

DEORIENTATION ACTS:  
THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IMAGINATION,  
1827-1928

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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## Abstract

Deorientation Acts:  
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by

Robina Josephine Khalid

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This dissertation attempts to unravel the way in which racial identities are constructed, articulated, mobilized, and re-constructed through an excavation of the complex web of significance the Middle East played in the formation of African American identities during the long nineteenth century. It does so by building upon two accepted critical notions: first, that the Middle East has carried great ideological weight in the construction of an American identity from the earliest moments at which such an identity was coming into being; and, second, that the anticolonial and civil rights movements from 1955-1972 amplified this weight for African Americans in particular. My study, however, amends both to suggest that the second process began long before 1955, and advances these studies to propose that early African American authors utilized the Middle East – which they knew as “the Orient” – to strategically deform the genres in which they wrote, thus destabilizing the understandings of racial, sexual, and national identities within these genres. This was achieved most often through what I term “deorientation acts” – processes by which African American authors critically defamiliarized assumptions and expectations within the forms in which they wrote to and, in the process, de- and re-constructed not only of African American identities, but what it means to be an American altogether.

I begin with the underutilized and often idiosyncratic print culture of the antebellum period, a body of texts that deorient our understandings of binaries such as such as domestic and foreign,

self and other. I show that decidedly different travel narratives – one written by a missionary, the other by a sly libertine – nonetheless use the conventions of the genre to subtly expose the pitfalls and hypocrisies of traditional Euro-American respectability and to question assumptions about race and gender. Contextualizing Pauline Hopkins’ novel *Of One Blood* within a tradition of turn-of-the-century black women’s fiction and political writing, I argue that the novel is a deorientation act in and of itself: it makes fantastic the accepted contrivances and categories of Western ways of seeing. I conclude by reading W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Dark Princess: A Romance* against Du Bois’ own body of intellectual work as well as novels by fellow Harlem Renaissance authors Nella Larsen and Claude McKay. I contextualize these writings within a burgeoning Pan Africanism movement, a dying Ottoman empire, and a relationship between the United States and the Middle East increasingly based on oil, and ultimately ask how their appropriation of an Orientalized sensuality sets the stage for the more popularly recognized Arab-African American interactions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Ultimately I neither simply report upon an often overlooked body of texts nor present a progressive history which moves unimpeded toward the anti-colonial alliances of the mid-twentieth century. Instead I negotiate the borders of various fields – from African American Literature to Postcolonial and Queer Theory to Anthropology – in order to advance theories about the way in which race, sex, and nation were articulated in the early days of American nation – and the way in which those articulations resonate and continue to “orient” us today.

## Acknowledgments

It is no coincidence that the further I delved into my own graduate studies the more likely I was to read acknowledgments pages. Only with the experience of writing this dissertation have I truly begun to understand the ways in which those acknowledged are integral rather than peripheral to a book. In this case, my dissertation began with a fortuitous moment in the basement of the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Black Culture, and I have Jon-Christian Suggs to thank for sending me there in the first place. Courses with him early on in my graduate career not only deepened my love of archival work but instilled my interest in early African American writing altogether. Elizabeth McHenry's never-less-than incisive thoughts on my work have strengthened this dissertation tremendously. Talia Schaffer has been a truly unflagging source of support and insight. Her enthusiasm saved me from succumbing to the depths of despair on more than one occasion, and if this dissertation can be called structured, it surely has her to thank. I also owe a great deal of gratitude to my advisor, Ammiel Alcalay, whose knowledge and compassion inspired me from my earliest days as a graduate student and continues to do so. I have never encountered a more encyclopedic, generous, or *tireless* resource; his influence on this dissertation is immeasurable.

