Wilson's text and the letters finds a mirror image in the letter by Allida. Interestingly enough, she chooses to include both a letter and a poem from Wilson in her own letter, thus providing the unusual twist of the authenticating letter being authenticated by the very person whose identity is meant to be validated in the first place. At this point, however, let us turn our attention to Wilson's poem, which presents an interesting contrast when read in conjunction with another poem Allida inserts at the end of her letter. Although it is unclear who wrote the second poem, it is clearly intended to be Allida's response to Wilson's poem, "calculated to comfort and strengthen this sorrowful, homeless one" (137). Wilson places herself in the her poem as a supplicant to God, begging him "O God, forsake me not," and identifies herself in social rank and plight with Jesus: "He chose a lowly lot;/ He came unto his own, but lo!/ His own received him not./ Oft was the mountain his abode, the cold, cold earth his bed;" (135-36). The second poem "lend[s] a gracious ear" to these pleas, repeating God's answer of "'I will help thee;'" three times to the supplicant. The use of quotation marks for this phrase, yet the insistence on a first person point of view for all but the second line make localizing the poem's voice difficult. Is the speaker intended to be a human as the opening suggests ("I will help thee', promise kind/ Made by our High Priest above;") or God as later lines imply ("Thy spirit find a peaceful home/ In mansions *near my face*.")?

Assuming Allida to be white, which is in keeping both with Foreman and Pitt's recent research and the slave narrative tradition of appended letters, the second poem reveals an authoritative and paternalistic voice of a white/God responding calmly, benevolently, and shelteringly to the supplicating black of the first poem. The dialogue between these two poems thus recreates the black voice of the novel speaking with the white voices in the appended letters and simultaneously fulfills the paternalistic desires of the white readership. As William Andrews shows with the example of Lunsford Lane, presenting the self as a

“black ‘child of sorrow’ safely deposited in the endlessly rocking cradle of white love and support” (*TFS*, 117) was one way of catering to white readers in the North. The dialogue of the two poems with each other thus functions as an authenticating strategy by casting Wilson herself in the romantic racialist image of blacks, a tactic made necessary by the novel’s refusal to completely portray Frado in this light.

The inclusion of Wilson’s letter in Allida’s testimonial helps reposition Wilson as a Christian in other ways, too. Not only the similarities in style that Gates has noted serve to tie authorship of the novel and the letter to each other (xxii), but also mention of the Bible she carries with her, presumably the one Frado receives from Susan, refers back both to the text and Wilson’s piety. Along with allusions to the story of the biblical prophet Elisha, these incidents function to portray Wilson as a thoroughly Christian individual. Yet even a casual reading of Wilson’s letter also reveals a heavy dose of sentimental affect. The reserving of “a place nearer my heart” (135) for the Bible and the coincidental opening of the holy book to an appropriate passage remind us that Wilson the letter writer was fully aware of the conventions of sentimental or domestic literature.

The use of anonymous and pseudonymous authenticating letters, the reversion in the letters to a highly religious persona—one not supported by the failed conversion in a supposedly autobiographical novel—and the use of sentimental language at appropriate moments in both the novel and the personal letters all lend some support to Elizabeth Breau’s assertion that the appended letters may have been written by Wilson herself (458). Yet in lieu of evidence to the contrary, one should perhaps be generous enough to assume that the letters are what they claim to be and that the authors themselves had reasons to conceal their identities. As mentioned above, Wilson would certainly have needed some form of sponsorship, either financial or a personal recommendation, in order to get her novel published, and the letter writers are the most likely source of such support. What the letters do finally suggest, though, is some degree of collusion between Wilson and the letter writers: almost certainly Allida, Margareta Thorn and C.D.S read the manuscript before composing their testimonials, and it is also possible that Wilson crafted the novel’s ending, with its sentimental references to religion, not only with an eye to garnering her readers’ sympathy, but also her sponsors’ and to maintaining their good will. Additionally, I would suggest that Wilson authorized Allida’s use of her private letter to a third party. Although Allida implies that it was her own decision to include it, the letter fits so well into an overall authenticating strategy that it may well have been part of Wilson’s plan.

Conspicuously, the letter presents Wilson referring to her white benefactress twice in as “mother” and places the twenty-something black in the position of a small child being read to. Claudia Tate sees the maternal discourses in *Our Nig* as Wilson’s attempt at an “act of heroic maternal transformation” and “the preface and appendix [as] textualiz[ing] Wilson’s self-esteem as a black person, a woman and a mother” (38), yet the implications of Wilson projecting Mrs. Walter as her own mother is something Tate glosses over. Far from bolstering Wilson’s self-esteem, it returns her to childhood. I read this passage as another ploy to romantic racialism, an attempt to make the author credible to the white reader by fulfilling stereotyped beliefs about safe and trustworthy blacks. Reinforcing the image of romantic racialism by putting the words into Wilson’s mouth, along with a renewed emphasis on sentimental religion, becomes necessary because several pages earlier the final chapter has, by presenting Wilson’s ex-husband as an imposter, raised the question of authenticity and the slave narrative. Indeed, the reference to his knowingly having deceived abolitionists about his status as a fugitive slave undercuts the authority of the slave narrative genre that Wilson is borrowing from and draws the reader’s attention more closely to its authenticating devices. Hence, when one does arrive at the appended letters, they are embellished both in tone and with the addition of Wilson’s own voice, as if any residual doubts about her piety—and hence credibility—following the failed conversion need to be overcome.

But what is one to make of this contradiction? How is one to reconcile a text that first raises the question of a genre’s authenticity and then relies on the same genre’s authenticating strategies? Many critics, eager to impute political motives to Wilson, simply overlook the appended letters and the implications of Frado/Wilson’s re-emergent piety, preferring instead to focus on how the body of the novel itself attacks “prevailing social constructions of Christianity, race, and womanhood” (West 3). One of the few critics to deal with the appended letters, Elizabeth Breau, claims the letters are fictional, asserting they are part of Wilson’s overall ironic and satiric portrayal of white abolitionists; yet in discounting any autobiographical intent, Breau neglects both Wilson’s stated purpose in writing the narrative and the verifiable facts concerning her life that the text bears out. Certainly Wilson’s ability to use irony is evident in her reference to herself in the title as “Our Nig,” and one can, of course, read the appended letters as ironic when placed in the context of Frado’s failed conversion. However, given the firm control whites held over the publishing industry, one must assume supporters lurking somewhere in the background. Unmitigated irony from the title page to appendix, though attractive to modern scholars, would seem unlikely to attract the necessary help in publishing a book, especially when the primary purpose was to support

her family. Backtracking to varnish an autobiographical novel appears a more likely approach.

Certain incidents in *Our Nig*, particularly in the early chapters, are obviously products of Wilson's own invention. The events before Frado's birth, dialogues between Mag and Jim, and some occurrences before Frado is sent to the Bellmonts at the age of six are all certainly results of a creative and imaginative process. Other events in the novel and letters have been substantiated by legal documents: the birth certificate of her son, his admission to the poor farm, and the marriage license to Thomas Wilson. Even the existence of the Bellmont family, in actuality the Heywood family of Milford, N.H., has been verified by Barbara White, although White also suggests that Wilson combined characters and changed the chronology "in the interest of streamlining the narrative" (44). Other events have almost certainly been reshaped for reasons of discretion or due to the nature of memory, yet it is fairly safe to say that the failed conversion is accurate. There would be little reason to falsify such an event and everything to be gained in having her fictional alter ego become a believer, especially given the expectations in a domestic novel or slave narrative. The spiritual struggle is possibly autobiographical, the failed conversion certainly is.

One can also view the novel as failed, at least in this sense. It remains a strong indictment of northern hypocrisy regarding racial prejudice, but from the perspective of incorporating slave narrative devices into an autobiography it allows fact and fiction to contradict each other. Literary appeals designed for a white readership, *Our Nig* inadvertently tells us, did not always convey the reality of black writers.

II/4 *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

As an unpublished manuscript, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* lacks the external authenticating apparatus of appended letters. Stored alone in a box for at least fifty years prior to its rediscovery in 2001, the text was unaccompanied by any indication of its unknown author's intentions regarding how it should be published or marketed. Internal evidence from the text, however, suggests Crafts might well have forgone the formality of testimonials had her novel reached the presses during her lifetime. Although Crafts positions her text as a slave narrative—proclaiming herself on the title page as "A Fugitive Slave Recently Escaped from North Carolina," and commenting in the preface, in the best tradition of the slave narrative, that the text presents "the plain, unvarnished facts" and "the truth,"—practically none of the genre's authenticating devices are used. In particular, the portrayal of protagonist's religious

faith displays none of the slave narrative's characteristic appeals to a white readership's sense of how blacks experience religion.

Antebellum slave narratives, as a rule, took pains to present black religious practices as fairly similar to white religious worship and beliefs, avoiding or toning down ecstatic and enthusiastic practices that other, later observers frequently noted (Raboteau 66-73). Some narratives did mention superstitious beliefs and conjuring that a Christian would frown upon, but are always careful to distance themselves from these practices. William Wells Brown, for instance, flatly states in his 1847 narrative "I am no believer in soothsaying," when he discussed his contact with Uncle Frank, a black fortuneteller (93). Indeed, Wells belittles the prophecy he receives, clearly painting this kind of clairvoyance as a fraud: "He further said, that in trying to get my liberty I would meet with many severe trials. I thought to myself any fool could tell me that!" (92). Similarly, Henry Bibb, in describing two incidents where he sought the help of a conjurer, points out that "I had *then* great faith in conjuration and witchcraft" (my emphasis, 26) and at the same time attempts to assure his white readers that blacks harbor no ill intentions when they turn to the supernatural. "This is all done for the purpose of defending themselves in some Peaceable manner, although I am satisfied that there is no virtue in it at all" (25-26). Both Wells and Bibb practiced these stories on the abolitionist lecture circuit and knew what worked with white audiences and what did not. Tales of superstitious Africans were both exotic entertainments and a way of confirming white beliefs of how blacks behaved and their own religious superiority. The tales could only be believed, though, if the teller shared the audience's own value system.

Crafts, on the other hand, has no qualms about presenting herself as both thoroughly Christian and superstitious at the same time. In introducing her new mistress, Mrs. De Vincent, Crafts even gives her superstitious side a racial origin: "I am superstitious, I confess it; people of my race and color usually are; and I fancied then that she was haunted by a shadow or phantom apparent only to herself, and perhaps even the more dreadful for that" (27). There is, of course, no reason why a person cannot believe both in orthodox Christianity and the supernatural, but the point here is that in doing so Crafts forfeits the authenticating function of religion for her narrative. Her nineteenth-century audience would have been reassured by the narrator's professing a belief they expected a black to have, yet certainly suspicious of a narrator who never firmly rejects such beliefs and completely adopts their own religious ideology.

Even Frederick Douglass, one of the most eloquent and intellectual of the slave narrators, was at pains to link himself clearly to Christianity: not only did he include an

appendix to his 1845 autobiography to “remove the liability of [...] misapprehension” and assert his love of “the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ” (153), but ten years later in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), he extended and deepened the one section that shows his dealings with African religious practices. In the 1845 narrative, he briefly describes how a slave convinces him to carry a root in his right pocket to prevent him from being beaten by Covey, the brutal “nigger breaker,” and the apparent initial success leaves him to conclude that “as it was, I was half inclined to think the root to be something more than I at first had taken it to be” (111). Left simply with that remark, the reader may also be “half inclined” to speculate on where his subsequent courage to stand up to Covey came from. In the 1855 autobiography, however, Douglass more clearly disassociates himself from faith in magic even before he takes the root, an idea which he now considers “very absurd and ridiculous, if not positively sinful” (184). After his early luck with the root, the inspiration for his rebellion is clearly attributed to his own resolve and not to superstition. “All went well with me until Monday morning; and then, whether the root had lost its virtue, or whether my tormentor had gone deeper into the black art than myself (as it was sometimes said of him [...] it is not necessary for me to know, or to inform the reader. Here, the tables are turned; his foe is now identified with “the black art” and not Douglass, whose physical resistance and determination place him firmly in the tradition of self-reliant American individualism that allows the audience to trust him. The process of seeking freedom in the slave narrative is thus not only the movement from “South to North [...] chattel to man, sin to salvation” (Foster 127), but from paganism to Christianity.

Crafts, however, leaves the distinction between mainstream Christianity and folk superstition blurred. While clearly indicating throughout the text her narrator’s strong evangelical Christian orientation, Crafts never allows Hannah to fully complete the transition from paganism to Christianity that slave narrators accomplish. Instead, Hannah remains in a religious sense a liminal character, fusing a strong Christian identity that brings her credibility with her white audience and beliefs in superstitions that she locates in her racial background. A later instance when Hannah denies possessing even “a particle” of superstitiousness (139) should be taken with a grain of salt, for here she is talking to Mrs. Henry, a white woman with whom she desires to be on good terms. In this situation Hannah is performing a balancing act between two worlds, that of the superstitious slaves who believe there is a ghost in the house, and that of the religious Mrs. Henry with whom she enjoys a special relationship, being neither exactly servant nor guest. Privy to the secret that the ghost is in reality a runaway slave, Hannah is not lying when she claims in this particular instance not to be superstitious.

By limiting her reply to the present circumstance, Crafts can uphold Hannah's ties to a more general superstitious nature and still stand in good stead with Mrs. Henry.

In portraying Hannah as both superstitious and pious, Crafts has created, I would argue, a character unusual in antebellum African American literature, namely a protagonist who adopts Christianity while maintaining a link to pre-Christian beliefs. She accomplishes this by emphasizing a variation on one of the slave narrative's authenticating strategies, belief in blacks' predisposition to superstitions being rooted in the romantic racialism that sees blacks as possessing an inherent, child-like inclination to religion. Here the authenticating strategy is associated not with other blacks as in the slave narratives, but with the narrator herself.

What Crafts's text shows us is how an authenticating strategy can mutate and take on a different meaning when used in different literary contexts. Authentication of the text—to have the reader believe that all the events of the narrative are literally true—is not Crafts's primary purpose, as the blending of apparent factual and obviously fictional elements shows. Indeed, the reference to Hannah's superstitious nature serves the literary end of foreshadowing the coming tragedy when Trappe exposes Mrs. De Vincent's racial background, leading to her flight to avoid enslavement and to her eventual death. It is a subplot so full of coincidental meetings and melodramatic deaths that it should not be taken as literally but as literarily true. By this I mean that the authentication Crafts seeks is for her text as a literary work, not as a testimonial to its truthfulness. Many critics, lead by the text's re-discoverer, Henry L. Gates Jr., have noted the links in the text to real places and people—the North Carolina locales, the government official Mr. Wheeler—and have treated Crafts's text as primarily a slave narrative with fictionalized and fictional elements added to it. While the crossing out and simplification of names suggest attempts to fictionalize real people and events (Nickell 306), we should not overvalue Crafts's statement in the preface that the narrative represents “the truth.” Her wholesale borrowings from Dickens that Hollis Robbins has pointed out demonstrate that she was attempting to validate her novel as a literary work as well. Similarly, using the Gothic convention of superstitious beliefs, not to mention the falling portraits, cursed houses, and terrifying storms, indicates that Crafts was reaching out for a literary authenticity and authority in her narrative.

Overall, Crafts's greater willingness to blend fact and fiction, and to adopt literary conventions to different genres, makes her novel artistically more successful than Harriet Wilson's. Wilson's use of slave narrative authenticating strategies leads us to read *Our Nig* as an autobiographical novel, yet if we do so the related facts—the failed religious conversion—

undermine the authenticating devices. Crafts, on the other hand, largely avoids any but the most perfunctory authenticating strategies, such as simply asserting that the text is “the truth,” and when she does borrow an underlying concept from the slave narrative’s authenticating devices, a romantic racist belief in black religious life, she places the reference in a gothic context that infuses it with a new meaning. The white reader’s racist belief that Africans possess a closer relationship to religion and nature is invoked not to assert the factuality of a slave narrative but the credibility of the narrator’s Gothic intuition.

Part of Crafts’s success lies also in the different approach she takes to spirituality. Wilson exploits spirituality for sentimental purposes, juxtaposing Mrs. Belmont’s religious hypocrisy with Frado’s heartfelt search for salvation in order to garner reader sympathy for her protagonist. Crafts, however, takes a matter-of-fact approach to Hannah’s religious belief, where divine retribution is a given for those who commit evil acts, such as Mr. Trappe, or who lack sufficient religious faith, such as Jacob. For Crafts, those who rely completely on religious faith are the ones who will survive.

II/5 Slave Narratives and the Nadir

Forty years lie between the two antebellum novels and the publication of Harper’s *Iola Leroy* and Hopkins’s *Contending Forces*, a period that saw the abolition of slavery and the rise of a new generation of African Americans who had no firsthand experience with chattel slavery. Though now nominally free, blacks in the 1890s were living at probably the lowest point of an era that Rayford Logan termed the nadir, a time encompassing the worst race relations in post-Civil War United States history. Countless lynchings and the steady erosion of civil rights for African Americans that culminated in the legal cementing of segregation with *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) characterized a decade in many ways just as bad for blacks as the 1850s. But if the racial situation was about the same, two factors had changed for Harper and Hopkins: first, the slave narrative now being published was different, and secondly, the audience for black writers had changed.

With the end of the Civil War, abolitionist support for publishing slave narratives began to evaporate and public interest in life under slavery waned. Fewer narratives were published, and those that did appear took on a different tone. The need to galvanize audiences to political action had now disappeared, and so the new narratives took a milder, more wistful view of the earlier era, as the inclusion of the word “reminiscences” in several titles suggests.

This change is partly a result of the literary turn during the era to regionalism, but the narratives also reflect the differing social values of the late nineteenth century. As William Andrews has shown, for example, Elizabeth Keckley's 1868 autobiography already reflects the materialistic, business-oriented values of the burgeoning Gilded Age, a trend that would culminate in Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), "in which the absolute and essential rights of African Americans are [...] confirmed and validated by the accumulation of property ("Changing Rhetoric" 484).

For Harper's and Hopkins's novels, however, the literary model they turned to was not the postbellum but the antebellum slave narrative. Although an evolution had occurred in the genre itself, it was the earlier form which better suited the political and moral agitation the writers were aiming to achieve. The antebellum narratives facilitated the historical perspective Harper and Hopkins incorporate into their novels, basing part of the action in the antebellum era in order to show the roots of contemporary problems in the legacy of life under slavery. Additionally, their personal backgrounds provided them a tie to the antebellum narratives: Harper had gone on the abolitionist lecture circuit during the 1850s, and Hopkins, though born only the on the eve of the Civil War, grew up in Boston, the center of abolitionism, and explicitly attempted to invoke the spirit of abolitionist Boston in texts such as *Contending Forces* as the best approach to addressing the problems of the nadir. Among the elements they brought over from the antebellum narratives were some of the authenticating devices.

The question of audience, however, is of even more fundamental importance in understanding how they employed these conventions. If Harriet Wilson could include an appeal to her "colored brethren universally for patronage" in the 1859 preface to her novel, it was nevertheless clear that any effective financial support would have to come from the much larger and more affluent white audience. The sentimental appeals she makes in *Our Nig*, in other words, are, like in the slave narrative, directed largely at a white readership, and hence borrowing these techniques from the genre made good sense. By the 1890s not only had black literacy greatly increased but the black middle class, the beginnings of Du Bois's Talented Tenth and potential purchasers of these novels, had grown to a modest size. The audience for African American novels had expanded from overwhelmingly white in the antebellum era to a mixed white and black readership in the nadir, and, despite the claims of critics such as Barbara Christian and Debra McDowell that *Iola Leroy* is created as a white mulatta in order to appeal to a white audience, there is clear textual evidence that the novel was written for readers of both races. The arguments Harper incorporates into her novel of ideas, where characters function as mouthpieces for common social beliefs of the era, are often clearly

intended to address white concerns and to refute white concepts of black inferiority, such as those proffered by Dr. Latrobe, yet many scenes, in particular the *conversazione*, present blacks debating responses to white racism amongst themselves. Ultimately, the young married couples at the end are meant, as are Will and Sappho, and Dora and Dr. Lewis in *Contending Forces*, as models for young people in the black community to emulate. Hopkins's novel, in fact, offers an even stronger focus on black responses to concerns in the community.

This new, mixed audience addressed in the nadir novels, different from the white audience of the antebellum era, complicates the issue of authenticating devices, especially those based upon romantic racialism. For black readers, authenticity would be demonstrated through portrayals they recognize as mirroring their own experiences, or those of relatives, friends, or acquaintances, yet these experiences may well not meet the expectations of white readers. Conversely, if the portrayals bear a latently racist imprint in order to achieve acceptance for one audience, the writer risks alienating the other or producing a self-contradictory text. Attempting to use this kind of authenticating strategy thus becomes a matter of negotiating between two audiences.

What I would like to suggest here is that these two novels represent two distinctively different strategies for negotiating between black and white audiences. Much as the two antebellum texts present an unsuccessful and a successful attempt to integrate religious portrayals as an authenticating device into a fictionalized or semi-fictionalized autobiography, we have in the nadir novels varying degrees of artistic success in relying on the slave narrative as a literary model. While Frances Harper's use of religious portrayals in *Iola Leroy* gets caught up in contradictions that are left unresolved, Pauline Hopkins melds the authenticating device into the fabric of her argumentative style and so turns the racist aspect of this convention back upon itself in order to paint the two races as equal.

What Harper's and Hopkins's novels do share are a number of common elements: both take an historical perspective that includes the antebellum and nadir eras, focus on a number of characters rather than a single protagonist, and advocate a policy of racial uplift as a solution to contemporary social problems facing African Americans. In turn, these three factors influence the use of religious portrayals as an authenticating device. On the face of it, there would appear to be little need to authenticate a novel, and thus little reason to retain an authenticating device when crossing the boundary from fact to fiction. Neither author put her own personal experience into her novel, nor did either make any pretence as to the characters being factual or based upon real persons. Here, instead of validating the experiences of an individual as the antebellum narratives did, Harper and Hopkins needed to present the variety

and richness of a race's experiences and make this believable. Hence, both authors created characters meant to be representative of the broad spectrum of personalities that developed during and after slavery, and that could be developed in the future. If their ideas were to take root in the real world, the characters had to appear realistic, though not necessarily real.

The distinction is subtle but important to the choice of authenticating devices. Documents such as bills of sale, wanted posters of specific slaves, or testimonials by prominent whites had less importance since specific identities were no longer at stake, although legal documents can be, and are referred to in order to ground the texts in an historical reality. An authenticating device such as religious portrayals, on the other hand, retains and even gains in importance since it relies on assumptions about racial behavior. At the same time, this also makes it a more dangerous convention to employ; if one's purpose is both to give a text authenticity and to defuse racial tension, one must steer very carefully through such a minefield.

II/6 *Iola Leroy*

Although critics early on recognized the resemblances to William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), both of which draw heavily on the slave narratives, *Iola Leroy* bears at first glance few similarities to the classic antebellum narratives. The novel opens late in the Civil War on a North Carolina plantation where a number of slaves are planning to run off to the advancing Union Army. With the flight to freedom accomplished at the very outset, the rest of the novel goes on to present flashbacks to the pre-war period, where the *Clotel*-like elements of the tragic mulatta tale are included, and developments in the Reconstruction era and beyond, bringing the lives of the characters up to contemporary times. The large slice of time covered and the proliferation of African American characters, elements that seldom appear in the classic slave narrative, allow Harper to trace developments in black history and show a variety of response to slavery and its aftermath.

Although the actual slave narrative tale in *Iola Leroy* comprises only a small portion of the novel, I would argue that it should be seen as the central element holding the novel together. In beginning the novel with the fugitive slave tale and then going backward and forward chronologically from there, Harper places the slave narrative experience at the center of black history and culture. *Iola Leroy* functions thus as an extended slave narrative, going beyond the boundaries of the antebellum narrative to update the history not of a single

individual but of the entire race. Harper's larger vision of black history allows her to root answers to the contemporary problems of reconstituting black families and defending black culture against white racism in the antebellum era.

The variety of characters permits Harper to show something that is almost wholly missing from the antebellum narratives, slaves who could escape but willingly stayed on in slavery. The traditional narratives told of slaves willing but unable to escape, or who were simply kept too ignorant to know any better, conditions which fulfilled the abolitionist aims of agitating against slavery. In *Iola Leroy*, however, Uncle Daniel receives an entire chapter to explain why he wants to keep his promise to his master; the purpose behind this shows how Harper adapted her text to contemporary needs. In an era in which blacks were viewed by as shiftless, dishonest and untrustworthy, Southern whites needed to be reminded of what they had themselves earlier proclaimed—that there were slaves who had been faithful and loyal. To bolster this claim that blacks are capable of selfless loyalty, Harper also turned to the antebellum slave narrative strategy of portraying slaves as deeply religious.

While critics have recognized that folk figures such as Uncle Daniel and Aunt Linda represent Harper's attempt to revise the stock caricatures of plantation novels, there is little denying that the religious portrayals of these characters are grounded in the ideology of romantic racialism. Aunt Katie, for example, is described as possessing a "simple child-like faith" which allows her to forgive her enemies and prevents her from running away (28); similarly, Marie Leroy's "child-like" religious beliefs eventually lead her husband to abandon his debauched lifestyle. If the repeated references to the simple piety of the many African American characters were not enough, it is left to a white military officer to say that "faith has in a measure underlain the life of the race" (48). John Ernest sees Harper as "simply put[ting] her own spin on [...] 'romantic racialism'" in order to empower African American women (506), yet I would draw attention here to its origin as an authenticating device from the slave narratives, and intended now in the nadir to counteract white suspicion regarding black moral behavior. The portrayal of blacks as having child-like faith is but one part of a web of religious portrayals Harper borrows not just from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but from the antebellum slave narratives. Harper, for example, updates the slave narrative dichotomy between slaveowner's religion and Douglass's "Christianity of Christ" into one between "white folk's religion" and those who "believe in the real, genuine religion" (47). In the same vein, the rejection of a slaveholder religion that preaches obedience and the reference to a Guinea man who practices an African religion, beliefs or "quare notions" (22) the black speaker carefully distances himself from, all have roots in the slave narratives, where the aim was to portray

blacks as instinctively religious and capable of recognizing a false, or falsely interpreted religion.

The appeal in portraying slave religion, however, is directed not just at a white belief in romantic racialism. Harper also has her characters use upside down pots at secret meetings, a slave practice designed to prevent discovery, and shows them using the meetings as opportunities for organizing mass escapes and passing along information. In doing this, she achieves authenticity for her black audience by invoking an experience shared by many and points out along the way the potential of religious institutions for organizing community life. This latter theme emerges again in the post-war sections of the novel when separated family members are reunited at church meetings and religious conferences.

Thus in the early sections of the novel when she portrays slave life during the Civil War, Harper is able to maintain a balance between authenticating for whites and for blacks, showing romantic racialism aimed at white readers and the social potential of black religious institutions as a model for blacks. It is in the later sections that deal with life in the nadir that the balance begins to falter.

As with Harriet Beecher Stowe, religion is for Harper a key ingredient for revitalizing both black culture and the American nation in general. By the end of the novel, Christianity is offered as the solution not only to racism but to all of the nation's problems. Up to this point a number of different versions of Christianity have been brought up and critiqued, with the choice for true religion falling on what Aunt Linda calls "dis ole time religion," (157) namely the belief represented by the illiterate folk characters, such as Uncle Daniel, Aunt Katie, and Aunt Linda herself. Yet how this will be passed on from the older generation to the new, one that has little or no experience with slavery, remains a question not fully answered. A lack of morality in some parts of the black community and the need to learn "the sacredness of the marital relation" (254) are among the topics dealt with at the end of the novel, suggesting backsliding or an improperly understood version of Christianity as the chief problem.

The title figure, Iola Leroy, is meant to be the link between the generations. It is she who recognizes the value and usefulness of Uncle Daniel's theology when he claims that he needs no formal religious training because "I larn'd my 'ology at de foot ob de cross" (168). In other words, it is the experience of suffering, of coming to religious understanding through being the lowliest of the low, that is identified as the source of true Christianity. Later, it is Iola who picks up this theme again and casts her earlier suffering in the closing days of slavery as positive, since it brought about a deeper religious change in her. "But now my life has a much grander significance than it would have had [...]. Fearful as the awakening was, it

was better than to have slept through life” (274). This transformation Iola undergoes—the movement from pleasure to suffering to religious understanding—is meant as a template for the younger generation to follow, and Harper reinforces Iola’s role as a model by sending her off at the end to teach. But since the experience of slavery is what the younger generation lacks and will, thankfully, not have to repeat, another form of suffering must stand in its stead. It is to this purpose that contemporary cases of lynchings and other injustices to blacks are reiterated in the latter half of the novel and Iola offers up the sufferings of Jesus as the sufferings of the black race during the *conversazione*. Harper is trying to recast the suffering of the nadir in terms of the experience under slavery, hoping that the power of suffering will lead others to the foot of the cross. As slavery was for the older generation, the sufferings of the nadir should be the catalyst for the younger generation to find Christianity.

A problem lies, however, in Harper’s refusal to completely cast off the link to romantic racialism in the new era. Rather than leaving the images of child-like faith associated with the folk characters of the Civil War era, Harper brings them forward to the postbellum era and applies the concept not just to individual characters but to the race as a whole. This comes clearly into focus in the poem which Iola reads out during the *conversazione*.

Oh, children of the tropics,
Amid our pain and wrong
Have you no other mission
Than music, dance, and song?

When through the weary ages
Our dripping tears still fall
Is this a time to dally
With pleasure’s silken thrall?

Go muffle all your viols;
As heroes learn to stand,
With faith in God’s great justice
Nerve every heart and hand (251-52)

Here, Harper again links the race to children, but now they are not naïve, trusting children nor the children of Israel as was the case earlier in the novel, but pleasure-seeking and apparently irresponsible children. Presented at the all-black *conversazione*, the appeal is directed at a black audience, but it is cast in terms of white romantic racialism, devoid of the faithfulness which made it a selling point before. Harper’s earlier ploy to show blacks as

inherently faithful and presenting no danger to whites is undercut when she takes the same image and switches audiences.

Given the similarities between the poet in the text, an elderly Mrs. Watson who could not be present, and the 67-year-old author, whose maiden name was Watkins, one can assume the poem represents Harper's own heartfelt beliefs about the condition of the race and the best solution to its problems. While her beliefs may be well intended, it is hard not to see the presentation of them here as an artistic, if not political failure. If the older folk characters are portrayed in terms of romantic racialism in order to mollify white readers, what will these same readers think when seeing another stereotype that puts blacks in a less than favorable light? The danger lies in the white reader associating the faithful, religious children only with the older generation, the novel's folk characters, and understanding the evolution to frivolous, hedonistic children of the contemporary era as a natural development. From careless pleasure-seeker it is only a short jump to the image of promiscuous immorality, a white belief about blacks that fueled the rise in lynching during the nadir.

To be sure, Harper's carrying over of the "black-as-child" image contained a certain inherent logic. First of all, social problems in the black community at the time were real enough, with drugs and crime on the rise (Giddings 79), and invoking the image of blacks as children could be seen as one way of softening white views of African Americans. Secondly, the concept of one generation backsliding from a better, more religious past is a fundamental theme in Christianity and allows Harper to imbue the overall project of Iola, Dr. Gresham, and the others at the *conversazione* with religious meaning. Indeed, the idea of an elite vanguard as a role model organized to improve conditions for the entire race was a project subscribed to by Harper herself, a founding member of the National Association of Colored Women, whose motto was "Lifting As We Climb" (Giddings 93-98).

Recent criticism has exhibited a good deal of unease with this elitist approach to tackling social problems, presumably since it runs counter to modern preferences for movements arising from the folk masses. With critics lining up either to condemn Harper for creating "an intellectual elite demarcated most obviously by a common light-complexioned mulatto history" (K. Wilson 107) and thus selling out to an assimilationist stance toward race relations, or to praise her for establishing positive role models and using mulattos to explore race relations (Carby 89), the one common element is a favorable interpretation of the novel's folk characters. Whether claiming that the critical focus on the complexion of the main character distorts the importance of the secondary characters (Elkins 44) or that "Iola's religiosity [...] diminishes the power of John Salter's and Aunt Linda's illiterate spirituality"

(K. Wilson 105), critics tend to overlook or excuse the romantic racialism that underlies these characters' portrayals. Certainly figures such as Uncle Daniel exhibit a more nuanced sense of Christian self-sacrifice than Stowe's Uncle Tom and do not allow themselves to be martyred unless it be—as with Tom Anderson—for a purpose that provides concrete results for the race, yet the effect is still the validating of a white stereotype about blacks. Any gains made in re-shaping white attitudes are compromised when Harper extends the metaphor of children to the contemporary era. The problem with the folk characters lies not in their origin in the slave narrative's romantic racialism or in their relationship to Iola and the privileged black elite, but rather in how romantic racialism links them to the younger, unseen masses of the new generation.

II/7 *Contending Forces*

In contrast, Pauline Hopkins succeeds with her folk characters in *Contending Forces* precisely because she does not link them directly to romantic racialism or try to blend them with the middle-class, urban black characters that she presents as models of racial uplift. Working with a very similar constellation of characters as Harper does, Hopkins chooses a different authenticating strategy from the slave narratives, but in the end turns it against the readers to make them question their own assumptions about race.

The strategy employed plays on the white belief of blacks as naturally superstitious. In particular, this strategy is evident when Sappho sits down outside a Boston church and listens to Dr. Peters relate the details of his career as a “magnifier.” Sappho, a near white mulatta, functions as a protagonist the reader can trust, while Dr. Peters is one of the folk characters identifiable by his use of dialect. But far from being the purely comic figure that critics such as Richard Yarborough see in Hopkins's lower class characters—a result of her “elitist views” (xli)—Dr. Peters's extended tale serves a satiric purpose. He describes first how he learned to conjure and use his “evil eye” (132) in the South in order to make money, later supporting himself and his family also through a variety of jobs and playing the black Sambo. But when he moves to Boston he meets a group of Christian Scientists, from whom he pointedly distances himself. In the end, this white version of “faith-cure,” as he calls it, comes off as an unreliable and less practical version of Peters's own magnifying, since, as the story of how they fail to cure his rheumatism reveals, Peters recognizes the limitations of his powers. In contrast, the Christian Scientists appear to have placed an almost Icarus-like faith in their abilities to invoke healing powers, an ability Peters reserves for God. “We git mad when our

prayers ain't answered, not thinkin' it's 'cause we ain't got horse sense nuff to use *discretion* in puttin' our faith on subjects that is approvin' to the Lord an' will fit in with his own ideas 'bout runnin' the business of the universe" (139).

Up to this point in the story, Hopkins has portrayed Peters largely as a comical, stereotypical black Sambo, even bringing in an outside listener, Brother Jones, to poke fun at Peters, as if to remind the listener to laugh. Peters's "evil eye" would be seen by white readers as but another example of the superstitious black practicing quaint and primitive African folk beliefs and the jumbled vocabulary he uses to a ship's captain—"how's yer corporosity seem to segashiate" (137)—as an example of a minstrel show darcy. Yet Hopkins has already set the stage for the later reversal of roles by blurring the distinction between a black and a white belief when she has Peters explain the practices of his youth in the South: "*Magnifyin'* an' *hoodooin'* is 'bout the same thing down thar, tho' sense the 'srender mos' all ol'-time doin's is done 'way" (132). Here Hopkins goes back in time not to assert that "spiritualism and mesmerism have African origins" as Thomas J. Otten contends (240) but to claim a fundamental similarity between the African and the European beliefs, the different origins having been lost in the past. The resemblance between the black and white beliefs – both assert that the eye can be used to exert control over another person – would largely be buried under white associations of conjuring with primitive superstitions and of magnetism with nineteenth-century science, especially since the first description is of the comical duel between Peters and a rival. The connection between the beliefs, however, becomes much more difficult to overlook when Peters later brings up the Christian Scientists he knows and pointedly explains this white religion to Sappho. The differences between Peters's earlier career laying hands on "a sick pusson [that] thar bad feelin's would disappear" (135) and this white "faith-cure" becomes blurred when the Christian Science doctors "started in to cure me by prayin' and wurkin' on my body through my spirit" (138). Here, the readers are forced to reinterpret their initial reaction to the earlier part of Peters's story and to question the stereotype that led them to laugh at first. Who is the primitive here, the black who "hoodoos" with the ultimate goal of making a living or the whites who express complete faith in a science that looks like "hoodoo"? Peters's rejection of the Christian Scientist practice, so similar to his own doctoring, should not be understood as jealousy or a foolish hypocrisy but rather as part of the pragmatism that characterizes him in his story. Be it charging money for faith-healing or playing "that hoodoo" as he did to get money from the ship passengers, the theme that emerges in his story is survival and gaining "as good a livin' as any colored

gempleman” (139). For Hopkins, this pragmatism is as much a message for her black audience as blending the border between white and black is the message for her white readers.

Far from being a whimsical anecdote or a solitary example, this instance of first presenting a racist image or argument and then reversing the situation to reveal white hypocrisy emerges as a rhetorical pattern Hopkins returns to again and again. When the fortuneteller is introduced at the church fair, the narrator uses phrasing with overtones of romantic racialism, stating that “the race [...] finds pleasure in the simple pastimes of innocence” (198). However, after the link has been made explicit in the claim that “[s]uperstition is supposed to be part of the Negro’s heritage,” Hopkins again turns the table and shows blacks as no different than any other ethnic group, including whites practicing all forms of superstitions and pseudo-sciences.

Be these things true or false, the Negro no longer holds the distinction of being the only race that believes in the pretensions of those who claim to be able to look into the future with mesmerized sight favored by hidden powers, that have a knowledge of coming events. In these days of palmistry, phrenology, card-reading, mind-reading, lucky pigs, rabbit’s feet [...], who shall say that the Negro has not lost his monopoly of one great racial characteristic? (199).

In another example, Hopkins takes an extended look into John Langley’s character just a chapter later, ascribing his lack of moral character to his heredity. Yet shortly after disparaging the “mixture of ‘cracker’ blood of the lowest type [...] with whatever God-saving quality that might have been loaned the Negro by pitying nature” (221), Hopkins reverses field and attributes character failings in general to environmental causes and not to genetic or “blood” roots. The position African Americans find themselves in, she asserts is the same whites would encounter under similar conditions.

Subject the Anglo-Saxon to the whip and scourge, grind the iron heel of oppression in his face until all resemblance to the human family is lost in the degradation of the brute, [...] and what would you have? Classic features and a godlike mind? No! rather the lineaments of hideous despair, fearful and hopeless as the angel forms that fell from heaven to the black gulf of impenetrable hell. (222)

While some critics have followed Richard Yarborough’s lead in condemning Hopkins’s approach to the origin of racial characteristics as “confusing” and “inconsisten[t]” (xxxvi), I read such passages as ironic and intended to undercut racial beliefs by first playing up a racial stereotype and then blurring the boundaries between the races. Indeed, such a

strategy is at the heart of the image of the near-white mulatto that not only Hopkins but many other African American writers of the era employed.

The abundance of fair-skinned mulattoes, such as Iola Leroy, Sappho, or Dora and Will Smith, in much of the turn-of-the-century black fiction has provoked much scholarly attention and led to a division in critical interpretation. Many see in a figure like Iola Leroy an attempt to cast a character as white simply because a white readership could only identify only whites as human (McDowell 285) and view the entire enterprise of books with such characters as “an essentially conservative appeal to white public opinion” (Baker 32). In my reading, I agree with Hazel Carby that “the figure of the mulatto should be understood and analyzed as a narrative device of mediation” (89), yet I would go even further here. Even more than “an expression of the relationship between the races” (89) or the chance to affirm or deny racial identity in passing or not passing, the white mulatto represents an attempt to force the readers to rethink their racial attitudes. In *Iola Leroy*, readers see this behavior modeled by Dr. Gresham and Dr. Latrobe, both of whom mistake a mulatto, Iola and Dr. Latimer respectively, for white and later are confronted with their misjudgments. The net effect is to render racial differences invisible, focusing attention on moral and intellectual abilities as a marker of identity over physical signs, and leaves the readers to choose which path they would follow in a similar situation: Dr. Gresham’s reflection and willingness to overcome his own prejudices, or Dr. Latrobe’s stubborn refusal, which in the end leaves him looking foolish.

By contrast, *Contending Forces* presents fewer examples of confusion over racial identity, although the division between a light-skinned black aristocracy and darker folk characters parallels the class structure in *Iola Leroy*. The only case of confusion regards Grace Montfort, whose exact racial affiliation is never revealed; the plantation owner’s wife appears physically to be white, but rumors started by local “crackers” are enough to lead to her downfall and suicide. Some see this uncertainty as “limit[ing] her usefulness as an exemplar of cruelly assaulted black womanhood” (Yarborough xxxiii), while others see the whipping she receives as marking her body as black (Berg 134). Such interpretations, however, miss the point and reveal only a modern desire to fit nadir characters into paradigms that serve contemporary political and racial expectations. The real power in Grace Montfort’s portrayal derives precisely from this uncertainty and the white readers’ inability to determine her race. The sense of identification a white female reader feels with Grace Montfort would be weakened were she revealed to be black, and the empathetic link to the novel’s other rape, Sappho’s, would be lost. Just as important as showing that “the suspicion of black blood was

enough cause for the ostracism of the entire family” (Carby 131), Grace’s unresolved heritage opens up the character of Sappho to the white readers by allowing them to empathize first with Montfort, and then with the victim of the later rape, “a reincarnation of sorts of Grace Montfort, Sappho” (Putzi 17). The two rapes thus represent both a historical connection between the ante- and postbellum eras to show how the past still haunts African Americans, and access for the white readers into the black reality. The blurring of the color line, with the ultimate goal of “transform[ing] [...] America’s already amalgamated citizenry into a symbol of national consanguinity” (Marcus 139) and establishing the common origin of all mankind, was a fundamental goal of Hopkins’s writing, culminating with the publication of her magazine novel *Of One Blood; Or, the Hidden Self* (1903). Here we should note how Hopkins employs strategies used in the slave narratives to make a black life accessible to whites. Be it through the color of a mulatto or the sharing of religious and social values, the key to achieving white empathy for blacks was through portraying the two races as similar.

Hopkins’s reliance on the authority and authenticating devices of the slave narrative is evident at various points in *Contending Forces*. Though the flight of a slave, Jesse, comprises but a few pages of the shorter opening section of the novel, it serves to connect the ante- and postbellum stories, the former of which Hopkins authenticates in the preface by mentioning court documents that exist in both Newberne, North Carolina and Washington, DC. and which supposedly verify the tale (14). Similarly, in claiming to tell an “impartial story” both “truthfully and with vituperation” (15), the preface echoes some of the language of the slave narratives, which, as mentioned above, were often at pains to portray the narrator as honest and not seeking revenge on whites. The scene between Sappho and Dr. Peters also follows the slave narrative’s lead in distancing the protagonist, who readers are encouraged to see as similar to themselves, from folk characters with more exotic beliefs that lie outside the white religious mainstream. Hopkins’s larger goal goes beyond the slave narrative strategy of portraying a black protagonist with white religious beliefs; instead, she aims to pragmatically shape black religious interpretations to meet very specific black, not white, needs.

Immediately following the encounter with Dr. Peters, Hopkins introduces Mrs. Willis, who provides Sappho with an interpretation of sin that offers a practical solution to slavery’s legacy of rape. Mother of an illegitimate child after having been sold into a brothel by a white relative, Sappho becomes emblematic of the sexual abuse many black women suffered and which was used against them as evidence of their lack of moral virtue. Sappho’s question as to whether “God will hold us responsible for the *illegitimacy* with which our race has been

obliged, as it were, to flood the world” (149) allows Mrs. Willis to define virtue and sin in terms that remove the stigma from black women.

I believe that we shall not be held responsible for wrongs which we have *unconsciously* committed, or which we have committed under *compulsion*. We are virtuous or non-virtuous only when we have a *choice* under temptation. We cannot by any means apply the word to a little child who has never been exposed to temptation, nor to the Supreme Being ‘who cannot be tempted with evil.’ So with the African brought to these shores against his will – the state of morality which implies willpower on his part does not exist, therefore he is not a responsible being. The sin and its punishment lies with the person consciously false to his *knowledge* of right. (149-50)

I quote this passage at length to emphasize two points. One is to show how Hopkins not only absolves the female victims of guilt by differentiating between act and intention but also follows this train of thought to its logical conclusion, assigning blame to the instigator who, she implies, must have “*knowledge* of right.” In bringing up the compulsion that characterized life in slavery, she argues for a definition of virtue which requires an agency black women did not possess at that time, an argument similar to Harriet Jacobs’s plea some forty years earlier that “the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others” (86).

Additionally, in this passage Hopkins subtly undermines the romantic racist tendency to equate blacks with children. She accomplishes this by first alluding to a linkage between the two when she introduces the example of a child’s moral culpability. Simply mentioning children in this context leads one to expect that the romantic racist argument will be invoked. However, strictly speaking, the two situations are not analogous—a child’s lack of experience and a slave’s lack of agency are two completely different states—and that is exactly the point she is making. Where a child cannot be blamed for a lack of knowledge, a black slave may indeed have “*knowledge* of right” but certainly has no freedom of choice. The slave’s lack of choice can no more be compared with a child’s situation than either can be to the “Supreme Being” who has both knowledge and choice. The three situations thus represent three different cases.

The issue of self-respect raised here is so central to both *Contending Forces* and African Americans of the era that Hopkins has Sappho bring up the questions of morality and responsibility two more times during the sewing-circle, and on each occasion sin and repentance are interpreted in terms of personal responsibility and usefulness to the individual and the race. After an intervening discussion of mulattoes, Sappho returns to the topic of sin,

this time looking at it from the perspective of passion. This in turn allows Mrs. Willis to redefine passion as not only lust but any “enthusiasm” and concludes that “[a]ll desires and hopes with which one is endowed are good in the sight of God, only it is left for us to discover their right uses” (155). Rather than interpreting passion in the conventional nineteenth-century terms that Sappho does, as something that one should “eliminate,” Mrs. Willis believes in harnessing such natural emotions to good purposes. Finally, after the meeting has broken up, the inconsolable Sappho restates her own moral quandary that she has kept secret and places the question of guilt and responsibility in terms of whether a woman should conceal her past from a suitor. To underscore the approach she has taken consistently in questions of morality, Mrs. Willis prefaces her answer with the observation that “I am a practical woman of the world” and proceeds to justify withholding the truth on grounds that doing so is in everybody’s best interests (156). In achieving the ultimate good, she claims, one should be guided not by moral absolutes but by the particulars of the situation.

Discussions of moral behavior and a tendency to interpret sin in the context in which it occurs is a common feature of the antebellum slave narrative as well. However, Hopkins does not just present us with a slave narrative soliloquy on morality in dialogue form. The absence of slavery and the audience she addresses in the contemporary era leads to a variation in where her reasoning takes her.

The contingencies of life in slavery and the problems associated with successfully fleeing northward often brought the slave narrators into conflict with traditional standards of moral behavior, situations they sought to explain. Needing to establish credibility with their white audience and to portray themselves as subscribing to the same social and moral values, slave narrators “were quick to identify occasional lies or thefts as ‘sins’ and to profess repentance while trying to explain to their audience the extenuating circumstances that necessitated such lapses” (Foster 83). In this manner, blame could be laid on the institution of slavery in order to galvanize the reader into supporting abolition, such as William Wells Brown does in assessing how his own behavior caused a free black man to be whipped in his stead: “This incident shows how it is that slavery makes its victims lying and mean” (*Narrative* 57). Even some of the narrators whom William Andrews identifies as having taken “the rhetorical risk” (*TFS* 8) of not condemning immoral behavior present slave actions in light of the secular ideals of American individualism and self-determination. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass states of the slave that “[I]f he steals, he steals his own; if he kills his master, he imitates only the heroes of the revolution” (191). Similarly, Samuel

Ringgold Ward compares black insurrectionist Madison Washington to white freedom fighters such as Lajos Kossuth (166-68).

In the confines of the all-black sewing circle, however, Mrs. Willis has no need to address white standards of morality and thus her reasoning leads her in a different direction. Implicitly, white standards are accepted when she urges her listeners “to refute the charges against us as to our moral irresponsibility” (148) as part of a larger strategy to counter the charges of uncontrolled promiscuity that were used to justify lynchings, but this is the extent of the defensive posture Mrs. Willis takes. Instead, she offers a broader concept of both virtue and passion, reconfiguring the latter in particular as positive so that it embraces a range of human behavior, and a definition of sin that allows abused black women to make peace with their past and move forward. Gone is the need to defend one’s past actions, such as James Pennington’s chain of reasoning in order to justify lying to men who would have captured and sold him back into slavery, and replaced with a broader, more flexible system that takes the context of a situation into account. One’s duty is not to meet white moral expectations but to do one’s best for the good of the race.

A number of critics have been quick to charge Hopkins with succumbing to white public opinion by adopting a “Victorian morality in whiteface” (Baker 33), accusations that misread both context and intent. In analyzing the above-mentioned passage at the sewing circle, Kate McCullough, for example, asserts that Hopkins “retains a white bourgeois model of female purity” (30), an observation that fails to recognize that guilt, not purity, is at issue here. From a Christian point of view, the “wrong” committed is a wrong—sexual intercourse outside of marriage constituting a breach of one of the biblical commandments—however, culpability for this sin, Hopkins argues, cannot be equally assigned to both parties. Indeed, in making this case she is arguing against a “white bourgeois” morality which assigned the role of fallen woman to any victim of rape.

Looking more closely at the audience in this particular passage, we can see as well that Hopkins is not arguing for a white standard of “female purity” but rather a revision of this standard. Although most of Mrs. Willis’s remarks apply to Sappho, it is only the readers of the novel and Sappho herself who recognize this, not the women of the sewing circle. Her comments are, in fact, directed to the black and mulatto women of the circle, or the all-mulatto participants as Mrs. Willis suggests when she states that “[i]t is an incontrovertible truth that there is no such thing as an unmixed black on the American continent” (151). As the abrupt shift in conversation from sin and responsibility to mulattoes and then back again shows, it is her listeners, physical embodiments of the “wrongs” committed, that Mrs. Willis

is trying to free from any guilt. Thus when Sappho raises the question of illegitimacy, it is the stain, that of a wrong “unconsciously committed,” Mrs. Willis addresses and absolves them of. In the course of her later remarks on mulattoes she again returns to this idea, severing the link between the physical act and the new generation it produces by emphasizing the primacy of the soul over the body. In effect, she is arguing that the sins of the fathers should not be visited on any subsequent generation, a message specifically tailored to her mixed-race audience. It is not the physicality of the body that is passed on, but rather “the beauty of the mind and soul [which are] transmitted to our children by the law of heredity” (153). In turn, it is the soul which shapes the body. When Dora neatly summarizes this concept in a short poem, Mrs. Willis’s response affirms that “that is the idea exactly” (153).

Mulattoes such as Dora represent living proof that female purity in the sense of virginity was not always an option open to black women; hence talk of purity is refocused to the question of choice. Purity, a word Mrs. Willis herself never uses, could only be understood in the context of having a choice in the first place. However, because the issue of choice could also be turned against black women—the charge of animal promiscuity was used against them to claim that a rape was not, after all, really a rape since black women by nature desired it—Hopkins has to address this argument as well. It is in this light that we should read Sappho’s follow-on question about women who “desire purity” (154) and her subsequent conflating of “desire and coercion” (McCullough 31) that lets the victim blame herself for the crime. To overcome Sappho’s equation of passion with lack of purity and hence with guilt, Mrs. Willis first redefines passion as not bad per se, but potentially something good as well. Passion does not therefore lead directly to lack of purity or to guilt; it can produce good depending upon the degree of control one exercises over one’s passion. When the relationship between passion and lack of purity is thus broken, the link between lack of purity and guilt and guilt is also weakened. It is no longer the outcome—lack of purity—which is important in ascertaining guilt, but rather the situation—or degree of control over it—that the outcome arises out of. The control mechanism, Mrs. Willis states, should be Christian teachings.

II/8 Conclusion

Viewing the context of a person’s behavior rather than predefined standards as the basis for assessing moral culpability is a trait Hopkins’s novel shares with *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Crafts subscribes in her novel to situationalism, a belief that holds “the world [to be] not the sort of place for which rules

should serve as the only guide to right action” (Bruce, “Mrs. Henry’s” 131). In portraying the consequences of Mrs. Henry’s faithfulness to a vow never to traffic in slaves, Crafts critiques the same blind adherence to rules or social judgments that would condemn Sappho to the title of adultress, or Dora and the other mulattoes to bastardy. In turn, both novels echo the slave narrative’s plea for understanding of the peculiar conditions which brought about these lapses from white moral standards. Yet a crucial difference exists that can be explained by the race of the audience addressed: the slave narratives ask the white reader to excuse the protagonist’s failure to fully meet white expectations, while the black novels ask no pardon. Indeed, *Contending Forces* asserts its black readers’ right to develop moral standards based upon the degree of agency they hold in a given situation. Neither *Our Nig* nor *Iola Leroy*, novels less artistically successful at incorporating slave narrative authenticating devices into their structures, attempt any kind of comprehensive revision of moral standards.

Hannah Crafts’s situationalism, on the other hand, makes no attempt to establish a systematic moral philosophy for her readers, embracing instead the era’s more general evangelical Protestantism that “founded morality on the necessity of love and toleration, recognizing that life cannot be reduced to a system” (Bruce, “Mrs. Henry’s” 134). Unquestioningly Christian from the early part of the text, Hannah makes her moral decisions on a case-by-case basis, critiquing the peculiar institution’s incompatibility with leading a Christian lifestyle the way the slave narratives do, but never offering a larger religious interpretation to fill the needs of a specific race, class, or group as *Contending Forces* does. This is largely in keeping with the mid-century fiction’s emphasis on the individual in comparison with the focus on social novels at the turn of the century. Again, however, the question of audience plays a role as well.

Parallels in the development from pre-Civil War black fiction to the nadir can be found within the antebellum slave genre. William Andrews documents the changes over this thirty-year period as slave narrators went from writing for fictive readers, whose expectations the writer tries to fulfill, to writing for implied readers, those who are to learn from and be shaped by the text (*TFS* 29). Similarly, black fiction of the nineteenth century moved from writing for a primarily white audience in the antebellum era to a mixed audience that included whites, blacks, and mulattoes by the century’s end. The techniques designed for fictive white readers, however, were not always applicable when the purpose of writing shifted from propagandizing the audience to satisfying readers of fiction. To motivate readers to support a real life political cause, a writer must present facts, or at least what readers perceive to be facts. In playing on the perception of a fact in a novel, as *Our Nig* does when mixing elements

of romantic racialism into the end of the novel, the writer need only worry about the inner consistency of the facts in the novel. The uneasy balance struck by Wilson in juxtaposing a failed conversion with romantic racialism requires a leap of faith on the readers' part. The better strategy belongs to Crafts, who rewrites the romantic racist convention, here the narrator/protagonist as superstitious, in order to have the white reader buy into the literary fiction.

Along the same lines, *Iola Leroy* demonstrates less adaptability to the era's new audiences than *Contending Forces*. Both novels portray an awareness of their black readers, showing black characters gathered into communal groups at the *conversazione* and the sewing circle, a church convention and a church fair, but Harper does not make the attempt to rewrite romantic racialism that Hopkins embarks on. Largely avoiding the issue of rape—Iola does not become pregnant and her virtue is apparently left intact when the hint is dropped that her master “tried in vain to drag her down to his own low level of sin and shame” (39)—Harper argues for a return to the old-time religion of the slave narratives, offering suffering as the key to spirituality. No reformation of moral standards is undertaken, only a re-imposition of the old through the institutions of home and church. In essence, white standards are accepted as she fuses her white and black audiences when Dr. Latimer calls for national unity over racial division: “Instead of narrowing our sympathies to mere racial question, let us broaden them to humanity's wider issues” (260).

All four novels thus show a keen awareness of audience, yet artistic success falls to those best able to integrate existing models into new forms. It is flexibility in adapting both morality and literary techniques to new strategies that emerges as the key to success in both the antebellum and nadir eras. Both Crafts's and Hopkins's texts display the willingness to borrow and modify literary strategies as black writing began to self-consciously move into the realm of fiction.

CHAPTER III

CONJURING SALVATION: MIMETICISM, MULATTAS, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY

III/1 Introductory Remarks

Having examined the four African American novels from the perspective of two literary genres, I turn in the next two chapters to look at these texts from a religious point of view. The central question to be considered is whether the novels evince a common spirituality that is definably different from the dominant form of white American Christianity. As we have seen, the novels differ from each other in the intensity of the characters' personal religious beliefs and the degree to which they adhered to the various generic expectations. Yet despite the variety they exhibit, it will be seen that the common experience of living as a scorned minority has led the authors to present a different interpretation of Christianity than that espoused by the hostile culture in which they lived.

Observers, of course, noted early on that the slave religious practices took on a distinctively different, ecstatic style from the white Methodist, Baptist, or Catholic churches they joined (Genovese 238) and recognition of such differences led in the 1960s and 70s to the establishment of African American religious studies as an academic discipline. However, the novels in question, in particular the earlier two, tend to represent a religious sensibility that superficially appears to be quite white. Indeed, this apparent contradiction has been interpreted as selling out to white audiences and betraying the black masses by adopting a "gospel [of] white-face mannerliness" (Baker 28). Such criticism, I contend, oversimplifies the variety of black religious experience and overlooks the strategies that black writers developed to counter problems African Americans individually and collectively faced. In my reading, these four novels represent an increasingly sophisticated mixture of an African religious sensibility with a limited mimicry of white religion, all designed to stave off white racism.

For this study I have chosen Theophus Smith's concept of "conjuring culture" and its definition of a distinctive brand of African American spirituality as a theoretical model. Smith's very broad understanding of black spirituality posits a mixture of an African worldview with European Christianity to produce a unique African American approach to culture. While Smith's theory was not developed primarily for the field of literary studies, it

nonetheless provides a distinctive perspective to view these nineteenth-century black novels with and a model to evaluate them against. The bicultural perspective is an important feature of Smith's theory, for my intent is to show that Harper and Hopkins in particular did not simply adapt white evangelical Christianity wholesale as critics such as Baker and Sterling Brown have implied.

Another useful aspect of Smith's theory is that he steers a middle course in the debate between Melville Herskovits, who argues for the existence of African retentions in black religion, and E. Franklin Frazier, who argues the slaves were wholly stripped of their indigenous religion and culture. Smith opts instead for Albert Raboteau's "continuity of perspective" (qtd. in Smith 37), which maintains that white religious elements were adapted to a traditional African worldview. In this study I am not going to attempt to prove the existence of specific African carry-overs into African American Christianity, but rather I wish to use this particular perspective on black religion as a model for confirming a distinctive point of view that unites these novels and separates them from white interpretations of black religion. To test this latter point, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (1852) will serve as a counter example to demonstrate how the four black novels represent black spirituality differently.

Additionally, I will be drawing upon Rene Girard's theories on mimetic desire and its role in the relationship between violence and the sacred, as well as his reading of the Christian gospels and their role in revealing the scapegoat mechanism. Smith's theory of "conjuring culture" also relies on Girard's ideas, in particular when he discusses the role Martin Luther King Jr. was playing in the black community; but whereas Smith focuses on "stand[ing] Girard on his head" (208) to develop a repertoire of non-violent practices, my interest lies in using Girard's theories to identify a common link that surfaces in each of the novels. Indeed, Girard's ideas are as important to my reading of these four novels as Smith's concept of conjuring culture is, for they provide a second approach to religious representations that support my claim for the distinctiveness of these representations. Smith's theory permits me to examine what is African American in these texts, while Girard's ideas help delineate differences in the Christianity portrayed by the black writers. Before looking at the texts from Girard's perspective, however, I turn first to outline Smith's theory, defining "conjuring culture" and its terminology and then applying them to the four texts.

III/2 A Theory of Conjuring

Under the term “continuity of perspective,” Theophus Smith understands slaves bringing an African worldview to the New World and then applying it to the new conditions they found themselves in. He posits the African perspective as a pharmacoepic worldview which blacks applied to Euro-Christianity to produce African American spirituality. Specific results of this process he identifies, among other phenomena, as the black fascination with Moses and envisioning the Hebrew prophet as a conjure man, and seeing the Bible as a conjure book, both approaches Zora Neale Hurston noted in her study on black folklore (Smith 32-36). The pharmacoepic approach is, in other words, a continuation of conjuring, whereby “conjure” should not be understood in the pejorative sense of magic or voodoo, but rather in the tradition of either medically curing or harming another person. While it acts on Euro-Christian symbols and figures, conjuring is not limited to purely religious interpretations but has, in Smith’s view, broader applications. He sees instances of conjure occurring in

social-historical transformations as well as folklore practices. I refer to such transformations as instances of conjuring culture, specifically where I find (1) ritually patterned behaviors and performative uses of language and symbols (2) conveying a pharmacoepic or healing/harming intent and (3) employing biblical figures and issuing in biblical configurations of cultural experience. (6)

The third part of this definition of conjuring culture—biblical configurations—will be pursued in greater depth in the following chapter. Here I would like to clarify the first two points, “performative uses of language” and “healing/harming intents,” addressing the latter first because of what I see as its centrality in defining the pharmacoepic worldview.

Borrowing the expressions from the Greek, Smith defines a pharmacoepic constellation as consisting of a *pharmakeus* (practitioner), a *pharmakos* (victim or target), and a *pharmakon* (medicine/poison). It is important to note that the last two terms are double-valenced, i.e., the same object can be simultaneously beneficial and harmful. This quality, Smith asserts, is what separates the African view from the European perspective, which tends to emphasize an “either/or” or disjunctive form of thinking over a “both/and” or conjunctive approach (143). Whether this tolerance for ambiguity stems originally from Africa or was a development brought out by experiences under slavery—or, what may be closer to the truth, was a combination of the two—it goes a long way to accounting for the failure of many slaves to see stealing or lying as sins (Genovese 610). For Smith, the importance of “both/and”

thinking is that it lets a practitioner use one and the same object or behavior as both a toxic and a tonic, and because it allows two parallel systems such as conjure and Christianity to exist side by side without contradicting each other. Thus blacks could quite easily bring a conjurational way of thinking to the Christianity they adopted.