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## Introduction

*“Finding those, who in general termed themselves Christians,  
not so honest nor so good in their morals as Turks,  
I really thought the Turks were in  
a safer way of salvation than my neighbors”*  
*Olaudah Equiano, Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (1789)*

*“I do not come to you as reality; I come to you as myth.  
Because that’s what black people are: myths.”*  
*Sun-Ra, Space is the Place (1972)*

Frederick Douglass couldn’t sleep. The radiant blue waves of the Mediterranean, which had earlier glistened idyllically, reflecting the downy white of the clouds above, had become “wild.” But it was not the violent rocking of the steamer that kept him awake. As it turned out, hardy sailor might be added to his lengthy lists of appellations – which included ex-slave, writer, publisher and editor, orator, feminist and Consul General to Haiti, to name just a few – and he jovially compared the strength of his stomach to his wife Helen’s as he recorded his thoughts in the waning hours of February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1887. “If right in my estimate of the length of time I have been in the word,” he reflected, “I am now 70 years old.” Attempting to stabilize his pen as the boat rocked on, he marveled, “It is peculiar that starting life where I did and old as I am that I shd (sic) be plowing this classic sea and on my way to the land of Moses and the Pharaohs” (Douglass *Diary* 14 February 1887). It was not the agitation of the waves that kept him awake, then, but his own exhilaration as he anticipated his arrival in Egypt.

It is within this space, in between Europe and Egypt, that Douglass was inspired for the first time to speculate upon his age in his travel diary, which spanned from September 1886 to June 1887. But it was not the first time he had written about this uncertainty. In all three of his autobiographies – *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1845; *My Bondage and My Freedom*, published in 1855; and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1881 and revised in 1892 – he acknowledged his lack of “accurate knowledge” of his age or date of birth (Douglass *Narrative* 255).

Contending that he had “never met a slave” who was able to say “with any certainty how old he was” (*Life and Times* 27), Douglass admitted that “this destitution” was one of his “earliest troubles” (*Bondage* 35). He explained:

The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit. (Douglass *Narrative* 255)

That this uncertainty seeps through in private journal entries, a form unconstrained by the conventions expected of nineteenth-century autobiography – namely, the detailed delineation of one’s pedigree – suggests that it haunted Douglass as a “source of some unhappiness” even in old age (*Narrative* 255). The withholding of basic autobiographical information, Douglass suggests, represented a denial of authority over one’s own body, a subtle act of terrorism by masters whose goal was dehumanizing their slaves. That it was a lasting wound is evidenced by the way in which he approaches it even in the midst of “congratulat[ing]” himself for achieving that which only “the most highly favored by fortune are permitted.” In this moment, Douglass did not simply call to attention the irony of someone who was “marked” for a life “under the lash in the cornfield” being able to travel to Egypt, first class (*Diary* 13 February 1887). If, as he points out three entries in a row, it “is no small thing” (Douglass *Diary* 11 February 1887) to travel to such “distant lands full of historical interest,” it is also no small thing that reflections on his age are for the first time recorded six months into his voyage, en route to a specific location. As the boat pushed east, it appears to simultaneously move back, into a deep past where the facts of his everyday self – his age, his immediate origins –entwine themselves with the presence of a larger self, a self that could not be contained within the borders of the nation but made that nation possible in the first place, a self always-already in transit.

This dissertation is a story about those intertwining selves. I attempt here to unravel the way in which racial, sexual and national identities were constructed, articulated, mobilized, and

reconstructed through an excavation of the complex web of significance the Middle East played for African Americans in the nineteenth century. Specifically, I argue that between the years of 1827 and 1928, African American authors utilized what we would now consider the Middle East, North Africa, and the Indian subcontinent – what they then knew as “the Orient” – to press up against the constraints of identities traditionally allowed to be imagined and articulated. These authors deoriented the “self-evidence” of certain truths, inviting the world in their home and blurring the boundaries between where one ends and the other begins.

As I explore the disorienting spaces of these texts, I employ what Daniel Hack has called “close reading at a distance.” This approach departs from a traditional New Critical understanding of close reading that purports to bring the meaning of texts to light through a focus on formal elements undistracted by socio-political context. Instead, I read informed by the larger cultural field in which these texts emerged, keeping a particular eye toward the complex ideological, stylistic, and literary expectations their readers might bring to them. Yet these texts did not simply materialize within a particular landscape, where they were read within a static set of expectations. Texts actively participate in and construct a particular socio-political moment; in the nineteenth century, that moment was particularly marked by the manufacture of what was then still staggeringly chimerical: a “United” States. In other words, at a time when the states “United” more closely resembled some of the colonies from which they had declared independence than each other – as New England had more in common with Nova Scotia, and southern states like South Carolina more in common with the colony of Barbados, from which they had sprung<sup>1</sup> – it took concerted effort for people to understand themselves as American<sup>2</sup>. Likewise, it took concerted effort for the “We the People” of the Constitution to come to signify a white, self-made man. That identity was actively consolidated

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<sup>1</sup> See Greeson; Jennings; Taylor.