As works of literature, novels or other texts can broadly be considered “performative uses of language,” although written works technically do not fulfill an important criteria Smith sets: embodied performance. So central to the concept of conjuring culture is embodied performance that Smith theorizes that one of the possible causes for the inability of blacks to effect changes in their situation throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lay with the failure to create such performances effectively. Not until Martin Luther King, Jr. came along were African Americans able to overcome “a deficiency of mimetic application” and establish “direct engagement” that would allow “such large scale transformations” (187). Indeed, King represents a prime example of a pharmacoepic approach to successfully conjuring a material transformation. Configuring himself as a Moses figure, King was able to enlist large numbers of blacks to perform an *imitatio Christi* during the Civil Rights movement, “craft[ing] social rituals of ecstatic suffering” that led “to federal legislation and a new public ethic that has irrevocably ameliorated the victimization of black Americans” (214).

By citing the example of King, Smith suggests that an embodied performance must physically take place to be successful, although at other points he does leave open the possibility for an effective literarily embodied performance if the author is able to overcome “the inability to publish and compel affective reading” (187). But as a religious studies scholar, Smith remains somewhat ambiguous as to what would constitute an effective “literary-conjurational strategy” (187), occasionally citing literary texts by Daniel Coker, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson as having conjurational intent, though never fully elaborating what would make such a text effective. Here it will be my first task to elucidate this strategy and outline the criteria that make the pharmacoepic approach successful.

The key to conjuring, however, lies in more than just the schemata and a particular understanding of its elements; it is in the process of conjuring that one finds its central significance. To describe this process, Smith borrows the example of a hoodoo ritual, emphasizing again that the ritual is akin to a performance and the embodied nature of that performance. The process, which includes five steps, entails a “performance [which] (1) targets a subject (whether client or victim), (2) names that subject, and then (3) affects that

subject by way of (4) a mimetic operation in which whatever happens to the name is also (5) intended or desired for the subject” (148).

By way of example, Smith asserts that a primary “conjuration trick” was for blacks to identify their own cause with that of whites (92). Thus, for blacks attempting to materially transform their situation, they could counteract the negative experiences of racism by becoming like white Americans. Hence, in the seventeenth century some blacks began converting to Christianity in the hope of obtaining freedom, and later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries blacks often attempted to equate their own struggle for freedom with the American independence movement. These were not instances of what later became known as passing; rather than attempt to physically resemble whites, they named themselves as Christians or Americans in order to be transformed into freemen. Combined with the conjunctive thinking described above, this form of mimeticism would allow African Americans to maintain their own cultural identity while curing whites of racism and ridding themselves of its pernicious effects.

In essence, conjuration is a performative naming ceremony whereby the practitioner attempts to induce a mimetic relationship between two persons or objects through the act of naming. With the term mimetic, Smith understands here “[t]hat spirituality is mimetic, not in the sense of literalistically imitating its models but by creatively transforming them at the same time it thoroughly appropriates them” (67).

As the historical examples show, the target/pharmakos could be the practitioner himself—naming himself a Christian or American in order to bring about a self-cure—and not just an outside person or persons who would be transformed by the mimetic operation. That neither of these attempts was successful can be traced back to a failure in the particular mimetic strategy itself. To produce an effective conjuration, Smith claims, there must be a performative dimension and modeling behavior which is balanced to produce a cathartic effect in the target. To illustrate how this works with a literary text, I turn to the example Smith uses, but go beyond it to examine some of the literary criteria necessary for an effective conjuration.

It should be noted here as well that some degree of similarity exists between African and Euro-Christian worldviews. Smith acknowledges this implicitly in using Greek terminology for describing the pharamacopeic worldview and explicitly in the case of African and Puritan approaches to typology. He insists, however, that conjuration processes tend to be more ritualistic and performative, citing numerous examples from the fields of music, literature, social history, and religion, to support his thesis, and in the case of biblical

typology asserts that there exists “a Puritan American tradition that projects its figural identity and destiny monolithically, as an unambiguous representation of biblical exemplars, and an African American tradition that is cognitively predisposed to view its reality [...] as simultaneously toxic and tonic” (76). While some scholars have criticized this as too much of an oversimplification of Puritan ideology (Wojcikowski 1064-65), I nonetheless find his arguments compelling enough to accept, backed as they are by similar observations on an African “refusal to dichotomize power into good and evil” (Raboteau 287). This conjunctive “both/and” thinking I hypothesize as underlying the literary figure of the near-white mulatta.

III/3 Toward a Literary–Conjunctural Strategy

Smith looks at Daniel Coker’s *A Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister* (1810) as an example of a text with conjunctural intent but a failed outcome. Coker’s aim is to turn his readers against slavery and so he portrays a black minister telling a story that leads his listener, a Virginian slave owner, to free his slaves. The story he tells is of a drunken slave owner mercilessly whipping and torturing a Christian slave, who in turn thrives on the chance to imitate Christ and his sufferings. The Virginian is simultaneously repulsed by the brutality and intemperance of the slave owner and moved by the Christianity of the slave, thus driving him to the action the minister desires: conversion to the anti-slavery cause.

There are, of course, many ways to bring about a person’s conversion, religious or otherwise, but Smith identifies the mimeticism of the pharmacopeic approach as at work behind Coker’s effort. Mimeticism works on different levels here. The primary level and the one Smith is most concerned with, is the slave’s *imitatio Christi*, the attempt of the black to identify his own cause with that of the whites by performing the central act of white Christian belief, the Passion. The relationship of mimetic intimacy between the slave and the owner is meant to induce the Virginian to perform his own *imitatio Christi*, to convert to abolitionism, and to renounce the worldly possession of slaves. The third and final act of mimesis to be evoked is the reader’s imitation of the Virginian’s behavior and the adopting of an anti-slavery attitude. Smith attributes the conjunctural failure of the story to the second level of mimesis, for no plausible reason is given for the Virginian behaving as he does. The operation should work by producing “an oscillating correspondence between (the Virginian) and two forms of his alter ego,” leading him to choose “whether to identify himself with either the

drunken, abusive slavemaster, on the one hand, or the slave's 'Dear Lord and Master' on the other" (189). Coker's assumption seems to be that "an authentic encounter with Christ in the person of his ministers of (suffering) servants should be converting" (187), yet if the aim is to provide a transformation in the reader, the change in the Virginian must appear believable. Lacking a "direct engagement with the embodied persons" (187), a literary performance therefore demands, I maintain, an added element of psychological realism in order to produce an effective conjuration.

Smith delves no farther into the literary aspects of Coker's text; however, applying a theory of catharsis he uses later in a different context, one can see where Coker failed. A catharsis, I would argue, is really what Coker wants to portray in the Virginian and achieve in the reader. Rather than simply being asked to make a choice between two options, much like choosing which side dish to go with a main meal, a reader must be led to see himself equally able to fill, mimetically, either role. After this first requirement is achieved, the proper balance between the reader and the text must be found in order to effect a catharsis in the reader. Thomas J. Scheff, in a theory developed in reference to performing arts and that draws on Aristotle, refers to this balance point as "aesthetic distance," when "the members of the audience become emotionally involved in the drama, but not to the point where they forget they are observers." It is the "simultaneous and equal experience of being both participant and observer" (Scheff 57) that induces the cathartic release necessary for the reader to make a choice. Scheff goes on to elaborate the two sides of the scale where balance is not achieved: *underdistancing*, where the audience identifies too closely with the performance and which provokes a physiological state of distress rather than catharsis, and *overdistancing*, where the audience is always aware that the performance is simply that and which therefore has little effect on them.

Overdistancing is the term best applied to Coker's text, and this is almost certainly because he failed to fulfill the first requirement, that of creating a potentially mimetic relationship between the Virginian and the slaveowner and slave. Smith believes Coker offers no logical explanation for the Virginian choosing as he does, yet the real problem lies in explaining why he should feel compelled to make any choice in the first place. In this case, "the oscillating correspondence" between the Virginian and either of the two models fails to materialize at all. Implicit in Smith's argument is the expectation that the Virginian will feel drawn to the slaveowner based solely upon race (both are white) and class (both are slaveowners). This formula remains too simplistic to create a plausible mimetic similarity between the two. The differences in the treatment of slaves by various owners was no great

secret and could indeed be intuited by an ordinary understanding of human nature. The Virginian could just as plausibly react by claiming that not all slaveowners abuse their property in this way or that he himself would never do such a thing. For this very reason the slave narrative strategy of claiming it was the institution of slavery that corrupted men and lowered them to such violent behavior made a much stronger argument. Similarly, the correspondence between the drunken slaveowner and the sober Virginian could be quickly explained away by differences in personal character. As powerful a factor as they are, individual identity remains too complex an issue to be attributed solely to race and class.

On the other hand, Smith misinterprets the other leg of the triangle as well, the relationship between the Virginian and the slave. It is not “the slave’s ‘blessed master’” (189) that the Virginian and the reader are meant to identify with—this would be blasphemy in the eyes of both—but rather the one performing the *imitatio Christi*, the slave himself. By the logic of conjuring, it is the embodied performance that is meant to affect the target, here the slave embodying Christ. If the viewer or reader wishes to imitate Christ, it will have to occur primarily through the vehicle of the performer, the slave. Again, however, a barrier exists that prevents a plausible identification that would be sufficient to provoke a cathartic reaction. Although racial similarity alone is not strong enough to create a mimetic identification, a difference in race is enough to present an insurmountable hurdle. Many twenty-first century readers would find it hard to accept the possibility of the slave seriously desiring to imitate Christ, a seemingly masochistic enterprise from a modern point-of-view; however, for the nineteenth-century white reader, imagining himself as black would be the main stumbling block.

A similar *imitatio Christi* occurs, of course, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, where Uncle Tom’s martyrdom provokes the conversion of those around him in the novel and led many readers to sympathize with the abolitionist cause. However, as Theophus Smith points out, Stowe’s character very quickly mutated in the public eye into the image of a docile slave and became the subject of minstrel show laughter. In Smith’s view, “Stowe’s literary strategy was flawed in its assumption that a straightforward display of the undeserved suffering of the good and innocent is itself sufficient to counter their violation” (194). Her novel, in other words, does not constitute a literary-conjuration, for while it moved readers it effected no social transformation or unequivocal improvement in blacks’ situation in the United States, and, I would add, it stumbles as well on the question of Tom’s race.

Based on this racial barrier, I propose here a modification in Smith's schema for achieving a creditable version of literary conjuration. In Smith's words, an effective conjurational strategy must

reflect[...] a synergy in which (1) a portrayal, representation, or dramatization of (2) a victimizer's scapegoating behavior, alongside (3) a victim's imitation of Christ (4) induces, catalyzes, or augments the observer's ability to identify with the latter and to disassociate himself from the former. Every element of this schema, I venture, is crucial for its transformative effect. Accordingly, for the dramatization to be compelling or efficacious, a participant or observer must be confronted with both alternatives: with a clear choice between a victimizing and a nonvictimizing role. Further, the dramatization must induce the observer's ability to enact in current circumstances the latter role over against the former. (189-90)

But before the reader can be lead to make the either/or choice between two separate behaviors, he must first experience a catharsis that allows him to identify with a black character at all. This *conjurational catharsis* is realized by achieving aesthetic distance to the black figure, inducing in the reader "the simultaneous and equal experience of being both participant (black) and observer (white)." The reader must therefore be made to see the protagonist as both black and white, in order to overcome the hurdle of race.

The slave narratives faced a very similar racial problematic some two decades later after Coker's text was published when they became implemented as anti-slavery propaganda. How was the readership to be lead to see the fugitive slaves as human beings and thus empathize with their fate? One strategy, of course, was to portray the blacks as Christian and thus lay claim to their humanity on the grounds of a shared faith. Another was to present blacks as domestically oriented and then, through direct address to the reader, to draw attention to the barriers that prevent the slave from realizing that aim, as Henry Bibb does when describing his first separation from his wife (147). Yet other strategies implicitly recognized that an equation between slave and reader would be impossible and so the appeal was directed toward the reader's vanity. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this included allowing the reader to himself as a Christian redeemer bringing God's word to ignorant slaves. The slave narrative thus vacillates between getting the reader to feel the whip lashing his own back and treating the slave as an object to gratify the reader's sense of moral outrage.

Nowhere is this ambiguity toward the reader/slave relationship more visible than in the skin color of the slave narrator himself. Although slave narrators spanned the spectrum from very dark to light-skinned, by and large the majority, especially the best known narrators and those sponsored by abolitionists, tended to be mulattoes, such as Frederick Douglass,

Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Moses Grandy. Lewis Clarke was at times mistaken for a white man, and Ellen Craft was fair enough to be able to pose as a white man as she publicly made her flight northward. On the one hand, a mulatto narrator was a silent indictment of the licentiousness and sexual depravity that slavery engendered among whites, but a light-skinned narrator also embodied the conflicting aims of abolitionist propaganda. The narrator had to be dark enough to be identifiable as a slave, yet light enough to evoke empathy in the reader, or at least a sense that this too could have happened to him.

All this is by way of saying that the slave narratives did not follow a conjurational strategy. No mimetic relationship could be created between the reader and the narrator because of the racial barriers existing in the former's mind. Here the question of authorship or white editorial influence is largely irrelevant in defining why a conjurational strategy was not followed; more to the point is the nature of the genre as autobiography. Fiction could provide better grounds for developing a conjurational strategy than autobiography could. In the latter, there had to be a correspondence between the real and the textual figure, and as many of the narrators were also lecturers, there was no hiding skin color. Indeed, the appeal of the slave narrative increasingly rested not on mimeticism but on voyeurism, hence these developed portrayals of blacks as exotic and focused on the sensational and violent aspects of slavery. William Andrews points out that an entire branch of the genre developed in this direction during the 1850s, as demonstrated by titles such as the 1857 *Life and Narrative of William L. Anderson, Twenty-four Years a Slave; Sold Eight Times! In Jail Sixty Times!! Whipped Three Hundred Times!!!* (TFS 184). This was much in keeping with the overall trends in the literary marketplace in the mid-nineteenth century, as the development of mass market publishing helped fuel a trend toward sensationalism in the US and Great Britain (Sturrock 103).

Despite the racial barrier to establishing a mimetic relationship between reader and protagonist, the slave narrative did present some improvements over Coker's text in developing a literary-conjurational strategy. Coker's text includes the other major aspect of conjuring, modeling behavior that the target should follow, through the traditional literary technique of the frame story. Rather than presenting the story of the drunken slaveowner and the Christ-like slave directly, Coker has a narrator tell the tale to a white man, the Virginian, whom the reader should then adopt as his model. While this overcomes the racial aspect of who the reader should identify with, it does not solve the question of why the Virginian should change his attitude and succeeds only in distancing the reader from the actual conjurational performance. For its part, the slave narrative eliminates the intermediary and attempts to establish a comparatively weaker empathetic relationship between reader and

protagonist instead of a mimetic one. This may well account for the ultimate failure of the slave narrative to provide a mass change in Northern opinion toward slavery—the reader, always aware of the racial barrier between himself and the slave, remained overdistanced to the slave narrator. It was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with its play on romantic racialism, that proved more effective in galvanizing Northern anti-slavery attitudes. In banishing the frame story to briefer picaresque roles in the text, however, the slave narrative showed a way forward to developing a literary-conjurational strategy for African American literary works.

A major weakness in Coker's text, as noted above, is the lack of congruence between the Virginian and the drunken slaveowner. Why should the former feel any compulsion to change his own behavior if he himself is prone neither to violence nor alcohol? What evidence existed that he too could undergo a transformation to make him similar to the slaveowner? The latter represented but one aspect of human behavior under those conditions. Psychological realism, however, could be presented by relying on the picaresque. This any number of slave narratives undertake when they present brief asides about particularly violent or benevolent behavior they had heard of from other slaves or that had happened on a neighboring farm. Thus the picaresque could be used not just to turn the slave narrator "into a romantic and a revolutionary hero" (Hedin 642), but as a way of presenting a variety of human behaviors and personality types, any number of which the reader might be able to recognize or identify with. In the ideal case, a skillful writer could even present a transformation, such as Frederick Douglass does with a short episode involving one of his mistresses, Sophie Auld. Douglas shows her both before and after her husband forbids her to teach their house-slave, and her "lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness" as "[s]he was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better" (82). Such displays of the diversity of human behavior, with all its characteristic weaknesses and strengths and changes, provides a more realistic view of human nature than Coker's text, with its starkly drawn black and white vision of the slave and master.

This technique of embedding stories inside the text was an outgrowth of the slave narrative's aim to inform Northern readers about life in the South and the tension that arose out of "[m]aintaining a balance between the portrayal of self as individual and self as type" demanded by the genre's propagandistic intent (Foster 68-69). These embedded stories would become increasingly useful later in the four novels when the mimetic approach would be used between characters in the text and not between reader and protagonist. This does not mean

that the novels did not attempt to establish a mimetic relationship between reader and protagonist, for as we shall see in a moment the basic conjurational strategy adopted in Coker's text of developing "an oscillating correspondence between [the target] and two forms of alter ego" still applies (Smith 189). It is not a strategy deployed in the slave narrative since the only mimetic relationships the narratives attempt to induce are not between reader and protagonist but, as William Andrews points out, between the text and reality. The slave narrative could never be fully conjurational since it did not aim to establish a protagonist the reader could identify with, preferring instead to produce a "self [...] on the periphery instead of at the center of attention, looking outside not within, transcribing rather than interpreting a set of objective facts" (*TFS* 6)

At this point it is clear that a great deal of overlap exists between a "literary-conjurational strategy" and traditional European literature. Much like any form of literature with a propagandistic intent, a literary-conjuration aims to influence or change the attitude and behavior of the readers by coercing them into an empathetic reaction. Indeed, the creation of a mimetic relationship is realized through the evoking of empathy. It is this very similarity that has lead critics to see the literary heritage of these four novels as lying in the confluence of the slave narrative and the sentimental or domestic novel, yet I would argue that there is a subtle but discernable difference in how these African American novels set out to achieve reader empathy.

As noted above, slave narratives faced a racial barrier when it came to empathy. Although portrayals of slaves seeking to marry or trying to establish domestic life invited readers to imagine themselves in that situation, the early narratives tend to take a factual, distanced approach to the protagonist's emotions and the later narrators draw back from equating themselves with the reader, as Harriet Jacobs famously does in telling her readers "[s]till, [...], I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (86). Henry Bibb occasionally suggests the possibility that "[the] reader may well imagine how I felt" (142), but then even more often turns around and, in much stronger language, denies the ability of anyone to understand his emotions: "no one can imagine my feelings in my reflecting moments" (17). The difference between protagonist and reader is thus never allowed to slip from sight. As Francis Smith Foster succinctly puts it, "the slave protagonist was to the nineteenth-century reader a figure with whom sympathy was possible but empathy was out of the question" (73-74). In the domestic novel, on the other hand, a genre about women for women, reader empathy with the protagonist was a direct aim, but one limited to a group circumscribed by race, class, and gender. They aimed for what Suzanne

Keen terms a “bounded strategic empathy” which “occurs within an in-group, stemming from experiences of mutuality, and leading to feeling familiar with others” (142). Since the protagonist already bore such a close resemblance to the reader, character identification posed no great problem, and the focus in the text could shift to “situational empathy, which responds primarily to aspects of plot and circumstance” (Keen 80). Hence, the emotional weight in domestic novels centers on the fears and anxieties of nineteenth-century, middle-class women: Gertrude’s fear of poverty that leads her into the teaching profession in *The Lamplighter*, Ellen’s helplessness trying to fend for herself in a bewildering department store or being accosted on the open road, and just about every orphan’s terror at being abandoned by a dead mother, absent father, or fickle suitor. None of the situations in the African American novels, however, fall within the realm of the believable for the white reader since the starting point for the protagonist, chattel slavery, is so far from her. A young woman could easily empathize with a character who loses her mother as Ellen Montgomery does since it could potentially happen or have happened to her, but to be subjected to rape as Iola Leroy or Sappho Clark are, or to have that possibility hung over one’s head as in *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* requires a much larger stretch of the imagination, especially if, by definition, this only happens to a different group of people. Since situational empathy is that much farther away, the African American novels focus instead on character identification to obtain reader empathy. To this end they call upon a heroine who is not just a mulatta, but a mulatta who is so light-skinned as to be indistinguishable from a white woman.

The near-white mulatta has been a contentious figure in African American studies for years, alternately castigated by critics for “adopting white values and a bourgeois ethic” or, as has more recently been the case, praised for “challeng[ing] constructions of race and racialized womanhood” (Zackodnick xii). Readings of the near-white mulatta, however, as a “mollifying agent to the white readership” (K. Wilson 105) or as “reinforc[ing] the concept that one must be white to be beautiful” (Campbell 25) tend to take an “either/or” approach, apparently unwilling to accept a character first created by a white woman, Lydia Maria Child in 1842, or to see the dual work this figure can carry out. These four African American novels were indeed written with an eye toward a white audience, but all four also contain internal evidence that black readers were also being addressed. What better character to place at a novel’s center than one that sits on the intersection of the two audiences? In Smith’s terms, the central character in each of the novels can act *both* as a toxin to white racism *and* a tonic to black oppression.

Much of the criticism is ideological in origin, with critics such as Sterling Brown rejecting figures that are atypical of the mass of poor Southern blacks in the nineteenth century. As Ann duCille points out, it was a position that received special emphasis during the Black Aesthetic movement of the 1970s, led by critics who “privilege[d] a particular notion of black identity and ‘the black experience’” (“Where Is William Wells Brown?” 453). It is also related, however, to a skepticism regarding the role of empathy in literature. Saidiya Hartman, for example, notes that “empathy is double-edged, for in making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration” and hence “empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead” (19-20). This presents a real danger indeed, for the possibility certainly exists of the white reader focusing exclusively on the whiteness of the mulatta and failing to validate the existence of the character as black. Precisely for this reason the character portrayals in these novels are managed in order to allow blacks to identify their cause with whites and to make whites constantly aware of the mulatta as both white and black at the same time.

III/4 A Proposed Literary–Conjunctural Strategy

An effective literary–conjunctural strategy would thus encompass the following four factors. First of all, it would have the intent not simply to inform or entertain, but to effect a material transformation in the world. This could function on a purely personal level, moving readers to financially support Harriet Wilson and help her recover her son, for example, or it could aim for a wider social effect, reducing racist oppression by changing public attitudes, as both Harper and Hopkins strive for. To achieve this aim it would target both white and black audiences. In addressing black readers, the second factor, an effective conjuration would identify the black cause with a white cause, here by naming black characters as white. Through this procedure, the writer attempts to identify the black cause with a white cause, performing an act of mimesis which would not necessarily imply a loss of a separate black identity. The third factor is the author’s targeting of a white audience, with the aim to garner reader empathy by creating character identification. The writer attempts to conjure a catharsis in the reader by achieving aesthetic distance, in other words the realization in the reader that the protagonist is both black and white. Finally, in trying to model behavior for both characters in the text and the reader, the author creates a series of embedded stories that present choices the character or reader is intended to choose between. As we will see, the

basic schema is fulfilled in all four novels; successful realization of these goals is where the novels differ from each other.

III/5 Strategies in the Four Novels

The aim of transforming the reader is made explicit in the prefaces or introductions to three of the four novels. For example, in her very first sentence Pauline Hopkins states that her aim is “to raise the stigma of degradation from my race” (13), a goal only achievable if white readers’ mindset has been changed. The use of first person plural in the same preface acknowledges a black audience as well and includes them as targets of transformation. Similarly, *Iola Leroy* points to “Harper’s expectation of a white and black readership” (Zackodnick 84), while Harriet Wilson makes a direct “appeal to my colored brethren universally for patronage” in her preface almost immediately after claiming to “have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends,” i.e., in her white readers. The preface to *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* constitutes an exception of sorts, adhering more closely to the stated slave narrative goal of trying only to show or portray slavery and its effects; nevertheless, the direct addressing of “Doctors of Divinity” (201) or “grave Senators (178), typical features of the slave narrative, indicate the text’s polemic intent and the targeting of white readers.

The embedded stories in the four novels all serve both to address a dual audience and to model behavior in order to effect transformations. This occurs most clearly in the two nadir novels, where both Iola and Sappho are conduits for the stories told by folk characters. Much the same as Coker’s Virginian, the two women represent models for the reader in how they should respond to the stories. Although these stories function to present a more comprehensive picture of the entire black community, removing the focus temporarily from the middle-class worlds both novels primarily move in, they are meant to model behaviors and attitudes, giving “a participant or observer [...] both alternatives [and] a clear choice between a victimizing and a non-victimizing role.”

The most overtly didactic of the embedded stories are those in *Iola Leroy* that Aunt Linda tells Robert and his niece. In recounting events since the end of the war, Aunt Linda talks of blacks visiting grog shops and selling their votes in a manner that is clearly meant to demonstrate the dangers of an individual’s selfish behavior for the larger community. In each case at least one positive and one negative identification figure is included, such as Uncle Job, who sells his vote for food, and Aunt Polly, who throws the food out the window. To move

beyond encouraging a black audience and to target a white audience as well, Harper has Iola point out the larger implications: “if it were shabby for an ignorant colored man to sell his vote, wasn’t it shabbier for an intelligent white man to buy it?” (178). Presenting some blacks in a negative light allows Harper to gain the trust of white readers by playing on their image of a degraded postbellum black community—and to win a degree of realism, since this was an undeniable social reality— but she is careful to balance these with positive characters, a strategy she continues when portraying whites as well. Aunt Linda, of course, is preaching to the choir when she tells these three stories; in the larger picture Iola and Robert themselves are models for the readers to follow, and they serve to help interpret proper behavior for the Sunday school audience suggested in William Still’s preface. The overtly didactic Sunday school style in *Iola Leroy* demonstrates the close proximity of a literary-conjurational strategy to European literary forms.

More subtle, on the other hand, is the embedded story in *Contending Forces*. Again, the tale Dr. Peters relates to Sappho appears to be a complete digression from the main plot or from any of the parallel or subplots in the novel, involving no one who appears either beforehand or afterwards. Primarily, it functions to provide a broader portrayal of the black community, to comment ironically on white Christian faith as mentioned in the previous chapter, and to add a demonstration “of the exquisitely droll humor peculiar to the Negro” (16) that Hopkins promises in the preface. Additionally, though, it also appears meant to transform the behavior and the attitudes of readers of all colors. For the white reader, identification should occur with either the captain of the steamship, one of its passengers, or possibly with a member of the Christian Science congregation; listening to the story told by this seemingly unreliable narrator, however, one is confronted with the distinct possibility that he is nowhere near as naïve as he seems and the whites in the story may be the ones gently having fun poked at them. The racist assumption that he is a foolish old teller of tall tales is subtly placed in the reader’s mind by Brother Jones’s laugh at the beginning, and then undermined by Dr. Peters’s own awareness later on of the benefits obtained through his stereotypical Black Sambo behavior. The white reader is potentially cured of racism by questioning where he stands exactly between the two models of behavior, black and white. For the black reader, it becomes a question of self-esteem. Should he view Dr. Peters as a buffoon, much as the passengers on the ship do, or as a survivor, which is Dr. Peters’s own stated self-conception? The question is of central importance to Sappho, for in the next chapter her conversation with Mrs. Willis reveals Sappho to be suffering under some burden in her past. Mrs. Willis refined definitions of sin and virtue offer a key to regaining self-

respect, although it will take to the end of the novel for Sappho to finally come to terms with it. Her placing the terms in a practical light also echoes the way Dr. Peters works with terms like hoodoo, playing first with the term in its pejorative sense of superstition and witchcraft before revealing a practical understanding of hoodoo as a way to make money off of the ship passengers. His story, as well as Mrs. Willis's advice, suggests that self-esteem is largely a matter of who controls the definitions. Dr. Peters manages this through establishing Smith's "oscillating relationship" between two models, moving his listener, and by extension he reader, from seeing him as a hoodoo quack to a very practical theologian who has learned how to make a living off of "magnifyin'."

If *Contending Forces* emphasizes oscillation of viewpoint over modeling behavior—for Dr. Peters's exact behavior is certainly not meant to be emulated—then *The Bondwoman's Narrative* reverses this order. The embedded stories told by Mrs. Wright in the jail or by Lizzie about the Cosgroves are extensions of the domestic tableaux discussed in the previous chapter, a way of creating extra models for Hannah and the reader to choose from. Neither tale directly affects the novel's plot or discusses characters Hannah ever encounters, yet both broaden the pallet of choices concerning a slave's decision and a white's reaction to slavery. Both episodes serve in a sense to justify Hannah's decision: in the first case the decision not to flee, illustrating as it does the seeming impossibility of success, and in the second her decision not to marry. Both presage dangers awaiting Hannah and thus heighten dramatic tension, but both are also cautionaries aimed at transforming the white reader's behavior. Mrs. Wright's tale is also a re-working of Hannah's own story and the fate that might have met Aunt Hetty, when Hannah was similarly "forbidden to visit" (87). The tableaux show not only the possibilities of domestic life, they also present myriad possibilities for opposing slavery: one can personally aid a fugitive slave as Mrs. Wright does, sell or drive off slaves as Mrs. Cosgrove does, or follow Mrs. Henry's example and refrain from engaging in the slave trade. In the end, Mrs. Henry's approach appears as one of the most positive for a white reader to take, although it is not an unproblematic stand, as Dickson Bruce Jr. has shown. It is, however, the one closest to Aunt Hetty's non-intervention and complete reliance on faith in God, which is itself the model that Hannah chooses.

In contrast to Crafts's novel, where embedded stories are incorporated into the text much in the manner they are in the slave narratives, as stories heard but not seen by the narrator, *Our Nig* appears to have borrowed the technique from the domestic novel. Perhaps for this reason, Wilson's text represents the least effective example of a literary-conjurational strategy; the stories of Jane's courtship and the brief visit by Jack's wife to the Bellmonts are

less oriented toward modeling behavior, instead serving to highlight the greed and villainy of Mrs. Belmont. Nonetheless, the conclusion of Jane's story, with the enfeebled daughter granted the right to choose a suitor for herself, suggests the importance of free choice for Frado as well. This of course does not prevent her from making a bad choice in the end, marrying a man who turns out to be a confidence artist and who eventually deserts her. The ability to choose freely, for better or worse, is interwoven into the main issues *Our Nig* confronts: abandonment by mothers, exploitation of child labor, and racially inspired violence. Indeed, the only serious decision Frado can exercise on her own is the choice to abandon the pursuit of religion and her spiritual life. Even this choice is compromised, however, since it is made chiefly in opposition to her tormentor. Such is the limited nature of Frado's options as an indentured servant.

Another aspect limiting the success of a literary-conjurational strategy in Wilson's novel is the inability to establish the last stage of mimeticism, to get the reader to identify with Frado. On the one hand, it is not clear exactly which behavior the reader is to emulate, since Jane's problem appears to be only indirectly related to Frado. The relevance of Dr. Peters's story for Sappho is made clear in the following chapter, while the parallels of Mrs. Wright's and Lizzie's tales to Hannah's own past and potential future are hard to oversee. For Frado, the direct result of Jane's dilemma will simply be that she is left alone at the mercies of Mrs. Belmont and Mary. An equally problematic aspect of *Our Nig*, I would argue, is that Frado is not drawn as strongly as a near-white mulatta as the other three protagonists. A very light-skinned character, she is still marked as different at various points in the text, indeed, even in the novel's title. A prime ingredient of a literary-conjurational strategy remains the figure of the near-white mulatta and the author's ability to manage the character's identity so as to establish an "oscillating correspondence" between the reader and the figure's two racial personae. It is aesthetic distance that must be created and so the character's exact racial identity must be kept indeterminate.

This comes quite clearly to the fore in *Iola Leroy*, where in two separate instances whites mistake a mixed blood character for white. In the first case, Dr. Gresham is initially shocked to learn that the blue-eyed, "beautiful and refined young lady" (56) had been a slave, stating that this "changes the whole complexion of affairs" (58), yet nonetheless goes on to propose to Iola and to suggest she attempt to pass for white. The courtship covers a number of chapters, keeping the topic of Iola mixed ancestry in near constant view and culminating in her choice to reject passing and instead consciously align herself with her black heritage. In the second instance, Dr. Latrobe mistakes a fellow physician he consorts with, Dr. Latimer,

for just what he physically appears to be, a white man with a “blonde” complexion (239). Again, the incident is drawn out over several chapters and the reader, like Dr. Latrobe, is enlightened only at the end, but this time the white man’s chagrin and angry rejection of the situation contrasts with Dr. Gresham’s reconciliation and acceptance of his mistake. The reader is shown a variety of possible white reactions, with little doubt left at the end that Dr. Gresham’s is the appropriate response to the situation. Additionally, Dr. Latrobe’s ability to recognize Robert Johnson as a white-appearing black man but failure in the case of Iola’s future husband draws attention to the artificiality of racial constructs. What one sees is not always what one gets.

In a similar vein, Hannah Crafts defies white readers’ expectations by refusing to pass in a number of situations. Most notably this occurs when she first arrives at “Forget me not” and Mrs. Henry appears to give her every chance to claim that she is white and thus free. Even after Hannah calls out for her “Master,” the now dead slave trader she had been riding with before the accident, Mrs. Henry twice provides her the opportunity to re-name her relationship with the “gentleman,” each time asking if he was “only a friend” (116). The repetition reinforces in the reader’s mind the idea of Hannah as a liminal character who is simultaneously walking in two worlds. Her status for the rest of her stay at “Forget me not” mirrors this state, where she is “not considered a servant, neither [is she] treated exactly as a guest” (124).

Contending Forces also supplies a virtually white character in Sappho, as well as another woman, Grace Montfort, whose racial ancestry Hopkins never clarifies, suggesting only that “there might even have been a strain of African blood polluting” her veins (23). The mere suspicion of mixed blood becomes a justification for her later rape and enslavement, hence ambiguity serves to simultaneously heighten reader identification with the beautiful mother and housewife, and distance her through the possibility of her racial distance from the reader.

Irony also becomes a tool in Hopkins’s novel to direct attention to mulattoes and to blur assumptions about the role of racial heredity. Like Harper in *Iola Leroy*, Hopkins presents commonly held white beliefs about the inferiority of black blood; however, she does this not through her characters as Harper does, which in the vast array of characters lets her present this as one of many opinions under discussion, but rather through her narratorial voice, a fact that has led many critics to assume Hopkins endorses these stereotypes.

Man has said that from a lack of means and social caste the Negro shall remain in a position of serfdom all his days, but the mighty working of cause and effect, the mighty unexpected results of the law of evolution, seem to point to a different solution to the Negro question than any worked out by the most fertile brain of the highly cultured Caucasian. 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. Combinations of plants, or trees, or of any productive living thing, sometimes generate are specimens of the plant or tree; why not then of the genus homo? 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. (87)

In his reading of this passage, Richard Yarborough sees sarcasm in the reference to the “highly cultured Caucasian,” yet goes on to interpret the rest of the passage literally (xxxv). A literal reading, I would argue, ignores the fact that much of *Contending Forces* deals with the question of amalgamation and how white blood had become “pretty generally distributed,” for example, through the rape of the fourteen-year-old Mabelle Beaubean by her uncle. Given the numerous references throughout the novel to such instances of “the infusion of white blood,” it is hard not to read the entire passage and claims of white superiority as dripping with irony. John Langley, the reader learns, retains the name Pollock because his mother had supposedly “boasted” of the connection (221), yet the first eighty pages of the novel make abundantly clear that this blood is not “the best in the country.” In fact, Hopkins repeatedly uses irony in order to undercut the notion of inherent white superiority, the figure of John Langley being a case in point. On one level he serves as the stock villain from a melodrama whose sexual advances force the heroine to flee, yet his figure also allows Hopkins to present another aspect of black society, the “colored politician” who sells out his people. His personal feelings are then traced back to his heredity.

Langley’s nature was the natural product of such an institution as slavery. Natural instinct for good had been perverted by a mixture of “cracker” blood of the lowest type on his father’s side with whatever God-saving quality that might have been loaned the Negro by pitying nature. This blood, while it gave him the pleasant features of the Caucasian race, vitiated his moral nature and left it stranded high and dry on the shore of blind ignorance, and there he seemed content to dwell, supinely self-satisfied with the narrow boundary of the horizon of his mental vision. (221)

If a white reader is inclined to assign the positive characteristics of a mixed race figure to their white identity, as numerous critics since Sterling Brown have argued (Sollors, *Neither* 223-28), then Hopkins turns this notion on its head and asks the reader to question where the bad qualities of a bad mixed race figure came from. Clearly in this case it is from the white

blood, not from what has been “loaned the negro by pitying nature.” By downplaying the positive aspects of black heredity, as she does here, Hopkins is ironically commenting on the belief that white blood is both superior and genetically dominant. This the reader will have to ask any time a character displays “the pleasant features of the Caucasian race,” such as Will or Sappho. If one rejects the idea that white blood has made John Langley evil, then what is to account for Will’s intelligence or Sappho’s goodness? Although Yarborough claims that positive characteristics “are never traced to any possible African forebears (xxxv) in the Montforts and, by extension, in any other clearly mulatto character, neither are then characteristics linked explicitly to any white characters. Comments throughout the text as well as the case of Sappho demonstrate that Hopkins believes it is environment and the ability to overcome one’s environment that largely determine one’s moral character. References to the superiority of one race over another, I would argue, should be read as ironic. They are part of a conjurational strategy to draw in white readers and then undercut their racial prejudices. Hopkins uses appearance to gain reader empathy for her white-looking characters but then constantly reminds the reader that these characters align themselves with the black community she is portraying. As in *Iola Leroy* and *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, characters here do not attempt to pass; instead, opposites are united. The older Southern-born ex-slave Ophelia Davis marries Northern-born, middle-class preacher Mr. James, and the white British Montforts sail together with the mulatto American Smiths in an image of racial equality that Hopkins seems to approve of. In the only allusion to passing, John Langley throws his fate together with twenty-nine other men at the end, and does alone in the frozen whiteness of the Arctic.

Of the four novels, only *Our Nig* falls somewhat out of the pattern. Frado is portrayed not as indistinguishable from a white; she is clearly identified by the children of the village that will be the six-year-old’s new home as “yeller” (21) and by her new family as “not very black either” (25). Her skin color is dark enough to be noticed, though Mrs. Belmont still feels compelled to do her best to bring out Frado’s difference from her own children by forcing the child to work without protection in the sun. Wilson’s decision not to create Frado as a near-white mulatta may well have been based on autobiographical considerations, which may have trumped the decision not to follow the tradition of William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853) or Lydia Maria Child’s “The Quadroons” (1842). Here, rather than aim for empathy based upon the appearance of her protagonist, Wilson strives to underscore similarities to her readers’ emotional states in the tradition of the domestic genre. Empathy is invoked for an orphaned or abandoned child who is exploited by a maternal figure up through her

adolescence. The spiritual struggles of a young woman attempting to realize conversion to a white church are portrayed, although this bid for sympathy, as discussed in chapter one, is undercut by the failed conversion. That this failure—part of the larger failure of Frado to identify her own cause with that of whites and hence a failure to realize a literary conjurational aim—is largely misread by modern critics stems undoubtedly from a bias in recent years in favor of difference and confrontational strategies. The markers of racial ambiguity in the near-white mulatta that have left so many critics uneasy are largely missing from Wilson's novel and is probably one of the main factors in *Our Nig's* mostly positive critical reception.

Despite *Our Nig's* inability to negotiate racial difference in a conjurational style that unsettles the reader's ideas about the protagonist's racial identity, it is nonetheless the manner in which it attends to the protagonist's race that unites it with the other three African American texts in opposition to white-authored versions of the "tragic mulatta" tale. As Eve Allegra Raimon has observed, critics tend to see "the mulatta narrative [as] encourag[ing] identification along the axis of gender at the same time as it ultimately disavowed cross-racial allegiances" (26-27). Yet I would argue that this is how white authors have tended to portray the figure of the mulatta, and not how the black authors, intent on establishing reader identification and then subtly undermining it, have approached the character. Compare, for example, how two mulattas are introduced: first Cassy from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one of the most famous tragic mulattas in American literature, and then Sappho Clark from *Contending Forces*.

It was a woman, tall and slenderly formed, with remarkably delicate hands and feet, dressed in neat and respectable garments. By the appearance of her face, she might have been between thirty-five and forty; and it was a face that, once seen, could never be forgotten, – one of those that, at a glance, seem to convey to us an idea of a wild, painful, and remote history. Her forehead was high, and her eyebrows marked with beautiful clearness. Her straight, well-formed nose, her finely-cut mouth, and the graceful contours of her head and neck, showed that she must once have been beautiful; but her face was deeply wrinkled with lines of pain, and of proud and bitter endurance. Her complexion was sallow and unhealthy, her cheeks thin, her features sharp, and her whole form emaciated. But her eye was the most remarkable feature,-- so large, so heavily black, overshadowed by long lashes of equal darkness, and so wildly, mournfully despairing. (501)

With proud self-possession she moved to Mrs. Smith's side, and soon found herself being presented to the occupants of the parlor. For a moment or two there was an unbroken hush in the room. Tall and fair, with hair of a golden cast, aquiline nose, rosebud mouth, soft brown eyes veiled by long, dark lashes which swept her cheeks,

just now covered with a delicate rose flush, she burst upon them—a combination of “queen rose and lily in one. (107)

What is remarkable about the first passage is not the absolute despair wrought into almost every sentence, nor is it the contrast between her aristocratic bearing and the pervasive sense of suffering, but the fact that Stowe manages to work the two words “heavily black” into such a long description. In fact, Cassy is one of the least recognizably black mulattas created by a white author, the majority of others being betrayed by black eyes that are explicitly traced back to Africa or a brown hue to their cheeks that might allow them to be mistaken for Spanish or Italian.

Yet where Stowe is careful to mark the race of the character she creates, however small the reference might be, Hopkins draws her mulatta as essentially white. Harper goes even farther, making Iola’s eyes blue, while Crafts marks the only physical trace of her narrator’s racial heritage in her “rotundity” and curly hair, avoiding the common white references to black hair as crisp or wooly. Indeed, if the two passages were read wholly outside of their contexts in the respective novels, both characters could be read as white, with Sappho the whiter of the two and Cassy standing out due to the unusual description of her eyes. Placed back into the original contexts, however, it immediately becomes clear how the two authors are configuring the authorial goal of empathy. Cassy’s aristocratic and tragic yet defiant pose, wildly out of place as a worker in a cotton field, aims at the heart strings of a white female reader vicariously imagining herself as long-suffering and temporarily fallen in social status. Here, the play on the reader’s conscious or subconscious angst is similar to the domestic genre, only now the identification figure is marked as racially different. No black reader, however, would identify with such a character in that context. The figure of Sappho, on the other hand, does much more complex work when she appears in the sitting room at a black boarding house. Given the conventions against racial mixing, we automatically read her as black or mulatta, a fact the other characters immediately recognize as well. Ophelia Davis’s remark that “thar ain’t nothin’ like thet growed o’ Loosyannie” (107) indicates that these dark-skinned characters understand her origins and accept her as one of their own. Sappho thus becomes part of a black community that encompasses a wide range of social classes and a broad spectrum of skin colors, from the dark black of Madame Francis through the light brown of Dora to the apparent whiteness of the newcomer herself. For black readers she functions simultaneously as a member of the community and serves as a conjurational icon.

For white readers, Sappho's appearance allows an empathetic "in" into the black community. Marked as physically similar to white readers, the mulatta permits them to journey through the experiences of a black woman who has suffered under the legacy of slavery and racism. The continual references to a secret in her past that makes Sappho uneasy in the black community mirror the unease the reader would feel in this vicarious relationship with blacks, while the character's refusal to pass for white and her ostracism from white work places would counteract a too strong identification with the mulatta. The push and pull of affiliations serve both to bring white readers closer to the narrative and remind them that this is a fictional experience for them. As mentioned above, the conjurational intent of such distancing would be to achieve a catharsis for the reader who would be induced into empathetic action that would materially improve the conditions of racism under which African Americans lived.

Racial ambiguity thus functions as a primary means of inducing empathetic character identification and separates black-authored texts about mulattas from white-authored writings. Indeed, a number of tales by whites, such as Richard Hildreth's *The Slave: or Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836) or Hiram Mattison's *Louise Picquet, the Octoroon: or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (1861) do not even attempt to establish reader identification with the tragic mulattas they portray, but rather eroticize such figures, reading them as objects of interest and of the male gaze instead of points of entry into the text. These male-authored writings lend credence to Marcus Wood's assertion that abolitionist texts played on the pornographic interests of their audience, although we should be careful not to generalize all abolitionist literature as such. Female authors, for example, could appeal to the maternal instincts of their readers either as a way to override any latent prurient interest or simply as a goal in itself. Stowe performs both these acts with two of her mulatta characters, Cassy and Eliza. The former relates how she killed her own infant rather than allow her child to suffer the same fate as she, thus at least attempting to counteract any pornographic interest Cassy's role as concubine might arouse, while Eliza is portrayed almost exclusively as a mother, the pathos of her jumping across ice floes and protectively clutching her child being one of the novel's most famous images. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, is not employing the tragic mulattas as primary figures of identification the way the African American novels are. In her twin projects of trying to end slavery and "bringing about the day when the world would be ruled not by force, but by Christian love" (Tompkins 141), Stowe employs the characters as two of many maternal examples, others being Rachel Halladay, Aunt Chloe, Marie St. Clare to show a broad range of motherly possibilities, stretching from the ideal to the neglectful, in

order to show the havoc slavery wreaks on domestic values. In fact, Stowe keeps the mulatto figures at a distance, ultimately sending George Harris and his family away to Africa as part of the colonization effort she subscribed to and neutralizing Cassy and “the ideological challenge posed by the active agency of the mulatta heroine” (Raimon 117) through her conversion to Christianity.

While Stowe thus resolves the racial ambiguity that the mulatta represents by moving Eliza out of the country, Lydia Maria Child attempts to incorporate the figure in a new vision of American society. In her study on the mulatta against the backdrop of nineteenth-century debate on race and nationalism, Eve Allegra Raimon points out how Child composed tableaux of black, white, and mulatta characters in “scene[s] of contrast and complementarity” that were “designed to appeal to genteel readers’ sense of aesthetic harmony to advance the sociopolitical goal of integration” (57). While such goals appear quite visionary from a twenty-first century perspective—especially given the intervening history of American race relations—and do construct the mulatta as “an expression of the relationship between the races” (Carby 89), this is still a fundamentally different approach to the tragic mulatta than the African American novelists take. It is not a matter of the browning of white America or the bleaching of black America, nor do the mulatta heroines represent a racial contrast; they are literally *both* white *and* black, the first by appearance, the second by preference. The reader is not presented with two separate characters who ultimately reinforce the notion of racial categories by being classified as either white or black, but with a single character who is white and black.

In arguing that an African American spirituality underlies the strategies behind these novels, I do not maintain that these four authors were consciously following a particular African tradition. Indeed, it would be difficult at this distance in time to prove that any of them started out with the intent to call upon or construct a conjurational tradition; Hopkins and Harper never indicated any conjurational intent with their fictional characters, while nothing is known of Crafts and not much more of Wilson. All we really have to look at are these texts themselves, and the strong similarities they show in the use of the white mulatta—appearances that differ markedly from the white tradition of the tragic mulatta—suggest that something was in the air or afoot in the culture in the nineteenth century that led them to this exact construction.

One could argue that the way these authors constructed the white mulatta is simply a natural outgrowth of blacks’ common experience as second-class citizens in nineteenth-century America. The mulatta as a double-valenced figure does in fact call to mind W. E. B.

Du Bois's assertion of a dual consciousness existing in black Americans, a people aware of being both black and American. Yet upon closer examination, differences emerge in how Du Bois interpreted this phenomenon and how these black authors employed it. Du Bois saw this split in black consciousness as negative, a problem to be healed, in particular for black artists and intellectuals who were "seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals" ("Strivings" 195). These authors, on the other hand, appear to have used the very problem to try to enact a cure. Rather than sowing "confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist" (195), the problem of addressing two disparate audiences is solved by invoking a figure that embodies both audiences to address each of them. From a conjurational perspective, no inherent contradiction exists in two identities occupying the same person, for the benefits of the one accrue to the other. No doubt African Americans were confronted with events on a daily basis that reinforced in them the concept of a dual consciousness, but this does not mean that this duality is automatically a bad thing or that slavery and racism were the sole origin of this dichotomy. The conjurational strategies that Smith has traced through African American history most likely were submerged in the black consciousness over the years, only vaguely understood as part of an African heritage.

Certainly by Du Bois's time—the nadir era in which Harper and Hopkins wrote their novels—there was no open discussion of conjurational patterns of culture, though this is by no means to say that assimilationist thinking was the dominant trend available, as some critics such as Robert Bone have claimed. As Smith maintains, Ethiopianism—the belief that Psalm 68:31 would eventually be fulfilled and Africa redeemed to glory—was at the time one prevalent expression of conjuring culture, configuring biblical experience to provide a cure for black oppression (69). However, it is most unlikely that such a devout and traditional Christian as Frances Harper would have approved of being associated with a tradition like conjuring. For her, the division between Christianity and non-Christian traditions may well have been unbridgeable. Nonetheless, in both hers and Hopkins's novels we can find traces of the tension between European forms of Christianity and the ecstatic worship characteristic of black Christianity. In *Contending Forces* this occurs at the conclusion of the sewing circle when Ma Smith questions the propriety of dancing at a church-related event. The threat of condemnation by their church "for conduct unbecoming a professor" looms over her and others, a prohibition against dancing representing an attempt to enforce contemporary white moral standards and to suppress suspected African forms of worship (158-59). In keeping with Hopkins's overall strategy of first presenting and then resolving class conflict in the black community—as she does, for example, in the competition between the high-class Mrs.

Robinson and the folk character Ophelia Davis—a diplomatic resolution is achieved when Ma Smith realizes the practical good of the church is at stake and abdicates decision-making for the evening hours to her son, Will. The dancing itself takes the form of the Virginia reel and other Southern white folk dances, thus avoiding a harsh dichotomy between a more solemn white approach to worship and the black ring-shout. That the chief instigator of the dancing is seen “cuttin’ grotesque juba figures in the pauses of the music” indicates, however, what is really at stake here (164). Similarly, Iola Leroy expresses a comparatively low regard for “hops and germans” rather than referring to any particularly African American forms of entertainment (243). Entering into a contemporary white debate regarding the decorum of dancing allows Harper to indirectly address white beliefs that black public behavior and religious worship are too frivolous to be taken seriously. The tension that emerges takes the shape of her family and friends chiding Iola, who believes the historical moment “too serious for us to attempt to make our lives a long holiday” (243), for being “too exacting” (244) and “brood[ing] too much over the condition of our people” (269). This strategy is again twofold: on the one hand, it is part of the social uplift movement of the National Association of Colored Women—whose founding meeting Harper attended (Giddings 93)—to encourage blacks to higher moral standards in order to preclude charges of an alleged black immorality which were often cited to justify lynchings. On the other hand, it is also aimed at making white audiences comprehend that blacks, as well as anybody else, had the need to enjoy themselves from time to time. If this is an indirect way of discussing the more ecstatic worship styles at black churches, Harper also explicitly presents blacks forms of worship as both orderly and quite pragmatic. Early worship gatherings during slavery are surreptitiously advertised and organized to “outwit [...] the vigilance of the patrollers and home guards (and are held] miles apart, extending into several States” (13). After the Civil War, meetings held in churches feature call-and-response style services that facilitate the reunion of families: it is here, for example, where Robert, Iola’s uncle, regains his long-lost mother.

These examples illustrate that black styles of worship are acknowledged in these novels, even though the conjurational patterns that Theophus Smith discusses are never explicitly mentioned. Conjunction persists implicitly, however, in the figure of the near-white mulatta and the appeal this figure represents to a white readership.

III/6 Girard and Religion

If only traces of an African American spirituality—in the form of the near-white mulatta and a literary-conjurational approach to changing readers' attitudes and behavior—visibly link the four novels together, applying Rene Girard's theory on violence and the sacred to these texts helps illuminate their common spirituality. Girard's concept of the generative role violence plays in founding and uniting human cultures has itself generated controversy, but I am not using it here to claim that African American Christianity is a separate religion, for I have already acknowledged this form of Christianity as a syncretic blend. Instead, applying Girard's theory to these texts allows one to see how the common experience of involuntary servitude allowed blacks to adopt a form of Christianity distinctly different than the nineteenth-century white version practiced in North America. Blacks' status as second-class citizens in the United States—codified by law both before and after the abolition of slavery—is analogous to conditions Girard discusses in relationship to ritual victims in primitive societies. Indeed, the religious symbolism employed by the Ku Klux Klan in their campaigns of racial violence after the Civil War is highly suggestive of the connection between religion and violence that his theory hypothesizes. While no explicit reference is made to the Ku Klux Klan itself in any of the novels, an implicit understanding of the factors at work in Girard's theory appears evident in all four novels.

Before I examine the four texts in light of Girard's ideas, I will first briefly clarify his theory and define the necessary terminology. In particular, the concepts of mimeticism—understood differently here than with Theophus Smith—and sacrificial and non-sacrificial religions are essential in understanding how the four novels share a religious interpretation more resembling that of early than contemporary Christianity.

Central to Girard's ideas is the concept of mimetic desire, a theory he developed as a literary critic before moving on to apply the idea to the fields of anthropology, psychoanalysis, and religion. Moving a step beyond Aristotle's definition of mimesis, which focuses on representations of reality or human thought that produce, for example, art or language, Girard proposes mimesis as a central motivating factor for human behavior. An individual desires an object not because of its intrinsic value but rather because it is desired by another individual. The theory of mimetic desire thus provides a simple explanation for social phenomena such as fashion and explains a central impulse behind the human drive to create social or cultural groups. Children growing up in any group instinctively imitate the behavior they see around them and desire those objects that they see others around them already desire,

and so common values and attitudes arise. However, since some objects are necessarily limited in number, mimetic desire will also necessarily give rise to rivalries and conflicts. Mimetic desire thus produces both a gravitational and a centrifugal effect that a culture needs to regulate or risk its own destruction.

Mimetic crisis is the term Girard uses for the state when mimetic desire goes unchecked and threatens to unleash a wave of violence; the central mechanism cultures have developed for avoiding a mimetic crisis he identifies as the *scapegoat effect*. Cultural order is based on a series of social distinctions that are designed to apportion who gets what in terms of material goods or marriage partners, for example, and thus prevent mimetic desire from coming to a head. From time to time, however, this system will break down, leading to a mimetic crisis where the signs are first a loss of distinction and then an outbreak of rivalries that threatens to engulf the society in a cycle of reciprocal violence as each individual or group claims what it believes is its due. Stability is restored through common agreement on violence against a particular individual or group, in other words, through the selection of a scapegoat. Thus the society's loss of unanimity brought about by mimetic rivalry is cured at the expense of a victim to establish a new "unanimity-minus-one" (*Violence* 259).

In primitive and pre-Christian societies, Girard suggests, selecting a victim occurs as an almost unconscious process so that members of a group do not understand exactly what has happened; they only see that the death of the victim has miraculously led to an end to violence and resulted in peace and order in their culture. This leads to the sacralization of the victim, to whom magical powers are attributed, and the scapegoat is transformed into a savior after his death. Thus the scapegoat mechanism, Girard maintains, is the central principle underlying the function of all religions and a driving force behind the creation of culture. He compares and analyzes Greek mythology as well as religious and cultural practices from Scandinavia, Africa, South and Central America, and the Pacific Islands to come to this conclusion.

The imminent outbreak of a mimetic crisis is heralded by signs of a loss of distinctions, signs that Girard similarly finds in myths worldwide. The appearance of twins, in particular identical twins, enemy brothers, monstrous forms, and transgressions of taboos such as incest all become telltale indications of social collapse. Sameness indicates an overcoming of boundaries, including those that hold violence in check. Cultures thus construct rules to enforce differences in order to prevent mimetic crises and periodically let off steam by staging events of controlled violence.

Girard distinguishes in his theory between an original act of violence that establishes a culture and the ritual attempts to recreate the event. For the original sacrifice to even take

place, a *surrogate victim* from the community itself is needed to stand in and accept the violence that would otherwise engulf the community and threaten every member in it. Once this first generative act of violence unites the group and has set in motion the forces that create the religion that holds the group together, a *ritual victim* is required to stand in for the surrogate victim as the ritual attempts to recreate the original generative act and reap its benefits once again. In other words, “[t]he surrogate victim comes from inside the community, and the ritual victim must come from outside; otherwise the community might find it difficult to unite against it” (*Violence* 102). The ritual victim becomes subjected to *ritualized violence*, not the uncontrolled violence of the mimetic crisis, as cultures implicitly recognize the difference between beneficial and destructive forms of violence. Rituals and religion are then the chief forms of controlling violence and placing responsibility for it far from human hands.

That the scapegoat mechanism no longer holds the same religious power over us today as compared to much earlier, primitive societies Girard attributes to our modern awareness of how scapegoating functions. It is a debt he claims we owe primarily to Christianity, which Girard sees as the first ideology to completely expose the workings of the scapegoat mechanism. By insisting on the innocence of the victim, the story of the Passion and the revelations of the New Testament gospels make it impossible to return to the previous state where man unconsciously created religion. Yet this is not to say that scapegoating does not exist today or that an earlier, “sacrificial” way of thinking has completely died out. A sacrificial reading of the New Testament, “most completely formulated [by] medieval theologians” (*Things Hidden* 182), has underlain much of what Girard terms historical Christianity, and finds expression, for example, in concepts of a vengeful God who has demanded the life of his own son. The sacrificial interpretation, which “make[s] the Crucifixion a cause of [Jesus’s] divinity” (*Things Hidden* 233), survives because of our difficulty in moving beyond sacrificial terminology and the thought process it implies. A non-sacrificial reading, on the other hand, sees Jesus as taking the rejection of sacrifice to its logical conclusion: it is a question of either kill or be killed (*Things Hidden* 211). Either one joins the mob, as everyone from Pilate on down does, or one becomes a victim as well. The explicit portrayals of Jesus’s lowly status and innocence are meant to expose his status as a scapegoat; the entire process of the Passion thus demonstrates the workings of the scapegoat mechanism. Vengeance is attributed not to God, but is shown as solely a product of man’s behavior. Moreover, according to Girard, the Gospels never present the death of Jesus as a

self-sacrifice (236); instead, his death is the consequence of rejecting the logic of sacrifice. What typifies his actions is not the will to kill but the will to save.

A *sacrificial interpretation* of religion thus sees violence as having a divine origin. When a mimetic crisis breaks out, humans respond to the threatened loss of unity by seeking violence against a ritual victim. It is an interpretation from the perspective of the persecutors, who see the violence as justified and divinely ordained. In the wake of Christianity, the explicit religious connection to violence is lost in the nineteenth-century American context of these four novels, at least in the eyes of the persecutors. To the persecuted, however, an understanding of the violence practiced against them as a primitive religious act will come to the fore, as we will shortly see. A *non-sacrificial interpretation* is the response of the persecuted to their status as ritual victim. It includes a recognition of their role in unifying others and a rejection of this role based on the non-violent example of Jesus. Part of this recognition is the portrayal of signs of mimetic crisis, which the sacrificial interpretation overlooks. Moreover, in following the nonviolence of Jesus, the persecuted recognize that Jesus's decision not to resist his crucifixion is not part of a desire for martyrdom, or glory and deification in self-sacrifice, but done to expose how the scapegoat mechanism uses an innocent victim to unify a community, how it disguises the origin of violence, and thereby to render the mechanism ineffective. This in turn puts the persecuted under no obligation to follow Jesus's example unto death, for the revelation has already been made. Instead, a key to non-violence is finding strategies to avoid mimetic crises.

While this brief treatment cannot elucidate all the aspects of Girard's theories, it does indicate the two major points which will be useful in analyzing the four African American novels: the portrayal of a mimetic crisis and a non-sacrificial interpretation of Christianity. Where necessary for the sake of clarity or emphasis, I will refer later on to Girard as well. Even though the black novels may select different reactions to these phenomena, it is in these two areas that the novels share more in common with each other than with white-authored texts.

III/7 The Ritual Victim in *Our Nig*

Again, the four novels may be divided into two groups based upon their chronological relationship to the great trauma of white American history, the Civil War. Set in the antebellum era, both *Our Nig* and *The Bondswoman's Narrative* show white society afflicted with signs of an impending mimetic crisis, while *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces* deal with

the shock waves of the same sacrificial crisis after it has come to a head. The latter texts focus on the black reaction to the failure of Reconstruction, which restored political unity between the white North and South at the expense of blacks. It is, however, to the former novels that I turn first.

Wilson's novel is not ostensibly about the issue of slavery that divides North and South, and is set instead in a domestic context far removed from the plantations and farms that were the scene of the conflict dividing the nation. Numerous critics have noted, however, that the full title itself, with its reference to "A Two-Story White House, North," is intended to be literally two stories that take on both a personal situation and the national issue of slavery (Tate 39-40). Indeed, the term "white house" can be read in a number of ways that all lead to a national interpretation of Wilson's story: it can be seen as a reference to the seat of national administration, itself a political symbol of the nation, it can be viewed as the typical white building of a Southern plantation existing in the North, embodying the Southern conditions of the peculiar institution which in fact exist throughout the country; and the racial composition—white—of the entire nation—the house. While all of these interpretations are valid, I would call attention especially to the last, the concept of America as a racially white nation. As *Our Nig* shows, both the Belmont household and the United States in the antebellum period are held together by a black presence.

The text indicates that Mrs. Belmont's temper has been the main cause of the high turnover in domestic help even before Frado appears on their doorstep, yet there are signs that it is the young mulatto child's arrival which actually sets in motion a mimetic crisis in the house. Already a number of characters reside in the house who mirror each other, such as the two older women, Mrs. Belmont and Aunt Abby, and the two daughters, Mary and Jane, coexisting in a clearly defined balance of power that provides stability to the household. Were it not for those distinctions, derived from stock melodramatic stereotypes that present Mrs. Belmont and Mary as the bad, willful and dominant figures, and Aunt Abby and Jane as good though ineffectual with their common status as invalids, the women around Mr. Belmont and the two siblings could almost be understood as twins. Bad temper and physical frailness, respectively, disguise the underlying equality or symmetry of these relationships, creating distinctions that grant authority in the family to Mrs. Belmont and her daughter. Were their authority brought into question and the full symmetry of their relationships revealed, the conditions for an unfettered, spiraling competition would be met, symmetry between characters being a key component that unleashes sacrificial crises (Girard, *Violence* 63-64).

Into this situation steps Frado, as unwillingly as any slave left on the coasts of a new continent, and whose presence threatens to upset the balance of power. Almost immediately Mrs. Belmont, who has no problem with exploiting Frado's labor, senses the danger the child represents and begins to mark her as different, thus establishing a new and lowly category for her in the family hierarchy. Although the matron claims that "I don't mind the nigger in the child," she promptly banishes Frado to a small room in another part of the house that marks her importance in the family and her relationship to the others with the comment that "it's good enough for a nigger" (26). Thus both physically and linguistically Frado has been thrust into a different category, a fact the son Jack quickly understands when he tells his sister that she will soon "be telling the other girls about *our nig, our nig!*" (25-26). Indeed, this remark that provides the novel its title does more than just convey the self-reflective irony that most critics have commented on; it represents an attempt by the Bellmonts to integrate an outsider through a possessive pronoun and to distance her with the use of a derogatory epithet. It is an attempt to control her through naming her. This proves a prescient move, for Frado emerges as a lively individual who calls the authority of both Mary and Mrs. Belmont into question.

Mary experiences the effects of Frado's presence most directly when the young mulatta is set off to school with her. At home, the hierarchy can be physically enforced and thus rigidly maintained, but at school a different set of rules apply. The teacher, Miss Marsh, encourages the pupils to "lay aside all prejudice" (32) and thus creates an atmosphere where outside rules and rankings do not hold influence, allowing Frado's exuberant nature to make her a center of attention. Although apparently some seven years older than Frado, Mary no longer enjoys any special status, and Wilson makes a point of indicating how the girl reacts to such a loss of authority over her peers: "She could not influence her schoolmates as she wished. She had not gained their attentions by winning ways and yielding points of controversy" (33). Her reaction to losing her distinctive position is to "use physical force 'to subdue [Frado]' and to 'keep her down'" and thus restore the hierarchy which exists at home. The resultant attempt to "compel" Frado to cross a river, which Mary orders her to do "authoritatively," ends with the opposite effect, as Mary falls into the water. Once more Frado's ability to subvert the previous order has been demonstrated.

Back at home, Mrs. Belmont's reaction to this incident is most telling. In separate conversations she insists that both her husband and her son Jack are obliged to view Mary's version of the incident as true based solely upon the girl's status as a family member. When Jack refuses to do so, Mrs. Belmont employs the same terminology of submission as was used earlier with Mary—"it is time your father subdued you" (36). The danger Frado

represents to the status quo, she realizes, extends beyond the mulatta's relationship to this or that person to encompass the entire structure of all relationships in the household, and for this reason she asserts that the father should carry out the punishment, falling back on the socially authorized power of the patriarchy. In essence, however, it is an empty threat, since Mr. Bellmont never shows any inclination in the novel to use physical force as a punishment; indeed, he implicitly cedes authority to his wife by leaving the house any time her moods grow dark. The violence not so subtly hidden in the word "subdue" is left for Mrs. Bellmont to carry out.

Our Nig shows Frado selected as the scapegoat, or ritual victim, in the Bellmont household for all these reasons. Rather than unleashing her own physical fury or husband's on her son, Mrs. Bellmont vents her rage on the mulatta servant in an almost ritualized form of violence. Both she and her daughter are portrayed as individuals always on the verge of violent outbursts, who wait until the other family members are absent before thrashing, kicking, or otherwise abusing the servant. Mary in particular is barely able to control her violent impulses and yet displays a conscious determination not to reveal to others her excesses, flinging a knife at Frado for a perceived insult and then threatening the girl if she should tell. The mother, on the other hand, while also observing a certain propriety in not whipping the young girl before others, experiences a release of tension for her brutality that is reminiscent of Girard's belief in the cathartic nature of ritualized violence. "What a chance to indulge her vixen nature! No matter what occurred to ruffle her, or from what source provocation came, real or fancied, a few blows on Nig seemed to relieve her of a portion of ill will" (41).

Indeed, the beatings and whippings seem to come so frequently as to take the status of a formalized act, and one especially violent scene occurs at the family hearth when Frado three times brings in wood that her mistress deems inappropriate. While feminist critics would tend to read the hearth as a symbol of domesticity, it is worth noting that the hearth, which is etymologically related to the Greek god Hestia, may also have been the scene of household sacrificial rites (Girard, *Violence* 307). Thus, violence and the sacred are seen as one and the same, as the scene also takes on the significance of a ritualized religious act, with Frado as the scapegoat.

For the violence against Frado to effectively unify the family and uphold familial order, it is necessary that everyone condone the violence against her, or in Girard's terms, that "everybody must agree on the selection of the guilty individual" (*Violence* 83). This appears on the surface not to be the case since all three main male figures in the family consistently

express objections to the mother's treatment of the servant, yet closer observation shows that their actions actually allow the violence to occur. Indeed, at various points all three men make themselves complicit in Frado's suffering: Mr. Belmont, for example, usually leaves the house "when a tempest threatened to envelope him" (34). While Wilson describes this behavior at one point as "unintentionally prolong[ing] her pain" (35), repeated occurrences of this behavior suggest his tacit approval. He tells his sister, Aunt Abby, that he can do nothing against his wife's behavior because it would mean "liv[ing] in hell meantime" if he did (44), suggesting he has made his peace with the situation and is willing to sacrifice Frado for his own comfort. In terms of the domestic novel, the male ceding power in the household is often read as a division of labor into separate spheres (Kelley, "Sentimentalists" 434), yet here we can also see it as a sacrificial solution to containing violence that would otherwise break out in the household. Mr. Belmont is still quite capable of anger and speaking "strictly" (53); his "word once spoken admitted of no appeal" (31), suggesting an iron will which has made arrangements with his wife's temper in order to prevent conflict.

Similarly, the two Belmont sons encourage Frado and condemn their mother's treatment of the young girl, but they undertake no concrete actions to prevent the abuse. James, who functions as Frado's spiritual mentor and urges her to focus on the afterlife, never sends for her once he has married, as Frado hopes he would, and instead returns home to die. His final words claim that "[h]ad it been [God's] will to let me live I should take you to live with me" (95), effectively implying that it is God's will that she should suffer. The other brother, Jack, also fails to send for Frado once he has left home, though he does return later to pick up his wife, who has been left at the Belmont house on an earlier occasion and suffers emotionally from the gossip and machinations of her mother-in-law. Jack, who shares his father's name, differs from the older man only in his more sunny disposition. Like his father, he is often "absent through the day, with the hired men" (48), and though he is benevolent toward Frado, her main value to him appears to be the entertainment her "natural temperament [which] was in a high degree mirthful" (53) provides. This is underscored by the episode in which he tosses Frado a coin for having provocatively humiliated his mother by preferring to eat from a dog's dish rather than from the mother's. Such good-willed condescension on Jack's part does not prevent Mrs. Belmont from later applying "a thorough beating, to bring up arrearages" (72). All in all, Jack's attitude toward Frado's situation is summarized in a curt reply to his mother after he has found the child beaten, gagged and locked in a dark room: "If that was the way Frado was to be treated, he hoped she would never wake again!" (36). Instead of seeing Frado delivered from her torturer, he apparently

would rather see her dead. Their willingness to sacrifice the child rather than disturb the family hierarchy is a trait shared by all three men.

Frado thus fulfills all the criteria marking the scapegoat and its functions in primitive religions. She simultaneously represents the potential outbreak of a mimetic crisis in the family and, through her availability as a victim, the solution to preventing it. Her ability to eliminate distinctions in the family is embodied by the authority she enjoys amongst the schoolchildren, in her dunking of a willful sheep, and by the lightness of her skin, “not many shades darker than Mary’s” (39). Rather than allowing her to become with her daughter Mary, Mrs. Belmont argues against treatment that would “have her in the parlor, smart as our own girls” (89) and attempts to physically distinguish the servant by cutting her hair and working her in the sun without protection in order to darken her skin. Yet the tacit agreement among family members that Mrs. Belmont may do as she pleases with Frado as long as they are not around is what holds the family together. The threat of spiraling, uncontrolled violence that one sees in Mrs. Belmont and Mary, and the full scale unleashing of which Frado’s arrival heralds, is brought into check by common agreement that one person should be the object of that violence.

It is in the context of the sacrificial crisis that one should understand Frado’s failed spiritual quest. Girard claims that the selected victim at whose expense the community unites later becomes credited by the same community for magically holding the group together, and thus the previously hated individual is transformed by its persecutors into a religious symbol. Indeed, the origin of the word sacrifice—to make sacred—refers to this very process. In a manner, it is fitting that *Our Nig* focuses on the religious conversion of the victim, for the novel is literally about Frado becoming not just an economically exploited victim but becoming a religious symbol as well. Such a reading of Wilson’s text would seem at first glance to distort Girard’s theory, since the victim must first die in order to be raised to a sacred status and, besides, the sacredness is in the eyes of the persecutors, not the victim. But one should not forget that texts which sanctify the victim are texts written by the persecutors, who are attempting to obscure the origin of their own violence. Wilson’s text is told from the victim’s perspective and as such exposes the workings of the victimage mechanism. Since Frado could only become sanctified in Girard’s sense after her death, a narrative impossibility for an autobiographical text, the religious aspect of the process must necessarily turn on her acceptance of a religion that appears to condone the procedure. In other words, it is a sacrificial interpretation of Christianity that Frado sees in the religion around her, an interpretation that demands a victim, and one that she must reject if she is to survive.

In refusing to share the same heaven as her earthly tormentor, Frado has both uncovered the workings of a sacrificial religion and rejected playing a complicit role in it. As with Girard's reading of the gospels, she firmly locates the source of violence in humans and as brought about by a mimetic crisis that threatens to erase distinctions in the family, and not as divinely inspired. Her later return to Christianity, however, bears too many traces of ingratiating behavior toward her readers, as mentioned earlier, to be considered an embrace of a non-sacrificial religion. This work is carried out by Hannah in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* as she consistently performs an *imitatio Christi* that conforms to Girard's non-sacrificial reading of the Passion.

III/8 Avoiding the Mimetic Crisis in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

Crafts uses the same concept of a mimetic crisis breaking out in a household as Wilson does, expanding it beyond a single household to a number of different locales. As in *Our Nig*, it is a near-white character who threatens each time to unleash the crisis by blurring the color boundary upon which the household's order rests. In each case Hannah potentially enters into a mimetic rivalry with the mistress or women in it, since she can pass equally as black or white, but she dogmatically rejects any form of competition. Her acceptance of her role as a slave unsettles some modern critics who hold active resistance to oppression as the highest good, yet her attitude is thoroughly consistent with the non-sacrificial behavior of Jesus. Rather than passively and naively accepting her lot in this world, Hannah is following the example of Jesus in consequently refusing to enter into any form of mimetic rivalry (Girard, *Things Hidden* 431). Her presence as a near-white mulatta signals an impending crisis in the household, but her religiously inspired behavior demonstrates the way out of it.

A slight variation occurs in the first example, Hannah's early years at Lindendale, as it is the arrival of another near-white mulatta that triggers the crisis. Already in the gothic story of the white family's progenitor having gibbeted an old slave woman we see the sacrificial basis upon which the family traditions and order rest. Violence is given no religious character here, although parallels to the crucifixion can be identified in the slow death of an innocent victim hung from a tree. Instead, violence and arbitrary rules can be seen as the foundation upon which the house with its long picture gallery of earlier masters and mistresses, and hence the institution of slavery, was built. Into this house comes a new young mistress and the signs of a loss of distinctions that will crumble this order herald her arrival. The unexpected

appearance at night spoils the ceremony which is intended to honor the newly married owners of Lindendale.

[The housekeeper] had planned that the entire troop of slaves, all arrayed in the finery of flaming Madras handkerchiefs and calico blazing with crimson and scarlet flowers, should be ranged on either side of the graveled walk leading to the mansion, with due regard to their age and character, and thus pay homage to their master and new-found mistress. But the night to their great disappointment forbade this display, and the ceremonial of reception was confined to the housekeeper. And well she discharged it. The deferential grace of her manner was equaled by the condescending politeness of the master and mistress, the latter of whom immediately asked to be shown to her rooms. (26)

I quote this passage at length to illustrate the extent to which Crafts details the ritual and ceremony that is meant to reinforce the social structure at Lindendale; indeed, the description of all the preparations prior to this takes up three times as much space as this section. Yet all this deference and condescension which holds the social fabric together and keeps overt human violence in check is endangered by a new mistress who is the racial equivalent of her servants.

Other supernatural and mysterious events occur after the new mistress's late night arrival that similarly portend an effacement of differences and a collapse of the old order. A portrait of the family founder crashes from the wall when the newest family head announces that he will have the linden, a symbol of the violence of the old order, cut down, and a mysterious man accompanies the new mistress to the house, apparently there "for some purpose of an uncommon nature" (32), until the secret of the mistress's mixed blood is revealed. The result is upheaval as she and Hannah flee Lindendale and a paroxysm of violence as the master commits suicide, the sacrificial crisis demanding a new victim to restore order.

Throughout their flight, Hannah always maintains the relationship of servant to her mistress, although it is quickly apparent that she is mentally and physically the stronger of the two. This acquiescence to one who is now her former mistress should not be read as an attempt to uphold the previous system; indeed, it is this very system the two are running from. Instead, it is a Christ-like refusal to enter into any form of mimetic relationship, for it is mimetic rivalry that caused the crisis in Lindendale. Here in the woods, far away from slave society, Hannah implements the strategy that Girard outlines as necessary to put an end to sacrificial solutions to mimetic rivalries—avoid conflict by avoiding mimetic relationships. More capable than her former mistress, she nonetheless submits to unfounded verbal

accusations with a muttering of “Not my will but thine be done,” (67) rather than take the proffered bait of conflict.

This strategy Hannah follows consistently throughout the novel. When she and her former mistress are captured by hunters, she immediately acknowledges herself as a slave. Later, when a carriage crash and the subsequent death of her owner leave her the opportunity to pass as a free white to Mrs. Henry, she rejects the chance to claim equality with the white woman. Crafts even has Mrs. Henry ask three times about the nature of Hannah’s relationship to the dead man she was found with, each time presenting the injured woman with a ready-made solution she need only acknowledge. But Hannah is tempted only briefly: “My better nature prevailed” (116).

That she should ascribe to her “better nature” a decision that leads away from freedom and down an unknown path almost certain to bring her grief is a paradox modern readers would find difficult to fathom. Yet this is not an example of “hug[ging] the chain” (142), an expression William chides her with when she again declines an opportunity to escape, this time with the black couple about to run northward, but rather it is another instance of refusing to claim an equality with anyone that would lead to a mimetic rivalry. Hannah insists on the liminal status she enjoys at “Forget me not” where “I was not considered a servant, nor was I treated exactly as a guest” (124). It is a condition which perfectly expresses her situation as a near-white mulatta, neither completely black nor white, but *both* black *and* white. To choose one over the other can only end in violence. Her “better nature” is the one that rejects conflict and violence.

This is not to imply that Hannah fully accepts slavery or that she herself has no desires. Her condemnation of the peculiar institution is explicit and detailed throughout the novel and is strongest when it touches on the subject of marriage and family. Indeed, her own desires run in the direction of marriage and a domestic idyll as the culmination of the novel, her married life with a pastor in a small cottage in New Jersey, reveals. These desires are not modeled, however, on the sacrificial situation of mimetic rivalry, but on the non-sacrificial goal of realizing the Kingdom of God. Girard’s description of the Kingdom of God fulfilled, a state where the renunciation of mimetic relationships has been universally realized (*Things Hidden* 197), matches Crafts’s description of the earthly paradise she finds in her period of slavery, at “Forget me not.”

Crafts devotes almost as much attention to the physical aspects of the Henry household as she does to the human relationships there, displaying again “her propensity for linking the appearance of [a] house with the personalities of its residents” (Sinche 183). The

description is striking not just for the detail but for the repeated emphasis on the combination of variety and harmony to be found in the house. “The furniture was not old, but rather old-fashioned, various, and pleasantly irregular.” Each room has its own theme: one “seemed a parterre of flowers. [...] Yet there was no sameness about it; for these beauties of the fields and gardens, whatever might [be] their substance, were so varied in shape and color, and arranged with so much taste that they had a happy and surprising effect” (122). “In other rooms there was a mingling of unique and singular objects in tasteful confusion. [...] In these rooms the tables and chairs were of great variety and pattern. No two were alike” (123). In a world ordered so that all differences are clearly marked and no two objects exactly resemble each other, no jealous rivalries arise that could lead to violence. “Forget me not” is as close as Hannah comes to finding heaven on earth, and her reverence for the estate is directed chiefly toward the organizational principle behind it: “I could never sufficiently admire the order and harmony of the arrangements, which blent [sic] so many parts into a perfect whole” (123). This guiding principle ensures order on the plantation “not through fear of punishment, but because they [the slaves] loved and respected a master and mistress so amiable and good” (123).

Compare the situation here to that in the Cosgrove household. Hannah herself is not directly involved in the events in this story, which appears to be included more for the critique it offers on slavery’s negative effects on both black and white. The house is Lindendale now under an ownership that is more worldly oriented than the Henrys are. It is not Christian love which rules here, but a master given over to “sensual enjoyments” (172) and a “haughty” mistress with an “imperious will” (173). Signs of conflict abound, with the mistress discovering rivals living secretly in parallel households under the same roof, as servants here enjoy the apparent same status as the owners. Significantly, it is an indeterminate number of rivals—“two or three beautiful and well dressed women” (173) the first time she discovers her competition—practically an entire crowd of undifferentiated women. The most telling sign of mimetic conflict, however, are the twins Mrs. Cosgrove discovers her husband has sired. When such signs of crisis appear, Girard’s theory sees the community undertaking a search for an agreed upon victim who will be sacrificed in order to prevent the situation from spiraling into reciprocal violence, and indeed, such is exactly the case here. Mrs. Cosgrove convinces her husband to expel the other women and their children from the estate, which leads to one mother publicly killing her child and committing suicide. This sacrifice itself is not enough to restore order in the household, which points to a crisis in the sacrificial system that governs the house. More victims will be demanded, including Mrs. Cosgrove herself,

before the couple realize that violence in fact is a direct result of their own behavior. Thus Lindendale remains throughout the novel the grounds for a sacrificial order and an arena of undifferentiated sameness, in contrast to the non-sacrificial “method and regularity” of “Forget me not” (123).

Both *Our Nig* and *The Bondwoman's Narrative* thus incorporate visions of sacrificial realms and attach these to specific households. Both protagonists reject the sacrificial order along with the racial attitudes that underlie them. That Hannah embraces religion wholeheartedly while Frado does not may be traced to the presence of a non-sacrificial vision of Christianity in the one novel and the absence of it in the other. Additionally, it is the racial characteristics of both protagonists and the way they blur the color line that expose the sacrificial nature of the households they serve in. As near-white mulattas they are themselves a sign of the sacrificial system in crisis, a sign of the loss of distinctions upon which the entire system is based, and simultaneously their whiteness points the way out of the crisis by exposing the workings of the scapegoat mechanism that underpins the system. Their simple presence sends a message that is amplified by their self-conscious and public affiliation with the black race—a trait that grows stronger in the two nadir novels—namely, that the selection of blacks as a class of *pharmakoi* or scapegoats is purely arbitrary (Girard, *Violence* 257). In refusing to pass, the characters represent more than the affirmations of a personal identity or racial allegiance that many critics see; they demonstrate that the victim can be anyone and thus reveals the social system as resting on an indiscriminate and violent search for a victim. All the novels, Harper's and Hopkins's as well, resist any attempt to deify their near-white protagonists. In contrast, for all the parallels drawn between the black novels and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, different structures and intentions underlie Stowe's novel.

III/9 The Sacrificial and the Non-Sacrificial: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

The nineteenth century's most popular anti-slavery novel portrays no domestic scene that rests upon a sacrificial system. In contrast to the Belmont household in *Our Nig*, which many critics see as a national allegory for the North's (Mr. Belmont's) complicity with the South's (Mrs. Belmont's) treatment of black slaves, the geography of households in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* rests on the assumption that there are degrees of complicity, ranging from the relatively benign Shelby farm, where economic factors threaten to destroy domestic harmony, to the God-less brutality of Simon Legree's plantation. In general, the North is presented as a

potential Canaan, as exemplified by Rachel Halliday's Quaker home, but has had to relinquish that role to Canada because of the figures such as Senator Bird from Ohio, who is willing to tolerate slavery for the sake of national unity. Characters such as the senator or Miss Ophelia reveal hypocritical Northern attitudes but do not suggest that an individual household or the entire nation is built upon the "unanimity-minus-one of the surrogate victim" (Girard, *Violence* 259), in other words, at the expense of the black servant class. Peace between husband and wife in the Cosgrove household demands the deaths of a young mother and her child; the same situation of a mother killing her child in Stowe's novel is caused by Cassy desiring to spare her infant son a life in slavery. Both acts show slavery perverting the Christian ideal of self-sacrifice, but whereas one appears as a private act of desperation, the other carries a larger significance as part of a public act of reconciliation between two other parties.

Indeed, the murder Cassy commits is part of Stowe's larger strategy of sentimentally galvanizing readers toward abolitionism and depicting motherhood as the solution to the woes found in the novel. Where mothers appear in charge of affairs, good is done: under Rachel Halliday's influence "there was such an atmosphere of mutual confidence and good fellowship everywhere" (223), and the senator's wife goads him into helping the fugitive Eliza. The threat of chaos and immorality grows stronger proportionate to the weakening or absence of female leadership: Mrs. St. Clare's hypochondria goes hand in hand with a household that runs chaotically, while Simon Legree's superstitious horrors are all related to his dead mother and his depravity linked to the lack of a maternal influence. Certainly this "new matriarchy" that Tompkins sees Stowe trying to usher in with her novel (142) bears much in common with Girard's understanding of the Kingdom of God as an absolute rejection of violence and an unconditional acceptance of the principle of love (*Things Hidden* 197). Both concepts envision "the day when the world would be ruled not by force but by Christian love" (Tompkins 141) and a new order that would require, "instead of the breaking of bones, the breaking of bread" (142). The difference lies in how Stowe links a new non-violent order with maternal and domestic values, whereas Girard sees the revelation of the scapegoat with either gender, and in how they perceive the transformation will come about. Both see a world in which "there will be no competition" (Tompkins 142), but for Stowe this will be brought about if the readers "*feel right*" (624); for Girard it is the concept of mimetic desire that must first be properly comprehended in order to better understand conflict and avoid destructive competition. All four African American novels present mimetic desire, embodied in its most concrete form in the near-white mulatta. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, on the other hand, contains no

portrayals of mimetic desire or conflict and separates its mulatto characters distinctly from whites.

The white preoccupation with marking distinctions is noted in each of the black novels, where it is the whites who are intensely concerned with marking the color boundary and accuse a near-white figure of the crime of passing. In *Our Nig* Mrs. Belmont orders Frado to work in the sun in order to darken her complexion, and the lawyer Trappe in Crafts's text makes a living off of identifying and blackmailing women with black blood. In *Iola Leroy* Dr. Latrobe becomes furious when he misidentifies Dr. Latimer since he prides himself on being able to discern racial distinctions, while in Hopkins's novel the suspicion of black blood is enough to have Grace Montfort and her sons removed from their home and relegated to slavery.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, however, a mimetic crisis never occurs because a set of social and racial distinctions is maintained throughout. As mentioned before, the one character who comes closest to being a near-white mulatta, Cassy, is still distinguished by her dark eyes, a trait associated with her time and again in the novel. Her social status is repeatedly emphasized when she is shown with her "delicate hands" and "respectable garments" against a backdrop of field hands (501). By highlighting the racial and class characteristics that set Cassy apart, Stowe does not allow her to signal the threat of a loss of distinctions and the resultant collapse of a social order. Cassy's case represents much more the fate of an individual woman falling in social status than the danger a lower class represents to the social hierarchy when it becomes indistinguishable from a higher class. It is for the latter reason—and not simply greed and lust alone—that Anson Polack instigates the attack on the Montfort family, and although the individual fates of Grace Montfort and Mrs. De Vincent titillate a sentimental interest in the novels, both Anson and Trappe make it clear that they are enforcing society's will and only doing "[w]hatever the law permits, and public opinion encourages" (Crafts 98). Danger lies in the liminality of characters such as Hannah and the other near-white mulattas, and this danger Stowe banishes when she gives Uncle Tom "truly African features" (40) and sends Eliza and George Harris off to Liberia at the end of the novel.

In consequence of the absence of a mimetic crisis, the deaths in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are devoid of any sacrificial meaning. Although both Little Eva and Tom perform an *imitatio Christi* (Tompkins 138), with Tom's death clearly portrayed as a reenactment of Jesus's death, this is not the same crucifixion Girard interprets. The gospel presentation, he claims, aims to expose the complete functioning of the scapegoat mechanism, and so all members of the community, including the disciples from Judas to Peter, even the criminals executed with

Jesus, are united in turning away from him or mocking him. Tom's protracted death scene, while it certainly establishes him as a Christian martyr in the way Christ's death came later to be understood, has no such unifying effect on observers or participants. Instead, it immediately breaks down a pre-existing unity brought about by a hopelessness that leads to Sambo and Cassy's cynicism, not by any form of mimetic desire. Like Little Eva's death, Tom's redeems those around him, and in adhering to non-violence and exemplifying the precept to turn the other cheek, he quite literally saves Cassy and Emmeline; nevertheless, such heroics threaten to add a layer of meaning that the four black novels explicitly reject. Glorification of a victim to where he or she achieves a status bordering on divinity is, namely, a step these novels never take.

Girard contends that primitive religions always developed from an original act of violence against a chosen scapegoat to whom then was attributed posthumously the divine power of saving the community from violence. Orthodox Christianity disavows a link between Christ's death and the Crucifixion, and Girard points out that the three days elapsing between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection underscore a separation between the murder and the proclamation of the religion (*Things Hidden* 231). In contrast, both Little Eva and Uncle Tom are recognized during their lifetimes by those around them as saintly. Stowe never commits the blasphemy of equating either character to God, yet she clearly indicates they are to be understood as heavenly manifestations on earth. When Master George arises from the spot where Tom has just died, he senses "that the place was holy" (591) for having witnessed this martyrdom. Indeed, in a reversal of the biblical timing of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, Tom actually lives for three days after his beating, during which time his suffering converts the slaves around him. Little Eva's death profoundly affects all members of the household, both in its run-up and its aftermath; her glorification may well have been part of an attempt to instill meaning into the death of a child, an all too frequent occurrence in that era, or as Jane Tompkins suggests, part of a nineteenth-century evangelical "theory of power" which grants the weak a power in death that was denied them during their lifetimes (128). I would argue, though, that the entire concept of someone being too good to live in this world is very much akin to the deification of a sacrificial victim.

For white readers, Stowe's strategy of glorifying her protagonist with a martyr's death proved highly effective, turning her novel into one of the nineteenth century's best-selling books and helping create strong anti-slavery sentiment in the run-up to the Civil War. The strategy also reveals how Christianity could provide an ideology that allowed black slaves to assert a form of psychological resistance and their own humanity in the face of brutal

oppression; however, Stowe's presentation of a slave willingly accepting death and this vision's popularity with white readers also speaks volumes about the era's romantic racialism. It fits well with a popular white belief that "[t]he Negro [...] was a better natural candidate for Christian perfection" (Frederickson 106), so well that they willingly live out the story of Christ, but has little in common with the more practical theory that Christianity helped blacks "to endure slavery precisely because these beliefs supported their moral revulsion toward it and promised eventual deliverance from it without demanding that they risk their lives in immediate resistance" (Timothy Smith 498).

None of this holds true for the black novels, which leave their protagonists as decidedly human figures who turn away any attempt at deification. The extreme example is *Our Nig*, where Frado wholly rejects the idea of sharing the same heaven as Mrs. Belmont and turns her thoughts away from religion, but even the other three, more pious protagonists evince an unwillingness to be made more of than they are. Hannah, Iola, and Sappho all reject the role of martyr, while clinging with varying degrees of strength to their own concepts of their Christian identity. All are survivors who choose not to perform a literal *imitatio Christi* but desire instead to lead their lives in accordance with Christian teachings and to leave the world a better place through active works, not through example. Iola, for instance, lists Moses and Nehemiah as the biblical figures she admires the most (265), emphasizing their role in serving their people, not the glory and honor of being a leader, and when the novel closes she is, just like Hannah, a teacher. Sappho at the end leaves the convent with her son, trading in the martyrdom of self-exile in favor of a life at the side of her husband, who appears destined to be a leader of his chosen people. A comparison of her with the Virgin Mary is made during the course of her separation from Will, but this should be seen as part of the expiation for her supposed sin, motherhood through forced rape, rather than as an attempt to glorify her. A period of penance is required before the reader can fully accept her and she can return to the world to fulfill her role as a model for the race. In each case, self-sacrifice is understood as working to uplift the race, not as a death.

The most dramatic and seemingly paradoxical example of this attitude to self-sacrifice is the narrator in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Critics have puzzled over Hannah's apparent willingness to accept a life in slavery, but then to rebel when she is banished to live with the field hands. Henry Louis Gates interprets the latter as a sign of her strong sense of class consciousness (Introduction lxvi), while Bryan Sinche sees all her behavior as consistent with the attempt to fulfill her own image of herself as a virtuous woman and thus reads her seeming submissiveness as an "act of resistance" (184). While her behavior certainly is

consistent with her attitude towards marriage in slavery and with her religious beliefs, I would add that her running away wholly conforms with her previous reactions to potential mimetic conflicts. If Jesus's acts were meant to expose the role of the scapegoat in resolving mimetic crises and thus render the process inoperative or weaken it, those living according to its dictates need not literally do exactly as Jesus did and let themselves be sacrificed; they can expose the mimetic conflicts and adhere to alternative solutions to resolving them through violence. This Hannah does first by turning the other cheek and submitting, and later by fleeing from slavery when the violence threatens to engulf her.

The potential for mimetic conflict occurs over and over again in Crafts's novel. Hannah could desire the same things as the female heads of any household she enters, Mrs. De Vincent, Mrs. Henry, or Mrs. Wheeler, and thus enter into competition and conflict with them, but she never attempts to usurp any mistress, even when the mistress is obviously insane or unjust. In following Peter's commandment for the servant to obey his earthly master (1 Pet. 2:18), she is not affirming slavery as much as she is adopting a non-sacrificial approach to the situation she is confronted with. She submits to her position in a social order she explicitly disagrees with in order to avoid a mimetic crisis. When acquiescence will not prevent a mimetic crisis from arising, as happens when she is sent to the slave huts on the Wheeler plantation, her only choice is to flee. In this context, the extended description of her introduction to the "promiscuous crowds" (207) living in the huts is especially telling.

It was reeking with filth and impurity of every kind, and already occupied by near a dozen women and children, who were sitting on the ground, or coiled on piles of rags and straw in the corner. They regarded me curiously as I entered, grinned with malicious satisfaction that I had been brought down to their level, and made some remarks at my expense; while the children kicked, and yelled, and clawed at each other, scratching each other's faces, and pulling each other's hair I stumbled to a bench I supposed designed for a seat, when one of the woman [sic] arose, seized me by the hair, and without array dragged me to the ground, gave me a furious kick and made use of highly improper and indecent language. Bill, who had retired to the outside of the hut, hearing the noise of the fray came hastily in. It was his turn then. He commenced beating her with a hearty good-will, and she scratched and bit him, furiously. In the rough and tumble they knocked over two or three of the children, besides treading on the toes of some women, who irritated by the pain started up and joined the contest which soon became general. (209)

All the essentials of a mimetic crisis are in evidence here, from the lack of distinction among individuals to the spiraling, out-of-control violence that engulfs practically everyone in the room. The apparent triggering of the violence is Hannah's misunderstanding of the

purpose of a bench, or rather from her perspective that the other woman covets exactly the same spot as Hannah precisely because Hannah wishes to sit there. Even the language used here echoes Girard's definition of a sacrificial crisis as the failure of rituals to separate impure violence from violence which purifies and makes sacred, thus leading to "impure, contagious, reciprocal violence [that] spreads throughout the community" (*Violence* 49). It is a God-less realm where "impurities of every kind" have led to a "contest which soon [becomes] general" and then the search is on for a new sacrificial victim to reestablish a new order. In such a context the God Hannah believes in cannot come to rule, and it is for this reason as much as the forced marriage that Hannah must run away.

Equally significant is the biblical passage which inspires Hannah to leave. Crafts appears to be "invoking divine authority for her own flight" (Gates, *Textual Annotations* 275) when she, with the flair for melodramatic coincidences typical of the sentimental novel, randomly opens her Bible to the passage where Jacob flees from Esau to avoid his brother's revenge. John Stauffer has pointed out the many parallels between Hannah's experiences and the biblical story of Jacob, and while certainly "Jacob becomes a symbol of freedom in Crafts's story" (66), the most amazing coincidence is that she chooses exactly that point in Jacob's story to open to. Like so many other biblical and mythical tales, the story of Jacob and Esau is one of enemy brothers, a sign of mimetic conflict in Girard's reading (*Violence* 6). Jacob has already deceived both father and brother by posing for the former as the latter and must flee from the violence he has unleashed by effacing the difference between himself and his brother. Hannah is no trickster—on this minor point I disagree with Stauffer's reading—for on numerous occasions she rejects the opportunity to deceive others of her status and practices deception only to facilitate her escape and remain faithful to her beliefs. The parallel to Jacob lies not in her unleashing a mimetic conflict, but in her similar response to the conflict itself.

That Crafts chooses an appropriate biblical story of escape is no mere coincidence, though I would hasten to add that it is most likely not a conscious decision to portray or refer to mimetic conflicts. All this, I conjecture, is an intuitive outgrowth of her experience as a second-class citizen in the United States based upon her race. Relegation to what is euphemistically called the serving class shapes her interpretation of Christianity. Her perspective shares much in common with that of the class of citizens kept in ancient Athens as *pharmakoi* for sacrificial purposes, more, in fact, than it does with white Americans, Athenians, or the Romans and Jews of whom Jesus said "they know not what they do." This passage from Luke 23:34 reveals not a simpleminded Christian forgiveness but an awareness

that the text is told from the point of view of the persecuted, not the persecutors (Girard, *Scapegoat* 110-11). With this perspective she selects biblical passages and constructs scenes of mimetic desire because they provide a ready explanation for the rejection she experiences from people otherwise just like her. It is a perspective not unique to slavery, but rather one shared by all persecuted groups whose very experiences give them insight into the sacrificial nature of their oppressor's religion. The nadir novels show these insights still working a generation after slavery was officially abolished, yet they also show slavery as the crucible in which such insights into mimetic desire are learned.

III/10 Rejecting the Sacrificial: The Nadir Novels

In *Iola Leroy*, it is the shifting of perspectives between persecutor and persecuted that throws light on how mimetic desire functions. As a young school girl in the North, Iola defends slavery, ignorant of her own racial background. Later, she is “compelled to take [her] place among a people [she has] learned to look upon as inferiors and social outcasts” (273), and from this both her attitudes and her religion change. Through this experience she comes to recognize that her own desires simply mimed those of the social class and ethnic group she belonged to. Though the experience is frightening, it is one she later does not regret, for it teaches her how a conscious choice, not simply unthinking imitation, is possible. This realization is dramatized in her decision not to pass and in the choice she makes between the two suitors, white and black, who vie for her hand. Selecting Dr. Latimer is a conscious decision based upon mutual interests that are independently derived, while falling in love with Dr. Gresham would have occurred “had there been no barrier in her way” (271). Similarly, a change in religious outlook is implied; the religion of her earlier, carefree life is shown as unable to sustain her in slavery: “I tried to pray, but the heavens seemed brass over my head” (273-74). Later, at the conversazione, she makes an impassioned speech in which she recognizes differences in religious interpretations, rejecting any that would accept the class differences she had earlier unthinkingly accepted. The tone of her voice clearly emphasizes that it is her own religious transitions which have inspired her, for “[t]here was a ring of triumph in her voice, as if she were reviewing a path she had trodden with bleeding feet, and seen it change to lines of living light” (257).

The appeal of Christianity to the downtrodden requires little explanation; it is explicit in Jesus's words “Inasmuch as ye have it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matt. 25:40), which Iola paraphrases (257). Yet for the same downtrodden

it appears to open the doors to understanding mimetic desire and the conflict that arises out of it, and to comprehending that whites have maintained a sacrificial interpretation of Christianity. The novel which presents this most clearly, though, is *Contending Forces*.

Ostensibly, Pauline Hopkins attributes economic causes to white racism and the oppression blacks are subject to. In the speech which gives the title to the novel, Luke Sawyer names the contending forces of oppression as “lack of brotherly affiliation, lack of energy for the right and the power of the almighty dollar which deadens men’s hearts to the suffering of their brothers” (256). Envy of Charles Montfort’s and Sawyer’s father’s wealth lead to their lynchings, while John Langley’s greed and willingness to sell out his people for personal advancement serve as further examples of the economic thesis. Yet to focus solely on economic factors is to overlook the religious imagery that pervades the antebellum and postbellum stories of Grace Montfort and Sappho Clark as well as the two lynchings that are portrayed.

In *Contending Forces* mimetic desire is less closely connected to religion than in the other novels. Recognition of mimetic desire is necessary for religious development in *Iola Leroy*, and avoiding it becomes a religious imperative in Crafts’s novel; even in *Our Nig* mimeticism is at the beginning of a long process of unity at Frado’s expense, a fact that leads her to reject religion altogether. For Hopkins’s characters mimetic desire hides behind the rivalries and relationships between them, motivating plot much more than providing religious enlightenment. Dora confesses that she desires John because “[h]e’s the style among all the girls in our set” (122), while Sappho’s coldness and haughtiness toward John attracts him just as much as his own lust drives him, demonstrating that desire will “seek out an obstacle that promises to be firmly insurmountable” (Girard, *Violence* 148). Conflict arises between Will and John, as it did earlier between Charles Montfort and Anson Pollock, because both desire the same woman, a common enough element in melodramas and romances, and seemingly devoid of any moral aspect beyond that of socially determined “good” behavior versus “bad.” But there is more to the two conflicts than adultery or blackmail. The religious significance lies in how the two mimetic conflicts are resolved.

As noted earlier, the whipping of Grace Montfort after the murder of her husband has been read by Hazel Carby as a rape and symbolic of the fate black women often suffered in slavery. What has not been noted is the ritual aspect of the entire scene. Grace Montfort is carefully tied “to the whipping post as the victim to the stake” (68), as Hopkins’s allusion to medieval practices would have it, though one could as easily have compared it to a crucifixion. The rules of vengeance are carefully obeyed as the victim must each time be

revived before suffering another blow, and the two men follow a set procedure in which they alternately apply the rawhide, deference for “dr[awing] first blood” being given by reason of his wrongs” (69) to one of the men. This is not the venting of rage as had earlier been demonstrated in Montfort’s untempered beating of Hank Davis, but carefully applied violence that bears much in common with the purifying violence Girard sees in the ritual sacrifices primitive religions undertook to channel man’s uncontrolled impulses. The victim so chosen bears all the signs of a mimetic crisis—the threat of effaced differences that the supposed mulatta, Mrs. Montfort, represents—that the community wishes to overcome. Indeed, the unanimity of the procedure is highlighted in the text by the committee on public safety that is invoked to carry out the murder and whipping. As Girard points out, legal systems are a modern invention created to fulfill much the same function as primitive religions did in enforcing a sacrificial regime to control violence, and the shadowy nature of the committee recalls that transitory phase when such religious practices gained a similar character. The final result, aside from the eventual death of Mrs. Montfort and the personal tragedy of her children, is restored peace to the community, as the threat of emancipated slaves and “an imaginary insurrection” (70) are removed.

Against this background of sacrificial ritual, the rape Carby sees in the whipping acquires an aspect of the primitive religious. Girard points out that sacrificial victims were often required to break sexual taboos or their sexual organs were beaten as part of the religious ceremony. African kings in some tribes, for example, had to perform ritualized acts of incest in order to make themselves “the very incarnation of impurity” (*Violence* 105) and thus “to enable him to polarize, to literally draw to himself, all the infectious strains in the community and transform them into sources of peace and fecundity” (*Violence* 107). It is part of a two-stage process, of first vilifying the victim in life and then deifying him in death for ridding the society of violence. The second stage, however, is left out of *Contending Forces* and the other nineteenth-century black novels. On the one hand, this is because the modern lynchers and rapists have never taken that last step the way their primitive ancestors did; this was a step left to white authors such as Stowe, who glorified victims as simply too good to live in this fallen world. On the other hand, for the black authors to take this step would be to accept a sacrificial interpretation of religion. Unduly valorizing their heroines or equating them with saints is a step they always retreat from. What Hopkins achieves in this scene is not so much the portrayal of Grace Montfort as a martyr; rather the text exposes the local whites as practicing a primitive, non-Christian religion.

In the same vein, it is significant that the central event in Sappho's past was not simply a rape, but an act of incest committed by her white uncle. What serves to shock late-Victorian morality and goad sentimental sympathy against postbellum racism also calls forth the image of primitive religious rites designed to heap the community's transgressions upon the sacrificial victim. Again, ritual aspects can be discerned, this time in the presentation of the lynchings that follow very similar patterns. In both cases a mob surrounds a black family's house, first Luke Sawyer's father's and then Monsieur Beaubean's, and then sets fire to it in order to "smok[e them] out" (257). Resistance ignites a spontaneous backlash in the first case, with a frenzy of violence that borders on Girard's "reciprocal violence" of the mimetic crisis, but ends in a manner reminiscent of the Montfort family's fate: the father is hanged from a tree and the woman whipped "and otherwise abused" (257) until she dies. The second follows on a more orderly course, as the mob waits outside the house and "pick[s] off" (261) the inhabitants one by one as they try to escape the flames. Both lynchings involve brothers, invoking again Girard's concept of an underlying mimetic crisis, with twin brothers killed in the first and then the rivalry of half-brothers, one from a black mother, the other from a white, launching the second. As is the case with the Montfort lynching, Hopkins assigns economic motives to both incidents, in particular to the first, but the confluence of so many signs of Girard's sacrificial crisis—twins, enemy brothers, a victim bearing the marks of a larger loss of social distinctions, incest, ritualized violence, the congregation of a faceless mob—all lend it as well the aura of a primitive religious ritual.

The repetition of these three scenes allows Hopkins to portray racial violence as not simply isolated incidents in contemporary society, but as an historical pattern stretching back into the distant antebellum past. They allow her to link the fates of the two women so that Sappho becomes "a reincarnation of sorts of Grace Montfort" (Putzi 17), whose story prefigures that of the nadir woman in much the way that the Old Testament is understood to prefigure the New. But just as the New Testament goes beyond the Old—or, as Girard puts it, fully reveals the sacrificial process that the Old only partially suggests—so Sappho's story shows how one can overcome the legacy of slavery and rape to survive where Grace Montfort failed. Indeed, a number of elements link Sappho to the New Testament story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, marking her "as [a] risen Christ figure" (Putzi 17). Revelation of her past abuse occurs on Easter and leads to her flight south, a symbolic descent into hell, within hours after she and Will have engaged. Christ's three days are extended to three years for Sappho, who must not only earn redemption but also confront a past that she is determined to flee, as she explicitly tells her son and later suggests to Monsieur Louis, whose

grandchildren she takes care of during this period. When she later meets Will, renewing their relationship and returning to as family “as one risen from the dead” (394), it is again Easter day.

Allison Berg has pointed out that Grace Montfort’s death conforms to the tenets of the cult of true womanhood, which requires a woman to die if her virtue or “purity are threatened, and sees Hopkins creating Sappho in order to establish “a revised and reclaimed maternity” (143) for black women. Undoubtedly, Hopkins is confronting head on a situation encountered by thousands of black women in the nineteenth century, the legacy of illegitimacy. I would only add that she accomplishes this by configuring Sappho’s tale as a non-sacrificial reenactment of Christ’s story. In finally confronting her past and openly reclaiming her son, she accepts the consequences of her rape, just as Jesus’s refusal to heed warnings about entering Jerusalem show him accepting the consequences of adhering to the non-violence, or the Kingdom of God (Girard, *Things Hidden* 206). Hopkins’s twist in the biblical story is to portray Will as unwavering in his belief in Sappho; her flight betrays her belief that by sacrificing herself she will unite the rest of the community in their abhorrence of her “crime.” In the end, it is the cult of true womanhood that is revealed as a sacrificial institution. No more shall victims such as Grace Montfort, who accepted her rape or her own crime and killed herself, be demanded.

The passion of Sappho also does not result in her deification. If she and Alphonse appear in Will’s dreams as the Madonna and child, one should read this as Will’s having come to terms with her past—his faith in a virgin birth, as it were—and not as a glorification of Sappho. The end of the novel locates her firmly in the context of her family: a wife and a mother, the same as her friend and sister-in-law standing next to her on the deck with her own family. This is not a holy mother who will redeem the world or even her family; the convent of the Holy Family and its mother superior have been left behind. She is a woman among many, now reconciled with her own past.

Despite the seeming glide into the normalcy of family life, Sappho remains the central figure, especially from a religious aspect. Indeed, of all the signs that suggest a primitive religious rite—ritual violence, twins, incest, the faceless mob, etc.—it is her person which most strongly embodies an impending sacrificial crisis and points the way out of it. Her figure accomplishes this by combining characteristics of both the surrogate and the ritual victim. No character better represents these qualities of being simultaneously of and not of the community than the figure of the near-white mulatta. And by combining these features in one

person, the near-white mulatta expresses better than any Uncle Tom or bloodied black slave the true workings of the sacrificial system. The victim could be literally anybody.

Girard contends that rituals not only aim to reproduce the original sacrificial act, they also serve to disguise its origin “as the memory of the generative violence fades from the collective consciousness” (*Violence* 303). Indeed, the entire purpose of sacrificial religions is to relieve man of responsibility for violence and assign to it a divine origin. In a work such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the ritual victims are, as in the black novels, “drawn from categories that are neither outside nor inside the community: slaves, children” (*Violence* 271), yet these categories mask the true origin of the original surrogate victim as one who is arbitrarily chosen. The glorification of Little Eva’s death was almost certainly an attempt to give meaning to the unfortunately common occurrence of child mortality in the nineteenth century, while Uncle Tom’s martyrdom is that of a man clearly marked for the audience as belonging to the category of victims. They are victims whose deaths, however poignant or moving, were always to be expected because they were of a known group that God wanted to call home. The ambiguity of a Grace Montfort, or of any of the other near-white mulattas, on the other hand, calls racial categories into question and reveals that the victim could be literally anyone. The conjurational catharsis in the reader the text aims for occurs in the revelation that the sacrificial victim is randomly chosen and could even be the reader. Differences are effaced between reader and protagonist, and the near-white mulatta becomes not just a sign of a sacrificial crisis in which distinctions among group members vanish, but also distinctions between the sacrificial and ritual victim. If the attempt to find a ritual replacement for the sacrificial victim is at best an imperfect affair since it cannot be one who is inside the community, in showing first the fate of Grace Montfort and then that of Sappho, the avowed mulatta with “hair of a golden cast [and] aquiline nose” (107), Pauline Hopkins manages to overcome boundaries in all directions.

III/11 “Because God is not dead...”

Of the thousands of antislavery lectures, meetings, and rallies in the antebellum era, certainly one of the most memorable was an 1859 meeting in Ohio that featured two of the most renowned black abolitionists, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. As the former stood at the lectern delivering a grim prediction that the national sin of slavery would not be resolved peacefully, Truth became more and more distraught until she finally burst out in the middle of his speech with the question, “Frederick, is God dead?” Rarely at a loss for words, Douglass

turned to her and replied, “No, dear sister, God is not dead, and because God is not dead slavery can only end in blood.”

With the reference to bloodshed, Douglass no doubt intended to suggest that a just God demanded an end to the injustice of slavery at all costs, but the exchange between these two disparate figures, the urbane Douglass and the earthy “Libyan Sybil,” highlights a number of truths about religious experience in nineteenth-century America. One, of course, is the sheer variety of religious interpretation from individual to individual, both within the nation and within racial and social groups. Another is the inability to escape sacrificial terminology and thinking. Douglass’s remark places the ultimate responsibility for violence far from mankind and implies that God demands violence and condones it as a solution to worldly problems. Such a suggestion is far from a non-sacrificial reading of the gospels, as we have seen above. Finally, the anecdote reveals that African American spirituality, insofar as it does display a unified approach, was itself not wholly non-sacrificial.

In making the case for a distinctive brand of spirituality in these African American novels, I do not argue for the simplistic equation that blacks practice a non-sacrificial and whites a sacrificial religion. While revelations of mimetic desire, the status of blacks as *pharmakoi*, and the sacrificial nature of white behavior align the novels with a non-sacrificial understanding of Christianity, an undercurrent of vengeance surfaces occasionally that demonstrates how difficult full realization of this interpretation actually is. It emerges in Frado’s unabashed glee at Mary’s death, and at John Langley’s demise in the gold fields of the Arctic, where he has obviously received the just and melodramatic penalty for his sins. But, paradoxically, it may appear most strongly in the novel where the protagonist most closely follows Jesus’s refusal to enter into mimetic relationships, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. Reference in the preface to “the hand of Providence” which “giv[es] to the righteous the reward of their works, and to the wicked the fruits of their doings” prepares the reader for the novel’s conclusion, where the chief evildoer, Trappe, meets a violent death in a chapter appropriately entitled “Retribution.” The use of such self-righteous language, the matter of fact recounting of the death of Jacob—who lacks Hannah’s religious faith—and the smile that Hannah cannot suppress when Mrs. Wheeler speaks of her humiliation all point to a smug, somewhat vindictive side to the protagonist.

Obviously, such details humanize Hannah as much as they attempt to steer the reader toward a particular moral interpretation, for it is the unflinching Christian self-denial and turning the other cheek of Uncle Tom that many readers from the nineteenth century on found unrealistic and troublesome. It demonstrates as well the appeal Christianity had for many

African Americans in offering justice at some point in this world and not simply in the next. Indeed, although an otherworldly orientation may have been the hope of white slaveowners when they encouraged evangelical missions on their plantations and farms, part of an effort to create docile servants, these novels focus on the practical applications of Christianity for both the individual and the larger black community in the here and now. They depict human beings, with all their weaknesses, struggling to adapt Christianity to their own predicaments; it would be unrealistic to expect a thirst for revenge not to occasionally rear its head.

One of the outcomes of their adaptation process, I have argued here, is not only that African Americans “conjured culture,” in Theophus Smith’s words, but that these authors were conjuring a literary genre. Just as slaves brought an African worldview to the Christianity they encountered, the four authors are subtly appropriating a white women’s genre for their own needs. In an attempt to target both black and white audiences, instilling self-esteem in the one while curing the other of racism, their main pharmakon was the near-white mulatta. The figure was borrowed from white authors and modified to suit their own ends, bleaching the figure over time until by the end of the century she was indistinguishable from a white woman. They managed the figure, keeping her physically white but avowedly black, in order to induce reader identification with the character and thus overcome the racial barrier to empathy. The aim of the conjurational process was to achieve aesthetic distance for the readers, both black and white, and thus reach the catharsis necessary for curing racism in the one while accruing the benefits of being white in American society for the black reader. Along the way, the process also reveals the sacrificial nature of a white society whose ritualized beatings and lynchings underscore cultural unity gained at the expense of blacks, and the comparatively non-sacrificial nature of black Christianity. That many twentieth-century critics fail to see this is a result of their privileging a particular form of resistance to oppression, a form that itself is sacrificial. What appears to be acquiescence to one’s oppressors is lumped together with Uncle Tom’s martyrdom and castigated as Christian self-sacrifice, since it is not the overt, confrontational resistance of twentieth-century protest novels. In fact, these nineteenth-century writers never allow their protagonists to go as far as Stowe’s Uncle Tom. Their seeming acquiescence to white institutions and ideals masks an attempt to take white Christianity and subvert it to their own purposes; indeed, practicing the passive resistance of this form of Christianity may have been a more effective weapon than either offering oneself up wholly as a sacrifice or fighting every inch of the way. For characters like Hannah or Sappho, and for blacks in general, it advocated self-respect.

Seeking justice in this life, Crafts draws the line at how much Hannah will take before she flees.

The desire to see justice done in this world is also a point of overlap with domestic novels and melodrama, though it would be fruitless to try to trace its origin solely to this literary source. Most likely it resulted from a congruence between the domestic genre's demand for a morally didactic ending and vestiges of sacrificial thinking in African American spirituality, both of which find their origins in a very human emotion. The weight in these four novels, however, leans toward a non-sacrificial religion, as Crafts's novel demonstrates. If the epigraph for the "Retribution" chapter does suggest an avenging God, the other chapters bear scriptural quotations at the start which indicate "an interesting pattern evoking suffering and the possibilities for deliverance" (Bruce, "Mrs. Henry's" 140), most taken from the Old Testament, especially the Psalms. This comes as no great surprise, since the other great appeal of the Bible for black slaves was how their story and the sufferings matched those of the children of Israel. The Old Testament orientation in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, however, is most suggestive, given that it is the New Testament gospels that fully reveal the workings of the scapegoat mechanism and "achieve what the Old Testament leaves incomplete" (Girard, *Things Hidden* 158). The attraction of Genesis, Exodus, the Psalms, and the prophets lay in how these stories expressed and crystallized a group's and individual suffering; the critique comes in how the story of the Passion could be used to reveal the causes of this suffering. In the next chapter I turn to examining the various biblical configurations that emerge in these novels.

CHAPTER IV
THE SERVANT IN THE WILDERNESS:
BIBLICAL CONFIGURATIONS, RACE, AND GENRE

IV/1 Introductory Remarks

Academic debate on the net benefit to the black community of adopting Christianity has covered a broad spectrum of opinion over the years. Black liberation theologians such as James Cone have argued that African Americans shaped the ideology they took on so that religion offered both a form of resistance to slavery and oppression, and a foundation for organizing the black community. Others have taken a more jaundiced view of Christianity, seeing it in Nietzschean terms as an “ideology of slaves” that preaches acquiescence in this world in exchange for otherworldly rewards. In one such example, Forrest Wood muses that “[o]ne can only wonder why the bondsmen at least appeared to adopt so easily his tormentor’s religion” (46).

Yet adopt they did, if perhaps not so monolithically as some scholars seem to imply. Indeed, the answer to Wood’s question lies fairly close at hand: the parallels—thus the analogies—between the Old Testament tales of the children of Israel and the black experience with North American bondage are self-evident, and the prevalence of these biblical stories and plot skeletons in slave spirituals and songs attest that the parallels were recognized. The sufferings of Jesus were as well an element from the New Testament with which blacks could identify, for the persecution of the innocent would have carried a special weight with those of a stigmatized group, a meaning certainly more specific for them than that of the general sufferings inherent in the human condition. As contemporary observers and later slave testimonies indicate, however, not all biblical stories or concepts were equally received; white preaching on stealing or obeying one’s earthly masters were frequently seen for what they were, blatant attempts to use the tenets of Christian ideology as a form of social control, and rejected. Concepts such as original sin were unknown in West African religions, as Eugene Genovese has pointed out (211-12), and this may well be the reason why the idea found little acceptance in the African American community. In other words, blacks did not simply adopt Christianity and the Bible wholesale, but were selective about what they took over.

The situation, however, becomes more complicated when looking at black-authored texts which also draw on white literary styles and genres, such as *Our Nig* and *The*

Bondwoman's Narrative do with domestic fiction. As Nina Baym notes, original sin was not a concept white authors subscribed to either (42), indicating how difficult it is to locate exactly where a particular ideology originated. Were the black authors following impulses coming from within their racial group's culture or adapting trends from the broader nineteenth-century American culture? Easier to isolate, and potentially more fruitful to investigate than ideological concepts, are literary motifs that authors have borrowed from particular genres. With their origin identified, it is possible to compare their usage to better understand how factors such as race and gender affect the way these motifs are employed.

In this chapter I will examine some of the biblical configurations the four African American novels employ and the extent to which these configurations conformed to patterns found in slave narratives and the domestic novel. Although all four novels are ostensibly fiction and thus have a large degree of freedom to draw from a fictional genre such as the domestic novel, it will be seen that race plays a greater role in determining which biblical figurations are used and how they are employed.

Additionally, taking a diachronic view of the four novels reveals an interesting aspect of the African American blend of the two fundamental Christian texts. As Eugene Genovese points out, “[a]t the risk of oversimplification, the God of the Old Testament may be taken as a national deity [...] and the God of the New Testament may be taken as the first projected Lord of the entire human community and a God of love” (253). This suggests, very broadly, that the Old Testament figurations would prove more efficacious in portraying a group identity for African Americans, a primary concern of the nadir novels, while the New Testament gospel stories would be more effective in portraying the general or individual case, an aim more important for reaching out to a broader audience such as domestic fiction attempts. Indeed, spirituals and postbellum slave narratives testify that it was the Old Testament stories of Joshua, or of Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt that most appealed to black slaves (Levine 50), while white domestic fiction tends to be much more centered on the story of Jesus. One might expect to find, then, a progression from New Testament constellations to Old Testament figurations as the focus on an individual and her immediate environment in antebellum novels gives way to the race-consciousness and orientation to a larger group that characterizes the nadir novels forty years later. While their typological relationship makes any attempt to draw strict boundaries between the two testaments problematic, this expectation that in these four novels the explicit references to one will predominate over the other at a particular moment proves to be false. Indeed, if anything, close examination shows the exact opposite tendency to be true.

The prevalence of the Psalms in nineteenth-century literature illustrates the Genovese's point about oversimplification and how difficult it is to clearly separate Old Testament from New, associating with one group identity and the other with an individual's salvation. Probably the most popular was Psalm 23 ("He maketh me lie down in green pastures"), which calls forth an image evoking comfort and solace for the individual, while Psalm 68 ("Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God") was quite popular in nineteenth-century African American sermons and has clear overtones of a racial dynamics at work. The context of each biblical reference will be more important for understanding why it is used than the naming the book it stems from.

Additionally, some biblical references can be understood as figures of speech or purely literary allusions rather than an attempt to configure the situation in a larger intertextual framework. In a nation where familiarity with the Bible was nearly universal, such allusions could easily be made to convey an incidental point about a character or situation without trying to imply a broader meaning. A case in point is Harriet Wilson's reference to Joseph in *Our Nig*'s closing sentence: "Frado has passed from their memories, as Joseph from the butler's, but she will never cease to track them until beyond mortal vision" (131). Katherine Clay Bassard reads this reference as an attempt to position Frado as "betrayed kin, slave, prophet and, significantly, as interpreter of dream-texts" (191), and certainly such a reading would support Brassard's aim of identifying *Our Nig* as "a black female Genesis narrative" (190). Yet it seems to me a simpler explanation lies closer at hand for this sole direct reference in the novel to the story of Joseph: Wilson is calling upon her readers' familiarity with the biblical passage to emphasize her exploited relationship to the ungrateful Belmont family. It is a skillful end to the novel, for it combines a biblical allusion with the idea that Frado herself will never forget the wrongs done her and that atonement for these sins will come in an after-life, somewhere "beyond mortal vision." It fits nicely with the book's scathing indictment of the Belmont family and the motif of revenge that is implied if indeed, as many critics believe, the novel is largely autobiographical. However, it will be remembered that the story of Joseph does not end here but finally, after a two-year interval, the butler does remember Joseph, and his intervention sets in motion a chain of events that head in a wholly different direction. The allusion to this part of Genesis serves to reinforce the theme of forgetting and ingratitude, but it does not wholly configure the protagonist as the Joseph from the Bible.

By biblical configurations I understand here how these novels align characters and situations in conformity with figures and stories from the Judeo-Christian texts. Rather than

purely literary allusion, it represents a form of typology, the Christian hermeneutical tradition which sees in an Old Testament figure, such as Moses, a type, for whom a New Testament figure, such as Jesus, is the antitype. In a larger sense, the entire Bible is read as a prophecy and post-Biblical events as a fulfillment of those prophecies. In effect, the authors structure characters and plot elements in their texts as if their novels are, in a sense, a realization of what the Bible foretells; however, since social and economic conditions have changed, and indeed differ from one group to another in the same era, differences emerge in how groups see their stories conforming to the biblical original. My concern here will not be primarily with biblical configurations in the sense of what Werner Sollors terms “typological ethnogenesis” (50), the use of biblical formations adapted by an ethnic group in establishing a group identity, although I will be examining some of the configurations most commonly used in African American culture. Similarly, the emphasis here will not be on Theophus Smith’s conjurational aspects of how these figurations were adapted to form an African American worldview. As discussed in the previous chapter, Smith’s theory posits a pharamcopeic approach to the Bible which resulted “in biblical configurations of cultural experience” (6), or, in other words, the conjuring of an African American culture. Application of his theory was useful in uncovering a common spirituality in the four novels and understanding the near-white mulatta as a product of a literary-conjurational strategy; however, in this chapter the emphasis will be on the blending of biblical configurations from the two literary genres, the domestic novel and the slave narrative, into the racially oriented fiction of the four African American novels. Accordingly, the two biblical configurations I will devote the most attention to are the suffering servant, drawn primarily from the domestic novel, and the wilderness experience, which plays a large role in the slave narratives. In addition, the unique African American fascination with the blending of Moses and Jesus will come up for discussion.

IV/2 The Suffering Servant

Distinguishing between a figure of speech and biblical configurations allows one to assess the relative importance of a particular trope; the usefulness of doing so becomes apparent when examining white domestic fiction. References to both the New and Old Testaments appear throughout a number of novels in the genre, but figures from the latter occur most often as literary allusions. Even in as intensely religious a novel as Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, Old Testament personalities provide little more than fodder for a children’s guessing game, an activity which the protagonist notably feels is inappropriate

for a Sunday afternoon. This is not to suggest that the Old Testament is trivialized in domestic fiction, but rather that it takes a subordinate role to the Gospel stories. Warner's novel, for example, abounds in discussions of Jesus Christ and references to the Savior. Recurrence of such references here and in other domestic novels is no great surprise given the dominance of evangelical religion in the United States by the mid-nineteenth century and the potential parallels between the genre's master plot and the image of the suffering servant. Indeed, the story of an innocent young girl, often an orphan or half-orphan, aiming to find her way amid the evils of the world could easily metamorphose into a melodramatic version of the Passion; that it does not owes at least in part to a scrupulous separation of the story of the suffering servant from the female protagonist.

The image of the suffering servant derives from Isaiah 53, which foretells the coming of a servant who takes upon himself the sins of others and silently bears his fate as he is taken off "as a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:5). While Jewish tradition interprets the servant as a metaphor for the people of Israel suffering at the hands of the Gentiles, the Christian understanding has been that the story predicts the coming of Jesus, his sufferings and crucifixion. To configure the suffering servant in nineteenth century America is thus to portray a character imitating Jesus, accepting persecution by another in the expectation that one is doing greater good for others in acquiescing. The benefits might be saving another person spiritually, emotionally, or physically as Gerty does for her rival in *The Lamplighter*; indeed, the frequency of suffering for the sake of an enemy highlights that it is the self that must be overcome. Suffering becomes a marker of Christian selflessness, the act itself a lesson in integrating into a group and not a metaphor for the group's fate. Suffering could include physical violence, even to the point of death, such as is the case with Uncle Tom, the epitome of the suffering servant in American literature.

As Nina Baym notes, the Jesus of the domestic novel tends to be both de-sexed and portrayed as a friend rather than an authority figure (44). Nonetheless, he invariably serves as a model for the protagonist as she attempts to acquire the Christian virtues of humility and self-sacrifice. That Jesus is in a sense emasculated, and hence made non-threatening, makes it that much easier for the protagonist to accept the lesson being taught, namely to conquer oneself through loving others. Yet this apparent merging of the two figures through gender identification is offset by constant reminders that Jesus is a separate entity with a different story than the protagonist. This is accomplished through one or more spiritual mentors who attempt to guide the protagonist to Jesus and their repeated references to "the Savior" and "what He wants for you," particularly in the more religious novels. The net effect is to

practically embody Jesus as a third person character in the novel, albeit one who is never seen. *The Wide, Wide World* makes this explicit by equating Jesus and his love with that of Ellen's mother: ultimately, the self-sacrificing love of the mother/Jesus is a value Ellen is meant to internalize through imitation. However, since she is a distinct individual from her mother, this is something Ellen must learn on her own through experience.

The division vanishes in the African American novels as the story of Jesus becomes almost directly associated with the protagonist. This is most explicitly declared by Iola Leroy, who at the conversazione compares the experiences of blacks with that of Jesus.

“And is there,” continued Iola, “a path which we have trodden in this country, unless it be the path of sin, unto which Jesus Christ has not put His feet and left it luminous with the light of His step? Has the Negro been poor and homeless? The birds of the air had nests and the foxes had holes, but the Son of man had not where to lay His head. Has our name been a synonym for contempt? ‘He shall be called a Nazarene.’” (256)

At the end of this long list of similarities, Harper clearly indicates that the comparison of the race to Jesus also applies to this near-white mulatta: “As Iola finished, there was a ring of triumph in her voice, as if she were reviewing a path she had trodden with bleeding feet” (257). No intermediaries have had to guide her to Jesus; the novel makes it clear that Iola has led the life of a suffering servant and carried her own cross as she walked.

Experience is also the key in *Contending Forces*, where the tale of Sappho Clark bears the strongest parallels to the story of Jesus. As discussed in the previous chapter, the relationship between the stories of Grace Montfort and Sappho Clark is a typological one, with the former prefiguring the latter and the latter fulfilling the promise of salvation not realized in the former, much the way the New Testament relates to the Old. Grace Montfort's rape and public humiliation, tied to a whipping post like Jesus to the cross, is partly repeated in the postbellum story of Sappho, whose own past is exposed on Easter Sunday, leading to a descent into the American South that leaves her, for all intents and purposes, dead to her fiancé, Will Smith. Her resurrection occurs on Easter too, three years later, when Will discovers her and her son in a cathedral, and her redemption is symbolically that of all black mothers raped during slavery, for it is collectively their sins she has taken on as well. The parallels to the Bible are so stark that there is no doubt that Hopkins is employing the image of the suffering servant and the story of the Passion to configure her own tale of racial uplift and redemption.

Similarly to Sappho Clark, Hannah in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* also has a small number of spiritual advisors to turn to in questions of faith, although again neither group leads the protagonist directly to Jesus. While Sappho has Dora as a partner in general conversation about religion and Mrs. Willis to provide a practical theology to help her cope with her past, Hannah has an older couple to guide her “to the foot of the Cross” (10). In a highly religious novel with conspicuously few references to a Savior, this is about as close as Crafts comes to mentioning Christ. Instead, Hannah appears completely oriented toward God and fulfilling his demands, almost as if she herself were performing here the role of Christ, a servant who places the will of her mistress above her own. Of course, no direct comparison to Jesus is made here, as was the case with Iola Leroy, and the analogy does break down when Hannah refuses to martyr herself by marrying a man from the slave huts at Mrs. Wheeler's command. The point is, though, that in contrast to religiously oriented white domestic fiction, the figure of Jesus is again elided as the protagonist takes on many of the qualities of the suffering servant.

It is interesting to note that in this context the black novels fulfill one of the observations Theophus Smith makes about African American typology. While he notes that Puritan and black typological traditions overlap in many aspects, it is its “performative and embodied nature that characterizes conjurational forms of black religious figuralism” (88). By having the protagonist directly perform the role of Jesus, the black authors have implemented a conjurational requirement “that postbiblical models or antitypes concretely substantiate or manifest their biblical prototypes” (88). Although the two traditions had certainly become more similar by the mid-nineteenth century, the differing method the white domestic novel had found to structure Jesus in the text demonstrates how they were still operating from different perspectives.

In the one novel that does imitate more domestic fiction's tendency to create a separate, embodied Jesus, *Our Nig*, the ultimate failure of the conversion experience signifies the inappropriateness of the domestic configuration for the black experience. On the one hand, Frado's conflation of Jesus and James, along with her young girl's crush on the latter, expose a subliminal relationship at work in some domestic novels. While submission to the will of the Lord may appear in novels like *The Wide, Wide World* or *The Lamplighter* as an acceptance of one's fate or a survival strategy, the reward is often marriage to a long-desired male acquaintance, potentially even the mentor who leads her to Jesus, as John Humphreys does in Warner's novel. In other words, *Our Nig* demonstrates that the appearance in one form or another of the Jesus figure in domestic novels can too easily displace the meaning of

the suffering servant image, transferring it from a religious image into the accoutrement of a romantic marriage plot. In this sense, feminist critics are correct in seeing the genre as essentially conservative and reinforcing social norms; for all the explanations of women's possibilities before the dénouement of marriage and the "counting of the cost" of submission (Dobson 239), the genre employs the religious image of the suffering servant as an ideology to support the patriarchal status quo. Having different and more radical social aims, the black novels are more interested in configuring their protagonists directly as suffering servants. Marriage, in the nadir novels in particular, takes on a different significance where, as Claudia Tate points out, legal weddings are a sign of social equality for the race and not just individual fulfillment. The suffering servant thus takes on the burden of others' suffering, as Sappho symbolically does for all black victims of rape, and not simply the woes of an individual's existence, as Gerty in *The Lamplighter* does.

In another aspect of the suffering servant, however, *Our Nig* differs from the domestic pattern more than the other three African American novels, namely, from the aspect of violence. Frado's story depicts the most graphic suffering of any of the four novels, where sexual abuse is alluded to but seldom portrayed, thus aligning these three more in the tradition of domestic fiction. Even the whipping of Grace Montfort is not as prolonged as the repeated abuse Frado endures. The wooden block stuffed in the young mulatta's mouth to prevent detection of one particularly vicious beating shows her literally as suffering silently, yet indicates too that the silence is imposed from the outside. While in all four cases the role of suffering servant is pressed onto the individual, Frado's enforced silence suggests that accepting the role this role as a response to oppression is not a solution. In essence, Frado thus rejects being cast as a suffering servant, though Wilson freely calls upon it to evoke sympathy for her protagonist, such as at the close of chapter eight. Here, while Mrs. Belmont discusses how she will "beat the money out of her," Frado is shown humbly praying "'God be merciful to me a sinner'" (90).

The systematic violence Frado encounters may then account for her not following the path of Jesus, although conversely the same violence places her closer to actually being a suffering servant than the white domestic protagonists are, whose suffering is primarily emotional or economic. That the link to violence is not absolutely essential to portray the suffering servant, however, is an issue which Hannah Crafts is at pains to stake out in *The Bondswoman's Narrative*. Hannah experiences no bodily abuse as a house servant, has no whippings administered to her, and when commenting on the unhappiness of a married slave couple points out that "those that view slavery only as it relates to physical sufferings or the

wants of nature, can have no conception of its greatest evils” (130). Indeed, it is more the threat of forced marriage than physical toils in the fields that finally prompts her to abandon the role of suffering servant and take matters into her own hands. Up to this point she has consistently deferred to those placed above her, living out time and again the biblical injunction she herself utters when living in an abandoned cabin with a mistress who has lost her mind: “Not my will but thine be done” (67).

As observed in the previous chapter, Hannah’s rigorous application of the injunction to turn the other cheek maintains distinctions and the social order by refusing to enter into any form of mimetic rivalry, yet it is also inextricably intertwined with her sense of self. As Brian Sinche points out, Hannah’s “unwilling[ness] to compromise the moral guidelines she creates for herself [allows her to assert] her individuality within a system that seeks to deny it” (189). Thus, adherence to the role of suffering servant – although it offers to form of active resistance to, and in fact, appears to accept and strengthen the institution of slavery – is ultimately an act of self-definition. In the end, of course, the suffering Hannah is willing to endure, be it physical or psychological, is an individual act and does not result in the redemption of the community. She willingly endures hardships for others, such as Mrs. De Vincent, who eventually dies, in order to maintain her self-image and finally reap the rewards of the domestic novel, a happy marriage and middle-class status, for herself. In keeping with the era’s domestic genre, *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* focuses on the individual.

In the nadir novels, forty years later, the sufferings of the servant take on more the Old Testament orientation to a tribal or group identity. When Iola and Sappho are remitted to slavery or left in a brothel, theirs is the fate of other black women. When Tom Anderson is shot during the Civil War, it is a death to directly save a group of white soldiers and to contribute to the greater cause of his race’s liberation. When Harry and Dr. Latimer from *Iola Leroy* or Will from *Contending Forces* refuse to pass, they, like Iola and Sappho, are foregoing a comfortable way of life among whites in order to help with the work of racial uplift. In praising her future husband, Iola emphasizes the Old Testament connection: “The characters of the Old Testament I admire most are Moses and Nehemiah. They were willing to put aside their own advantages for their race and country. Dr. Latimer comes up to my ideal of a high, heroic manhood” (265).

What can be seen then is a shift away from the white domestic novel’s use of the suffering servant over time toward a more Old Testament-influenced understanding of sacrifice for the redemption of one’s ethnic group. The closer the text comes to the Jesus-centered version of the domestic genre, as *Our Nig* does, the less successful the novel is in

presenting a convincing religious experience. Again, this is not to suggest that Old Testament references automatically imply a link to a group identity, or that domestic fiction is entirely devoid of references to the older book: rather, it shows the black authors as constantly aware of a racial interpretation to religious experience, whereas in the domestic novels religion is seen primarily in its implications for individual salvation. When Ellen Montgomery's mother writes in the Bible she is about to give her daughter as a final present "I will be a God to thee, and thy seed after thee," (42) the echoes of God's promise to Abraham from Genesis are impossible to overhear, but the context is now solely middle class and the flame is passed only to the immediately following generation. The Old Testament references are reduced to the nuclear family and drained of any meaning for a larger group identity.

It is tempting to look to the slave narratives as a source for the suffering servant motif in the black novels, yet a search will turn up little evidence of any link. While the violence of slavery and the propagandistic intent of garnering sympathy for the slave suggest this image as an ideal trope for a slave narrative, it remains primarily confined to the domain of white-authored fictional characters such as Uncle Tom. There are a number of reasons for this. The passivity necessary to accept the mistreatment a suffering servant must endure runs against the grain of most slave narrators, who by virtue of being fugitives must actively take their fate into their own hands. One need only think of Frederick Douglass's stand against the nigger breaker Covey or William Wells Brown's tricking another black man into taking the whipping intended for him to see that the personality types of such men were not conducive to their becoming suffering servants. The possibility also existed of casting others in this role, since many narrators also aspired to present a broader portrait of life under slavery and thus the plights of other slaves were often included. Yet extended portraits would have been necessary for such purposes, especially if the emotional impact of a suffering servant was to be fully exploited, and most slave narrators, aspiring to factual accounts and presenting the "unvarnished truth," left only one or two paragraphs for the additional windows into human suffering. Additionally, they aimed to show the burden of suffering not as something willingly taken on but as arbitrarily imposed upon them. The suffering of the innocent was enough to humanize the slave and this was a radical enough goal for most narrators; to portray themselves as figures of redemption would have been to overshoot the goal or miss the mark entirely.

This is not to say that the suffering servant never appears in the slave narratives, only that it is not a dominant image, especially in the antebellum narratives. One can find this image invoked in at least one WPA narrative, which Albert Raboteau uses as evidence that

Christianity could provide “a victory of the spirit over the force of brutality” (308). Indeed, the image of the suffering servant may very well have served as a model for strength and self-definition for some of the slaves who were unable to escape, providing a means for understanding their own fate. The slave narratives and the four African American novels, however, demonstrate that, unlike Uncle Tom, there were limits to what blacks were willing to endure and that the question of self-definition was not wholly a matter of fulfilling this one particular image.

Josiah Henson’s narrative was cited by Harriet Beecher Stowe as one of the models for Uncle Tom. In particular, she claimed the incident where Henson escorted a group of slaves, his own wife and children included, as overseer through Northern territory alone without escaping himself as an example of the faithfulness blacks were capable of. Reading Henson’s own account of the incident more closely, however, shows that he himself both later repudiated his own behavior and recognized it as motivated not by a sense of religious selflessness but by his own vanity.

Pride, too, came in to confirm me. I had undertaken a great thing; my vanity had been flattered all along the road by hearing myself praised; I thought it would be a feather in my cap to carry it through thoroughly, and often painted the scene in my imagination of the surrender of my charge to master Amos, and the immense admiration and respect with which he would regard me. (52)

Such reflections by a man who was also a preacher reveal a self-awareness of the complexity of one’s own behavior that never comes to the surface in Stowe’s fictionalized creation, for whom self-doubt is never an issue. Henson’s “capacity to discern the difference between obedience as a theological virtue and obedience due to psychosocial conditioning” (Smith 192) demonstrates the difficulty of applying the suffering servant image as a model for creating one’s identity.

The four black novels display a wide range of uses of the suffering servant that nevertheless all fall between the extremes of Uncle Tom’s living out and Henson’s questioning the effectiveness of the image. As noted earlier, Wilson exploits the image for sentimental purposes, but ultimately denies it both through the failed conversion and the act of resistance she displays in the scene at the woodpile. The oscillation between the two extremes is consistent with believable human behavior, but the emphasis on a melodramatic self pity when she fulfills the image and unexplained return to it after the woodpile scene represent, in my view, an artistic failure on Wilson’s part. Reliance on the suffering servant image also

forces her to ultimately define Frado not in terms of a relationship to Jesus Christ but, as Jill Jones points out, in opposition to Mrs. Belmont. She is defined “by what she is not (*not* incapable of elevation, *not* a possession of Mrs. Belmont)” (49).

The other antebellum novel, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, takes the almost diametrically opposite track by sticking fairly rigidly to the configuration of the protagonist as a suffering servant. Hannah consistently practices self-denial, but always places her behavior in the context of an obligation to a higher master and not her earthly one. Early on she realizes that “‘I am not a slave,’ thus my thoughts would run. ‘I cannot hold an elevated position in society, but I can do my duty, and be kind in the sure and certain hope of an eternal reward’” (11). On the surface, this appears to be an other-worldly oriented way of thinking, but it is also an immensely practical philosophy that allows her to create a space for her own self-definition. Even when Trappe sadistically preaches to her that she “must have no mind, no desire, no purpose of [her] own,” Hannah realizes its appropriateness to her situation, yet reserves a religiously defined sense of self that neither he nor anyone else can touch. “[T]his advice was probably well adapted to one in my condition, that is if I could have forgotten God, truth, honor, and my own soul” (109). Thus when Hannah does finally assert her own will, she is guided by a chance opening of the Bible to the passage where Jacob flees from Esau and the belief “that rebellion would be a virtue, that duty to myself and my God actually required it” (206).

Similarly, both nadir novels set limits to the suffering the servant must endure, limits that are ordained by religion and social class. For Iola Leroy, her “ministry of suffering” (114) converts her to abolitionism and a new identity as an African American. But though she must become a household servant and have “outrages heaped on [her] which might well crimson the cheek of honest womanhood with shame,” Iola makes it clear that she was “tried, but never tempted” (115). She maintains her sense of identity by fiercely resisting the sexual overtures of her many masters – she is sold seven times over a month and a half, and her determination to die rather than submit to her last master implies that she kept her virtue intact – and then dedicating her life thereafter to serving her new race through teaching and social advocacy. In effect, she carries over the social values of white female purity and applies the same tenets to black womanhood as she becomes a servant to the cause of social uplift.

Not all suffering servants in *Iola Leroy*, however, are female. The image is extended to Tom Anderson as well as to Uncle Daniel, as Frances Harper employs the trope for a variety of purposes. While the first actively lays down his life to save others, the second plays the faithful servant by not running off to the Union army and staying instead to fulfill his promise

to his master. Their behavior is reminiscent of Stowe's Uncle Tom, but key differences show that they are variations on the more famous fictional creation. Tom Anderson offers himself up to serve the practical goal of helping white soldiers, in contrast to Uncle Tom's death, which has purely spiritual consequences, Uncle Daniel's faithfulness, meanwhile, does not extend into a spiritual eternity but carries the earthly time limit of keeping his promise by staying "till Marse Robert gib back" (24). Both incidents serve Harper's goal of projecting a positive image of blacks to counteract white prejudices that the former slaves were dishonest and ungrateful. In essence, she is signifyin(') – in Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s sense of the term – on Stowe's suffering servant and re-visioning Uncle Tom into a more realistic figure.

Sappho Clark's story is the one most closely configured to the tale of Jesus, and *Contending Forces* itself is, after *Our Nig*, the novel most concerned with the process of how the protagonist takes on the role of suffering servant. While Hannah finds religion early, spending the rest of the novel living out its dictates, and Iola's perception of Christianity changes in slavery but is never put into question afterward, Sappho struggles through most of the novel in search of a religious meaning to her past experiences. In keeping with the tradition of the domestic novel, she never denies the existence of God but worries that she may be a backslider, unable to live up to the standards of any religious faith. The advice she receives from Mrs. Willis – that she is to be blamed for the sin which is pleasant to her, not that which is forced upon her – is essentially the same as what Iola espouses upon emerging from slavery – "Tried but not tempted." Thus, one novel preaches to the reader, the other shows the protagonist learning the same lesson herself, but both show an understanding of the servant's suffering that differs from the domestic novel's.

Whether the ultimate purpose of religious indoctrination in the domestic novel is socially conservative and meant to encourage submission to patriarchal institutions (Brodhead) or the submission is a more radical attempt to access power (Tompkins), submission is always understood as acquiescence to the prevailing social norms. When, in one of the most intensely religious novels, Ellen Montgomery's mother tells her daughter that "although we *must* sorrow, we must not rebel" (12), she is advising her to overcome the temptation to assert herself both in the presence of God and in all social situations, a lesson taught to her again and again throughout the novel as she learns to submit to her Aunt Fortune and her Scottish relatives. In the black novels, however, one is not suffering in order to accept social norms but because of them; it is not temptation, as the nadir novels emphasize, that needs to be overcome but the social norms, or slavery. Thus the seemingly limitless suffering of a white protagonist will indeed go on and on since it is herself she must overcome, while

the suffering of the black servant can find an end in escape from slavery or a change in social norms occurs. In *Contending Forces*, Will's acceptance of Sappho's illegitimate son suggests the steps by individuals that need to be taken for this to happen.

That the idea of any kind of temptation even enters into the equation resulted from an apparently perceived need to address the dominant images of African Americans in contemporary society. In the nineteenth century, "the figurations of black women existed in an antithetical relationship with the values embodied in the cult of true womanhood, an absence of the qualities of piety and purity being a crucial signifier" (Carby 32). In order to make their female protagonists acceptable to their black and white readers, the authors had to address the issue of purity and the stereotyped image of black women as sexually lascivious; Hopkins in particular, who was the most forthright of all the four authors in regards to sex, had to account for the existence of Alphonse. To do so meant putting a qualifier on the concept of purity, and that was to insist that lack of agency nullified the bargain. Indeed, Iola's "tried but not tempted," which applies equally to Hannah Crafts's and Pauline Hopkins's protagonists, turns the tables, casting them as suffering servants enduring trials, albeit unwillingly, rather than being led into temptation.

If the white writers gave a divine meaning to a character's suffering and believed that "God loves us most when he punishes us" (Baym 42) the black writers located the source of suffering in social conditions and human attitudes. Their sufferings could have an end since people could be changed. They believed no more than white domestic authors that man was innately evil, for neither could the individual be held solely responsible, though white writers could put the burden on their protagonists to conform. The black writers simply had a clearer idea that the source of their troubles was not up in heaven.

In the end, gender also accounts for why the black writers' use of the suffering servant more resembles images from domestic fiction than anything the slave narratives might have been able to produce. The predominantly male slave narrators had to break with the patience required of the servant; without doing so they never would have escaped to tell their tales. The female-oriented domestic genre simply provided a model better suited to this motif. The issue of race, however, led the black authors to modify the domestic suffering servant: the protagonist did not need to follow the teachings of Jesus because her experience was already configured to be almost the same as Jesus's. Her redemption was no longer simply that of an individual who had found her way to God and been saved; in the postbellum era in particular it was the redemption of an entire group of people and was thus closer to the Old Testament interpretation of the image.

IV/3 The Wilderness Experience

If the African American novels draw on the domestic novel for the suffering servant because the protagonists are also female, they rely on the slave narratives for the motif of the wilderness experience despite the fact that the protagonists here are not women. However, because the wilderness experience that appears in so many slave narratives is determined by the options open primarily to males, the four female writers are compelled to modify some of the elements of the experience. Additionally, the shift in perspective exemplified by the nadir novels, written a generation after the Civil War, causes these texts to deepen the meaning of the biblical wilderness experience, one that builds upon the Old Testament aspects of the motif.

The slave narrative version of the wilderness experience was based on the literal parallel between the children of Israel wandering through the wilds of the Sinai Peninsula and the fugitive slave's flight through the North American forests. The narrators were often conscious of the parallel and configured their tale for their readers based on the Exodus story, with the South representing Egypt and first the North and later Canada standing in for Canaan, the Promised Land. Melvin Dixon points out that the meaning of the experience for the black narrators went beyond the obvious geographic analogies to represent personal growth and development of the individual. The wilderness became a testing ground where the fugitive slave could prove himself, both physically and spiritually. Like the children of Israel wandering with only faith in their god to guide them, it "became an important test of man's faith in himself and in God's power to bring deliverance as free territory within reach" (26). The wilderness experience thus becomes part of a larger conversion process, be it to freedom of God, in which the slave must first realize his condition as a slave, a feature of virtually all slave narratives, before "committing [himself] to God," as the fugitive Thomas Jones put it (46), and fleeing northward. The individual's deliverance from bondage on the plantation was much like deliverance from the bondage of sin: in the end it was rewarded with a rebirth in freedom, a new identity, and not infrequently a new name.

Many scholars have noted how "[t]he appropriation of the Exodus story was for the slaves a way of articulating their sense of historical identity as a people" (Raboteau 311), yet this expression of group identity is commonly traced back to references in the spirituals and the postbellum narratives. The antebellum narratives, with their emphasis on the fate of the individual and reporting facts, tend to downplay Old Testament allusions as a source of a racial or group identity. When Henry Bibb, for example, comes upon the Ohio River and finds

himself unable to cross, the biblical references remain in the context of this one individual's attempt to escape: "I had no Moses to go before me and lead the way from bondage to a promised land" (29). While the narrator in such cases was undoubtedly "the spokesperson for the thousands remaining in the wilderness" (Foster xxx), readers are left to make this inference and not overtly lead to it. After all, the audience addressed was a Northern white one, not black, thus accounting for the lack of any direct evocation of group identity. In contrast, the spirituals, developed as work songs sung collectively in the fields, feature a variety of addresses, second person, first person plural, and first person singular addressing a family member, all of which assume others complicit in the same fate. Thus when the slave narrators explicitly configure their adventures as wilderness experiences, they are not calling for racial unity but using allusions which their white readers can understand in order to solicit sympathy and understanding. Indeed, direct allusions to the Exodus story are more a feature of the narratives of the late 1840s and 1850s when empathy became a goal. Frederick Douglass's famous remark about Canaan referring to Canada in the spirituals, for instance, only appears in his 1855 autobiography, not the first, 1845 version.

Both black antebellum novels adhere to the era's pattern of emphasizing the wilderness as an individual's experience rather than as a trial emblematic of a group. This is true in particular of *Our Nig*, where the Northern setting does not allow for a clear geographical configuration of a safe haven for a destination. Indeed, Wilson's embittered attack on a woman "wholly imbued with southern principles" (preface) and the Northern environment that tacitly permits it leaves the impression that Egypt can be found everywhere. Frado's wilderness experience is a comparatively brief section of the novel and more reminiscent of a domestic novel. When Frado departs from the Belmont household at age eighteen with a Bible and a silver half dollar, she wanders an inhospitable world with no goal in mind other than owning a domestic sanctuary of her own. It is a goal which remains ephemeral, in contrast to the fulfillment almost universally found in the domestic novel after a period of sojourning in society. In this aspect Frado's story prefigures that of Harriet Jacobs, whose flight from North Carolina to New York allows her slave narrative to end with the "vast improvement" of freedom in the Northern promised land, but, similarly to Frado, "still long[ing] for a hearthstone of my own, however humble" (302).

Jacobs's text also sheds light on how the wilderness in the slave narrative is primarily a male experience and requires reconceiving in the case of a woman who is also a mother. Beginning her narrative in the Carolinas, Jacobs's story would seem to naturally follow the slave narrative pattern of seeing the wilderness experience as a physical movement through

nature from South to North, but the presence of her two small children hinders any such drama. Instead, her wilderness experience begins by hiding in her grandmother's attic and lasts for seven years until her physical removal to the North via steamship, an act which comprises only a few pages of her relatively long narrative. It is here in the attic where she and her faith are tested as she watches her children grow up, who themselves have no idea where their mother is. While the male slave narrator succeeds because he can move alone through the forest guided by the North Star, the female fugitive is bound by a web of family and community that tests her physically—the seven years confinement took a debilitating toll on Jacobs's health—spiritually, and emotionally. Jacobs's wilderness experience thus represents a fusion of slave narrative elements, with its emphasis on physical trials, and the domestic novel's orientation toward communal connections and ultimately institutionalizing “a self-made or surrogate family” (Baym 38). Indeed, it is that period “between her unhappy childhood and the conclusion” (38) when the protagonist is learning independence, faith in herself and forming relationships that constitutes the wilderness experience in domestic novels.

Though they come from different geographic regions and have different legal status that require the one to turn to the slave narrative and the other to the domestic novel, what Jacobs and Wilson both share is a reconfiguring of one genre's geographic Canaan into the other genre's Promised Land of domestic independence. For Wilson as a Northerner, this act is unavoidable since no distinct geographic entity is otherwise available as a destination. To keep her narrative moving after its previous central conflict, Frado's struggle against Mrs. Bellmont, has past, Wilson must give Frado a goal, and this goal for the final fifteen or so pages is a home of her own. That neither protagonist in the end crosses over into the promised land results in both novels commenting ironically upon the domestic genre, for in the end both trace this failure back to the issue of race. Jacobs does so by continuing her novel past the slave narrative ending of arrival in the North and by pointing out the many ways “how the north aped the customs of slavery” (248). Her escape from the promiscuous masses of drinking and smoking lower-class people into the ranks of middle-class domesticity such as Mrs. Bruce represents is hindered by the Fugitive Slave Law. Linda Brent is trapped in a limbo between the two conditions, constantly vigilant for slave catchers because of her race. Frado's inability to support herself, on the other hand, appears at first largely a result of her ill health, a consequence of her treatment at the hands of Mrs. Bellmont, but blame is also laid on those who refuse to help her. This occurs, Wilson implies, because of her skin color, for support only comes from those “who could see merit beneath a dark skin” (124). In both

cases, the domestic novel's goal of middle class security and a home of one's own appears as a prerogative of whites, a destination black women are shut out from.

The Bondwoman's Narrative follows more closely the broader contours of the slave narrative and its version of the wilderness experience, with its description of flight through forest, across rivers, and disguises used on public transport, a journey that ends in the North as the tale then rapidly concludes. Yet here too the narrator's gender leads to similar modifications of religious symbolism, most notably the fusion of slave narrative and domestic Canaans into a single entity. The fairy tale-like ending—where all loose ends are wrapped up, Hannah's mother is magically reunited with her and others from her past, all living in the same neighborhood as Hannah and her minister-husband—is unique in African American literature, both autobiography and fiction, and appears to offer a stark contrast to the critique of white domestic fiction that *Our Nig* offers. However, Crafts's ending can also be read as a critique coming from the opposite direction, since it “challenge[s] the notion that an African American woman had no business expecting or even hoping for such fulfillment” (Andrews, “Hannah Crafts's” 40). Farfetched though the novel's outcome is, extending the slave narrative's Canaan to include the domestic novel's version of it permits her to claim the domestic genre for black writers in ways that Jacob or Wilson do not.

Additionally, although her final escape to the North is highly reminiscent of the male slave narrator's adventures in the wild, Crafts is careful to point out that familial concerns do make a difference in the possibilities of escape. Her refusal to marry she considers as act of moral responsibility since she is determined “never to entail slavery on any human being” (207) by becoming a parent, an insight Henry Bibb comes to realize too late when he calls the fathering of a child the “one act of my life while a slave, that I have to lament over” (44). That marriage or parenthood would also prevent or hinder flight from slavery, much as it does for Harriet Jacobs, is also alluded to at another point. “I have always thought that in a state of servitude marriage must be at best of doubtful advantage. It necessarily complicates and involves the relation of master and slave, adds new ties to those already formed, and it is at the bottom of many troubles and afflictions that might otherwise be escaped” (131).

While recognizing these drawbacks to escaping the troubles and afflictions of slavery, gender plays no role for Crafts in carrying out a successful escape once the decision to run has been made. Instead, faith and divine will are the key factors that decide success in the wilderness. In a harbinger of Hannah's own flight, Charlotte and her new husband are the first to complete the journey. Despite Hannah's worries over their “wild and unpromising” plan (142), they succeed, and Mrs. Henry makes it clear that their decision is religiously and

biblically justified: “The language of Scripture is just as true today as it was six thousand years ago. ‘Thy desire shall be thy husband.’ For him Charlotte could abandon her home, and long-tried friends” (143). That the couple are as religiously committed as the novel’s protagonist is borne out both by this successful escape and by the mutual weekly church visits with Hannah at the novel’s conclusion. Similarly, when her turn comes to run, Hannah does so to maintain the sanctity of marriage—although here the running is from an unsanctified one rather than from the rending apart of such a union—and it seems to her that “my God actually required it” (206). Once in the wilderness, Hannah places herself completely in the hands of God, and it is this faith which sees her through. As Brian Sinche notes, in contrast to most slave narratives, “Crafts does not utilize the wilderness to demonstrate Hannah’s determination to escape slavery, nor does she present the protagonist’s self-reliance. Instead, she places Hannah in the wilderness so the reader can see that God’s favor is the key to her success” (176). The wilderness becomes a testing ground for her faith, and because it is so strong Hannah almost miraculously receives milk or shoes when she needs them, company to help her on her way, and protection from disease which strikes down others.

In contrast, characters who lack faith do not survive in the wilderness. Mrs. De Vincent, for example, gives in to “[t]he passiveness of settled despair” and believes that “Heaven [...] has turned against [them]” (70), her lack of faith correlating to her lack of physical stamina to continue on toward the North. Similarly, the brother and sister Hannah encounters show the effects of a lapsed faith. The sister bears the ill effects of the slaveholders’ religion, the preaching of obedience to one’s master having “hardened [her] heart” (220), while Jacob, the brother, can only nod “unmeaningly” (217) when Hannah asks him if he believes in God. Both die en route, suggesting that God’s benevolence extends only to those completely committed to their faith. From an arena where a male slave can prove his ingenuity and physical endurance, Crafts transforms the wilderness into a spiritual site where her female protagonist can compete equally with any man.

Forty years later, the wilderness remains in the nadir novels a location where salvation is won by testing one’s faith, albeit a concept more abstract than before. Harper and Hopkins do not use the chronological reference to turn the wilderness into a metaphor for the entire post-Emancipation era as W. E. B. Du Bois does in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) but remain more closely tethered to the slave narrative’s understanding of wilderness as a geographical entity. However, since their postbellum settings are not conducive to dramatic escape episodes through the forest, the novels rely on more broadly construed geographical

movements between North and South. In turn, these geographical movements by individuals can be understood as attempts to symbolically unite a people together.

Robert Stepto has identified two types of narratives in the development of African American literature, the ascent narrative and the immersion narrative, both closely related to “ritualized journeys” (*Behind* 167) from South to North and North to South, respectively. The former, which he traces back to the slave narrative, involves the ascent of an individual to achieve social and personal freedom at the expense of alienation from his cultural identity, while the latter describes an individual immersing himself in the larger group culture in order both to find “those aspects of tribal literacy that ameliorate, if not obliterate, the conditions imposed by solitude” (167). Writing before the two novels received any large degree of scholarly attention, Stepto never addresses Harper’s or Hopkins’s works, though both appear to offer excellent examples of immersion narratives and, I suggest, allow one to understand the ritualized journey of the immersion narrative as a wilderness experience.

In keeping with the changed circumstances after the Civil War, a clear dichotomy between “good” North and an “evil” South is replaced by a more complex set of relationships. For Harper and Hopkins, both Northern-born like Du Bois, the South represents the origins of black folk culture, the connection to which needs to be regained, even as the region is the site of lynchings, rape, and institutionalized racism. The North, on the other hand, stands for more liberal and enlightened views in social relations, such as those Iola experiences at the Ohio college she attends, but also for cooler interpersonal relationships and unofficial forms of workplace discrimination and racial prejudice. In short, clear-cut geographical goals as solutions to personal or group problems, as is the case for Hannah in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, become harder to recognize.

In lieu of concrete final destinations, movement between regions takes on significance as a marker of transformations. Journeys to the South for Iola Leroy and Sappho Clark signal their immersion in black folk culture, much as Du Bois’s sojourn to the Black Belt marks his “route to union with a race and a culture” (Stepto, *Behind* 73-74), but this does not necessarily indicate that they have arrived in a promised land. In both cases these are symbolic acts; for Iola Leroy and the other mulatto characters, her brother, uncle, mother, and Dr. Latimer, southward movement represents first the search for lost family connections, later an affirmation of allegiance to the black race, and finally a commitment to work for racial uplift. Despite the rosy-tinged happy ending, as the novel closes it is clear that there is a ways to go and much work to be done before they can realize “the promise/ of a brighter coming day” (282). For Sappho Clark, the sojourn to and in New Orleans is part atonement and part

acceptance of her past, but here too this is not the final step, as the novel closes with her standing with her new family on the deck of a Europe-bound ship.

If the decision to go South affirms racial allegiance, movement northward signals an acceptance or a testing of white attitudes, particularly in Harper's novel. Both Iola and her brother Harry are sent to schools in the North, where Iola begins espousing pro-slavery views. Upon her return to the South, Iola discovers her racial heritage, which immediately starts the process of dropping those views; Harry's return, on the other hand, is instigated by the same discovery. All subsequent decisions on racial affiliation, whether to pass or to openly acknowledge themselves as black, are placed in terms of a choice between moving North or South. When Dr. Gresham asks her "to share with me my Northern home" (230), Iola knows enough of prejudice in the North to understand that a move to New England from the city of P-, a thinly disguised reference to Philadelphia, would entail either passing or accepting social ostracism. Accepting Dr. Latimer's proposal, on the other hand, means a move South to the Carolinas and joining him in his work of racial uplift. Indeed, Iola is perched in Philadelphia because she wants to test Northern waters after the freedmen's school she had taught at was burned down. The foray North demonstrates only that racial prejudice is less violent there than in the South, but just as prevalent, as she loses two of three workplaces when her colleagues protest at having to work with a mulatto.

Thus, in Harper's "symbolic geography," in which landscapes and regions become "spatial expressions of social structures" (Stepito, *Behind* 67), the South represents both institutionalized Jim Crow racism and the heartland of black folk culture, as symbolized by Uncle Daniel and Aunt Linda, New England a less virulent but hypocritical form of the national disease of racism, and Philadelphia a jumping off point from which one casts one's lot with one group or the other. *Iola Leroy*, in fact, fits well with Stepito's observation that in "both the ascension and the immersion narrative, a fair portion of the hero-narrator's journey is through differing manifestations of social structure expressed in spatial terms" (*Behind* 68), and Iola's decision to go to North Carolina identifies the novel as an immersion narrative. What is more, I would argue, the protagonist's journey up to this point bears the hallmarks of a wilderness experience. From the moment when she is driven out of the white race and sold into slavery up to the point when she ceremonially casts her lot with blacks by marrying Dr. Latimer, Iola wanders through a social and moral wilderness, experiencing slavery and Reconstruction era racism, and relying primarily on faith to see her through. This is not the literal wilderness of the fugitive slave; rather it is the wilderness the vast majority of slaves had to traverse to survive the peculiar institution and to reconstitute family life in the

aftermath of emancipation. It is appropriate then that Iola compares Dr. Latimer to Moses, for he is the one who leads her out of the wilderness and toward a new racial home.

No such direct references to the Old Testament can be found in *Contending Forces*, but Hopkin's novel does contain a very similar symbolic geography and also uses movement between regions to conjure up a wilderness experience. A similar constellation of middle-class, light-skinned mulattos and darker folk figures is evident, although here the project is not to grapple with the former's racial affiliation but to set racial allegiance over class differences between the two and thus unite the race. To this end, Hopkins frequently invokes the abolitionist history of her hometown, Boston, which comes to stand in for the possibilities open to blacks in post-emancipation America, but also for the class divisions in black culture. Louisiana and New Orleans represent historical slavery, the sexual licentiousness and abuse it induced, as well as a separate culture within black society. All these differences are encapsulated in Mrs. White's response when her friend discovers that Sappho Clark comes from Louisiana, just as they do: "I knowed it," cried Mrs. White, as she triumphantly glanced around the room. "O! New Orleans blood will tell on itself anywhere. These col'-blooded Yankees can't raise nuthin' that looks like that chile; no 'nneed!" (108). As in *Iola Leroy*, the use of dialect marks the lower class folk figures and separates them from the educated, middle-class characters, while a rivalry between North and South inside black culture also comes to the surface. Regional pride belies as well the unspoken reality behind her observation: New Orleans was synonymous with miscegenation and octoroons, the offspring of white males and mixed-blood women. Unwittingly, the older woman here identifies the near-white Sappho as the product and potential victim of the sexual humiliation visited upon black women in the New Orleans octoroon markets. The implication that Southerners are hot blooded, as opposed to the "col'-blooded Yankees," feeds into the stereotype of black women as sexually wanton or aggressive—a belief used to justify raping and mistreating them—and brings up yet another contradiction that Hopkins takes as her task to overcome. How is it possible to take pride in one's heritage if that heritage is rooted in shame? How is one to fulfill a private desire, such as marriage, when public attitudes militate against it?

One solution Hopkins finds for these problems is to redefine terms such as shame, sin, and virtue in an effort to change public opinion. A first step in this direction is undertaken by Mrs. Willis in the sewing circle, when, for example, she provides an interpretation of passion that mediates between extremes: passion she points out, is not automatically bad, but "in some degree passion may be beneficial" (152). Subtly, she is pointing out that passion may be sexual or non-sexual, creating space for the former by mingling the two definitions. Full

resolution of social problems, however, only occurs when contending forces in the novel are brought together, and Hopkins uses a variety of tools to achieve this end. A conciliatory gesture by Ophelia Davis unites the two class factions in the church, and the same woman's marriage to the young divinity student "join[s] the historical resources of an illiterate southern peasantry [...] to the young, but uncertain forces of education and uplift" (McCann 806). Additionally, a key element Hopkins employs is to move characters between poles of the symbolic geography she invokes.

The admission that her mother is from New Orleans associates Sappho early on with the system of sexual abuse engendered by white racism, but it is first Luke Sawyer's public recounting of Mabelle Beaubean's story that reveals her for the reader specifically as a victim of the system. Her flight to Boston, her refusal to discuss her past, and the public disassociation from her son all indicate Sappho's attempt to break with her past and the legacy of racism. Claudia Tate labels the name change that goes with it an "act of heroic self-transformation" (148), yet here I agree with Ann duCille that this most American of acts only leaves her "a fugitive" and "a continuing victim of the patriarchal social order that [...] defiled her" (*Coupling* 42). To realize the novel's goal of overcoming contending forces and affirming racial unity, Sappho cannot deny her past but must go back and accept her own personal history. Her flight after John Langley threatens to reveal her secret is not simply *away* from Boston but *to* the convent in New Orleans where she gave birth to her son. Here, aided by the conveniently named Sisters of the Holy Family, Sappho can reclaim her son and perform penance, at least in her own eyes and those of the readers, for her supposed sins. However, this is more than a story of "redemptive maternity" (McCullough 40); it demonstrates the necessity of confronting and reclaiming one's past in order to build one's future.

Sappho's wilderness experience thus begins when Luke Sawyer leaves her in the convent, assuming that she will die in childbirth. From here until she emerges from her second stay in New Orleans, Sappho's faith in God and herself are tested as she wanders from one extreme of American society, New Orleans, to the other, Boston, and back again. When she decides to return South, she sees herself answering God's reproach for having lacked faith and "question[ing] the wisdom of the Most High" (342). Before she can be redeemed, however, she must prove her faith in God by serving her son and a widower's family for three years, and only when she is prepared to marry the widower and thus sacrifice herself for her son's future, does Will come to lead her out of the wilderness.

As in *Iola Leroy*, the novel ends without the couple crossing over into Canaan, which again is not the state of marriage but the promised land of racial unity and peace that lies somewhere in the future. Hopkins, though, alters the journey's direction, showing the new and enlarged Smith family sailing east to England rather than heading directly south to the Black Belt. Hopkins clearly indicates that this is only a temporary "visit to Mr. Withington" (401) to reunite the descendants of the Montfort family, yet earlier comments by Will suggest that the promised land might actually lie "across the water, [where] associated with men of the highest culture, the Negro shall give physical utterance to the splendid possibilities which are within him" (389). Clearly, Hopkins is tapping into the contemporary debate between W. E. B. Du Bois, who Will with his Heidelberg studies and scholarly inclination resembles, and Booker T. Washington, represented by his brother-in-law, the leader of a Southern industrial school for blacks; nonetheless, this European orientation has not always sat well with critics. Hopkins has been taken to task for weakening Will's already tenuous link to the African American community by sending him outside the country (L. Brown 68-69) and returning him to a site that represents "the history of British imperialism and the Montfort's collusion with it" (Peterson 192). Such criticisms are grounded in the late twentieth century understanding of racial allegiance, racial politics and how they should be played out. Hopkins's overriding concern, however, is mediating between opposites, and Will, with his belief "that religion and the natural laws were not antagonistic" (167), stands as much as any marriage or gesture of reconciliation in the novel for finding common ground. It is he who, in his public address, reinterprets a white understanding of Psalm 68:31 ("Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hand...") from a call for sending blacks back to Africa into an "appeal for the justice of our cause to every civilized country under the heavens" (272). Uniting all the descendants of the Montfort family allows Hopkins to collapse the "either/or" of group politics and defuse racial attacks by showing the interrelatedness of all people. In expanding her vision across the Atlantic, she is no more condoning British complicity in the slave trade than slave narrators such as William Wells Brown and William Craft who praised the comparative freedom they found in Great Britain in the antebellum era. Hopkins does not use England to play on the American conscience but incorporates it for a vision of going beyond racial politics, one that was undoubtedly a radical utopian idea at the turn of the century.

Finally, the married couples at the end of the nadir novels resemble each other in the constellations they have brought together. Each marriage combines a young and upcoming male race leader with a woman equally committed to racial uplift because of the suffering she

has endured. The “sibling affinity” of these couples (Tate 169) does more than just harken back to the domestic novel’s idea of marriage as “something like a union of equals” (Baym 41); evoked in each case is a male Moses with a female Jesus. Dr. Latimer’s similarity to Moses is declared outright by Iola, who herself is portrayed as having walked the same path as Christ. In the case of Will, his ability to command the respect of older intellectuals and to stir crowds with speeches signal the potential to lead, while the previously discussed representation of Sappho as a Christ figure is the strongest example of a biblical configuration in any of the four African American novels. It is no mere coincidence, I would argue, that both novels adapt the same configuration. The symbolic marriage of these two biblical figures is highly reminiscent of how black slaves had earlier “merged them into the image of a single deliverer” (Genovese 252). Conflating the two figures in the antebellum served very specific purposes which Genovese describes as follows: “Moses, once become Jesus, had his dangerous message muted, and the gloomy implications of the forty years in the wilderness could be forgotten. Jesus, once become Moses, underwent a transubstantiation that carried with it the promise of this-worldly salvation without suicidal adventures” (254).

In the nadir era, decades after emancipation, the situation had not changed all that much. In the face of legalized racism and an increase in lynching, the foreseeable future offered little prospect of change. Needed were figures who connected blacks to their past, who had wandered the same wilderness, and leaders who were survivors and showed that salvation was eventually possible. Required were both a Moses figure to symbolize racial unity and a Jesus who had suffered as they had.

An exact one-to-one correspondence with the biblical figures does not come about here, since in both cases it is the Jesus figure who has the Old Testament-style wilderness experience. This being women’s fiction, however, it is understandable that the experience is centered on the female protagonist. At any rate, a direct correlation is not important here; what counts is the presentation of a Moses/Jesus configuration. In this reading, the couple represents both a link between the black religious past and a hopeful future, and an evolution from the earlier era. Rather than merged into one image, the two are separated into distinct individuals, though still joined together in marriage and a mutual sense of purpose.

In another sense, the two nadir novels also represent an evolution away from the Old Testament to the New. The wilderness configuration becomes more abstract in the later novels, partly the result of the difficulty in applying the slave narrative experience, which lent itself so well to the wilderness motif, to the contemporary situation. Instead, the domestic novel’s version of the wilderness, the wanderings of the protagonist in the world outside the

home while searching for emotional and financial independence, seems to provide a closer model, especially for Wilson's *Our Nig*. Yet it is the adding of the race factor to the nadir novels which permits the wilderness experience to be seen more clearly. Direct Old Testament references fade as the century draws to a close, but the allusions to it are kept alive by the stronger correlation to the question of group and racial identity.

In the end, of course, the suffering servant, the wilderness experience, and a fused Moses/Jesus do not exhaust all the biblical references or configurations in these four novels. Hopkins presents Sappho not only as a Christ figure but also simultaneously configures her and Alphonse at the end as Madonna and child, while Crafts's use of name Jacob for her brief travelling companion suggests implications discussed by other critics elsewhere (Buell). True to the failed conversion she presents, Wilson includes an episode of the irreverent Frado leading a sheep astray and into the river for a dunking, an act I see as more than just an illusion to her earlier experience with Mary, another "willful sheep" (54). But these and other configurations remain fairly minor aspects compared to the role the servant in the wilderness plays in all four novels and the fusion of Old and New Testaments it allows.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: RECIPES FOR SURVIVAL

Religion clearly meets many different needs for any individual, and these needs inevitably vary from one person to the next. In other words, it would be impossible to boil down the meaning of religion or the spiritual desires of all humankind or one group of people to a single, compact statement or set of beliefs, and that is not my intent in this dissertation. However, common experiences, shaped by belonging to a socially defined group, can lead to a number of common elements that develop into a shared sense of spirituality. These shared elements are transmitted to other members of the group via communions celebrated at home, in the workplace, and at religious gatherings in churches and elsewhere. They can also be transmitted via literature.

This dissertation has examined religious portrayals in these four nineteenth-century African American novels as products of blacks' historical circumstances in North America and two literary genres. From the domestic novel the two antebellum texts borrow a number of motifs, including the heroine's struggle to convert employed in many domestic novels and which is a central element moving the plot forward in *Our Nig*. While religious belief in the white domestic novel can be read as either reinforcing submission to the patriarchy or granting access to power within the limited options open to women at the time, it remains in essence a socially conservative ideology, which in the end never overthrows worldly power structures. Even when the domestic uses belief in Jesus as a linking device to form new relationships and communities, such as happens in *The Wide, Wide World* or *The Lamplighter*, the ultimate goal remains acceptance of one's lot and submission to larger social forces. The two antebellum black novels, however, never completely make that compromise, although the individual responses are widely different. Harriet Wilson's Frado takes the unheard of step of not converting, rejecting an ideology that would have her share a heaven with her tormentor. The devout Hannah follows a different path in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, submitting almost everywhere in worldly affairs, but using belief as a justification for resisting intrusion into the one realm she maintains for herself. Her resistance, of course, is not a radical challenge to the domestic novel, for by virtue of her status as a slave she has a destination to escape to, the North, that the white protagonists of the domestic novel do not have; they remain immersed in their social world no matter where they live. Nor does Crafts envision large scale social changes, leaving her heroine content at the end of the novel in a

middle-class world not unlike that of a white domestic protagonist. Nonetheless, Hannah is able to use faith to achieve much a greater transformation than white protagonists are able to—freedom from bondage—even if the transformation remains an individual one.

From the slave narratives all four novels take the theme of the narrator's piety as an authenticating device, improvising on white beliefs about black religious sensibilities with varying degrees of success. Writing more closely in time to the antebellum slave narratives than the two nadir novels, Harriet Wilson borrows more heavily from the genre's authenticating devices, embedding religion as an authenticating device into the traditional authenticating letters at the close of her text. The other three novels also deploy the image of blacks naturally possessing a child-like faith and being superstitious, concessions to whites' romantic racialism that both *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and *Contending Forces* either fail to completely fulfill or ultimately subvert. In this respect I consider these two texts the most successful, for they are better able to negotiate between the expectations of a white audience as to what constituted black experience—the need to present oneself as a type of the black slave—and the desire to construct their own experience as they saw it. When Crafts leaves Hannah both superstitious and devoutly Christian or Hopkins presents Dr. Peters turning the tables on a group of Christian Scientists and asking who is really practicing superstitions, both authors are effectively dismissing what William Andrews calls fictive readers—readers who are “embodiments of official white moral standards” (*TFS* 29) and expect to be placated—in favor of an implied reader—“someone who can read his story and judge him according to a set of norms, both moral and aesthetic, that text and author—not the predominate culture—require” (30). Crafts and Hopkins are not catering to a reader; they are attempting to create a particular type of reader.

Thus, when it comes to genre, the question of intended audience plays a key role in shaping religious portrayals. *Our Nig* distinguishes itself from the other three novels, in my view, by borrowing more heavily from the domestic and slave narratives with an eye to meeting rather than challenging reader expectations. This is not to deny what so many critics have noted about Wilson's novel: the portrayal of Mrs. Bellmont's brutality and her exploitation of Frado is a singularly strong indictment of white racism in the North. Rather, religious portrayals in *Our Nig* are subservient to this overall exposé and are applied unchanged from their original ideological purposes in the original genres, namely, to garner reader sympathy for the protagonist. The other novels, on the other hand, aim to subvert white readers' expectations after initially meeting them on familiar generic grounds. With its strong emphasis on presenting Christianity as an unequivocal good for blacks and its straightforward

appeals to the readers, *Iola Leroy* employs less irony than *Contending Forces* does and so emerges as less successful in creating an implied reader. Here, too, a failure to clearly indicate which audience is being addressed manages to confuse the message: placing romantic racist images in a poem by a black poet read at the all-black *conversazione* makes it difficult to see how white prejudices can be overcome. It is the chronologically last of these four novels, *Contending Forces*, that best achieves the goal of countering white expectations that are implicit in religious portrayals in the slave narratives. Indeed, it may be the generation gap between Hopkins and the other authors that partially accounts for this. Born the year *Our Nig* was published and at a time when Harper was already a nationally known poet and abolitionist lecturer, Hopkins may have had not only the artistic skills but also the distance from the antebellum slave narratives to better manipulate the ideology of romantic racialism that influences some of the slave narrative portrayals.

While the distance in time may have been great, the same cannot be said for the differences in circumstances for blacks in the two eras, the 1850s and the 1890s. Emancipation had come with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment at the end of the Civil War, but with the failure of Reconstruction in 1877 a very similar set of conditions to legal slavery began to emerge. The rise of the Ku Klux Klan almost immediately after the war, the dramatic increase in lynchings in the 1880s that reached its high point in 1892, the year *Iola Leroy* was published (Giddings 92), and the Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* which codified legal segregation were all parts of a larger process that locked blacks into second-class citizenship, a state of affairs which differed at times only nominally from legal slavery. In the face of such similar types of oppression, use of religious motifs such as the suffering servant and the wilderness experience changed very little, as did the overall interpretations of Christianity. Applying Rene Girard's theory on the relationship between violence and the sacred has provided us with a framework for better understanding this black religious interpretation. Faced with a situation analogous to other groups scapegoated throughout history—second-class citizens held as *pharmakoi* in Athens, categories of ritual victims by societies in the ancient world; indeed, the case of Jesus himself—blacks constructed a general understanding of Christianity similar to the early, non-sacrificial version of Christianity that Girard posits. Behind the various scenes of mimetic desire and impending mimetic crises, including the appearance in all four texts of a near-white mulatta, lies the implicit recognition that the violence turned against them holds white society together, that the violence itself holds an element of the sacred for the people who use it. Violence is a controlled element, in particular in *Our Nig* and *Contending Forces*, where unbridled fury can

be seen just below the surface of organized violence. It is controlled by ritualized behavior, by sharply maintaining distinctions that prevent conflict from breaking out, and by uncovering mimetic desire as the potential cause of conflict.

I do not maintain that any of the four authors were explicitly aware of being practitioners of a non-sacrificial as opposed to a sacrificial religion, nor that they drew on any special African connection to realize relationship between violence and religion. It would be wrong to assume that because they came more recently from a continent where what Girard calls “primitive religions” were practiced they necessarily better understood this relationship; like many of the antebellum slave narrators, these nineteenth-century African Americans undoubtedly understood the situation in terms of the difference “between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ” (Douglass, *Narrative* 153). Instead, it was the common experience of racial oppression, or slavery, of abused indentured servants, of systematic racial violence, and of strict laws enforcing segregation that led them to understand “true Christianity” in the way they did. Had they seen things in terms of a sacrificial as opposed to a non-sacrificial interpretation, writers such as Harper and Hopkins would undoubtedly have dealt more directly with phenomena such as the Ku Klux Klan, where Christian symbols are overlaid onto a program of racial oppression. Indeed, the mere existence of the Ku Klux Klan and its burning crosses suggests that a strong undercurrent of sentiment in the United States at the time provided a sacrificial interpretation of Christianity, combining religious symbolism with a drive for economic, political, and social power.

Many interpretations have been suggested as to the meaning of Christianity for African Americans in the nineteenth century. Christianity was encouraged at various times by slaveowners as a means of social control, with particular emphasis laid on the passages that encouraged servants to obey their masters. Many slave narratives, both antebellum and postbellum texts, testify that the slaves both understood this aim and rejected it. Others have suggested the otherworldly orientation in Christianity provided compensation for the suffering in this life, and thus indirectly led blacks to accept the loss of political and social power while they lived in this world. Yet others emphasize the solace that many biblical stories could offer, particularly the ones that parallel black experience, and see Christianity as offering individuals strength and a sense of self-worth in the face of the dehumanizing effects of chattel slavery. Indeed, it has also been pointed out how slaves often transformed the figure of Jesus into a warrior king, suggesting the Bible also left open the possibility of retribution in this life.

As mentioned above, the four African American novels cover a wide range of personal responses to the question of religious belief under involuntary servitude. *Our Nig* presents a rejection of Christianity, a fact that may also help account for its largely positive critical reception in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, an era that tends to be skeptical of Christianity and what it considers imposed ideologies. More radical, I believe, is the full embrace of Christianity in *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, which flies in the face of the modern preference for resistance that is both physical and overt. Crafts demonstrates how Christianity can, on the personal level, be used to assert one's sense of self-dignity and be lived out as a philosophy of non-violence. In fact, all four of these novels are recipes for survival; the even more radical self-sacrifice of Uncle Tom is an act that all four reject. In each of the novels the protagonist's ability to survive in a world of racial oppression is directly tied to their religious faith, be it through giving it up or living it fully, but they are never called upon to risk their lives for their religion. Instead, religion offers a moral high ground for condemning those who would endanger the protagonist or other blacks, as well as reasons for not allowing oneself to needlessly suffer or be killed. As Mrs. Willis tells Sappho: "God does not look upon the constitution of sin as we do. His judgment is not ours; ours is finite, his infinite. Your duty is not to be morbid [...]. Your duty is, also, to be happy and bright for the good of those about you" (157). Indeed, the two nadir novels are expressly concerned with providing women a religious mandate to work not for themselves but for the good of others in their race. Iola Leroy's future sister-in-law suggests as much, though she is careful not to offer this as a direct challenge to male leadership roles in the public sphere: "There is a field of Christian endeavor which lies between school-house and the pulpit, which needs the hand of a woman more in private than in public" (254). In the same vein, Sappho's acceptance of motherhood and place alongside her husband, a future race leader it is implied, position her similarly to work for the betterment of the race, a position underscored by her comparison to the Madonna and her image as a risen Christ figure. The secondary role to men is in keeping with the lower status of women in the larger society in nineteenth-century America, one that harkens back to the era of the domestic novel in mid-century, but updated now from a purely private role to one that works for an entire racial group.

Thus, in the two nadir novels in particular, when one offers one's life for the race, it is in order to serve it, not necessarily to die for it. This rejection of sacrifice in dying comes even as the four novels all place their protagonists in the role of the suffering servant. Jesus does not become an authority figure or a friend to guide them to salvation; indeed, Jesus as a separate figure plays a much smaller role in three of the novels because in a sense the

protagonist is living out the role of Jesus. It is a role which becomes more and more apparent in the later novels, culminating in Sappho's "rise from the dead" on Easter morning. The protagonists follow quite literally the dictate to imitate Jesus because, as members of a downtrodden group, it is a role which fits them quite easily. The failure to convert in the fourth novel, *Our Nig*, can be read as proof for this thesis; here, the role of Jesus is already filled by another character in the story, James.

The other common factor the four novels share is the near-white mulatta, which I interpret here as a manifestation of African American spirituality. Seen in the light of Theophus Smith's theory of conjuring culture, the mulatta represents not an assimilationist urge to become white or pass, an act rejected in all four novels, but an attempt to reach both black and white audiences. Reader empathy is achieved through a conjurational process that attempts to portray the protagonist as both black and white, overcoming the racial barrier to empathy by confusing clear, socially constructed distinctions of race. Ultimately, the near-white mulatta defies a white European inclination to view the world in binary terms of either/or. The failure of the novels to achieve an impact on a wider audience, in particular the two nadir novels which enjoyed greater opportunities for circulating, may be traced back at least in part to the contemporary society's lack of familiarity with a conjunctive, or both/and, approach and stronger grounding in disjunctive thinking. In addition, the market for black-authored books remained fairly small through the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries, and receptiveness to what would now be called post-racial ideas, such as the near-white mulatta represents, was undoubtedly quite small. Pauline Hopkins's later attempts to explore the artificiality of racial constructs in her magazine novels, such as *Of One Blood*, similarly met with little success at the time. Her ouster from *The Colored American* magazine by sympathizers of the Booker T. Washington line of thinking shortly after her fourth novel was published demonstrates that resistance to such post-racial concepts was probably not confined to white society.

Critical resistance to the near-white mulatta since then and rejection of Harper's and Hopkins's novels by critics from Sterling Brown to Houston Baker I attribute at least partly to reading these novels against the background of nineteenth-century melodrama and subsequent turns in African American literature in the twentieth century. Melodrama, with its flat characters and its sharp binary oppositions of good and evil, encourages one to read the mulatta in the either/or terms of the protagonist desiring to be white. As Werner Sollors notes, the tragic mulatto has frequently been interpreted since Sterling Brown as tragic because of the supposed "warring blood" that never allows the figure to become a member of one race or

the other (*Neither* 226). The dichotomic thinking that lies behind melodrama, however, is European in origin and a straightforward assessment of these African American novels as melodramatic or sentimental does not take into account the borrowing of a particular form with a different intent. None of the protagonists in the four novels display any characteristics of warring blood; indeed, superstition and faith lie easily side by side in Hannah in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. The one character who is torn apart in melodramatic fashion by warring blood is John Langley in *Contending Forces*; all others remain comfortable in appearing white but understanding themselves as black.

Additionally, African American literature after the nadir takes a different tack on the issue of passing, one which reflects back on the earlier, nineteenth-century novels. Published a little more than a decade after Hopkins's novel first appeared, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson is often considered a transitional text thanks largely to "his modernist formal self-awareness" (Fabi 92). Johnson's novel, as well others by later authors who took up writing passing novels during the Harlem Renaissance, subtly probe the costs of passing for white. Their more modernist approach is closer to the sensibilities of twentieth century critics, whose distance in time to the melodrama of the late Victorian era predisposes them against other possibilities in exploring alternate versions of the older drama. By the time black literature turned later to the protest novel with Richard Wright, the distance in mentality was evidently too great.

This is not to say that some in the black middle-class did not try to pass; indeed, the creation of ideal black communities in *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces* can be read as a call for the better-off not to leave the race. Instead, this dissertation argues for reading the nineteenth-century black novels more closely in light of other genres and an earlier African American worldview that is posited here. This is not the double consciousness that W. E. B. Du Bois identifies, the awareness of being both African and American, but the outgrowth of an African way of thinking brought along on the Middle Passage to the New World. Whether this mode of thinking survived in literature beyond the nineteenth century in this particular form or emerged in different patterns in the Harlem Renaissance or thereafter is beyond the scope of this study. If it did, it almost certainly took on slightly different contours, influenced by other literary trends and fashions of another era, the same way religious portrayals in these four novels were shaped by the domestic novel and the slave narrative, as well as by the historical forces that shaped black experience in the nineteenth century.

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