<sup>2</sup> See page 28 of this introduction for a detailed explanation of the terms used in this study.

through the increasing naturalization of social hierarchies along the lines of race and sex, a domination legally insisted upon to the point of neurosis (a point to which I will return shortly). But even for many of the white men who were ostensibly the beneficiaries of this naturalization, this idealized national identity effectively served to obscure “socioeconomic inequality as structural” (*National Manhood* ix). Further, the persistence of this imagined and universalized white masculinity has over time served to elide the very real “dissensus” (Watts 15) of the early nation, a discord which makes itself known when one looks past what have come to be accepted as the foundational texts of the nation and into its vast and discrepant archive. Building on critics who have illustrated the Orient’s crucial role in the consolidation of these national identities, I here investigate the way in which African American authors specifically utilized the pliable discourses of Orientalism to manipulate, shape, dissect and stretch those identities. Black authors, who were themselves figured as external to their nation, used the “accepted” Other to the supposedly United States, the Orient, as a perforation from which they could strategically destabilize the truths of their increasingly positivist world. If Frederick Douglass’ inability to quantify his age over a century earlier speaks to the disorientations and dislocations of enslavement, in other words, his writings about the Orient strategically relocated that sense of disorientation to the dominating assumptions on which American identities were based.

### **Reorienting U.S. Orientalisms**

*“Arrived at Port Said. The queerest of queer places.”*  
– Frederick Douglass, *Unpublished travel diary of 1886-1894*

This dissertation builds upon two accepted critical notions, the first of which is the insight that the Middle East has carried great ideological weight in the construction of a American identity from the earliest moments at which such an identity was coming into being. Studies such as Robert Alison’s *The Crescent Obscured*, Holly Edwards’ *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures*, Timothy Marr’s *The Cultural Routes of American Islamicism*, Melani McAlister’s *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the*

*Middle East 1945-2000*, Hilton Obenzinger's *American Palestine*, and Malini Johar Schueller's *U.S. Orientalisms*, to name just a few, have all skillfully demonstrated the way in which discourse about the Oriental world (which was associated with Islam almost inexorably) was central to the creation of a American nation and remains so today. These studies have all necessarily built on Edward Said's groundbreaking work *Orientalism*, (1978), which has been charged with "chang[ing] our way of thinking forever" (Doniger 943) by some and less extravagantly, but more typically, cited as ushering in the field of postcolonial studies by others.<sup>3</sup>

Said defines the word Orientalism as a triadic, but interrelated, set of meanings: first, Orientalism refers to the body of knowledge produced about the Orient; second, Orientalism is a particular "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction" between East ("Orient") and West ("Occident"); and, finally, Orientalism functions as an instrument of empire that manages the Orient by "making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (*Orientalism* 2-3). In other words, *Orientalism* as a text is not one of locations but one of relations; not the story of the Orient, but those who Orientalized it; not the study of a geographic entity but of a way of making meaning. Reading a variety of nineteenth-century (and primarily British and French) authors and explorers, Said extracts an overarching coherence to that process of meaning making, specifically suggesting that the Orient emerged as a set of signs deployed to support the stories the West told about itself. Specifically, it became the degenerate, mysterious, irrational, carnal, despotic Other to the virtuous, cultivated, rational, and sexually and civically egalitarian West. The East, then, becomes not only racialized but gendered: it is the supine, feminized body to the West's upright, masculinized mind. This dichotomized understanding helped to consolidate the "us" of Western identities precisely at the moment when

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example Behdad ("Edward Said"); Bhabha (*Location*); Boehmer; Chatterjee; Crush; Parry; Prakash; Schueller (*US Orientalisms*); Singh and Schmidt; Spivak; and Young, to name just a few of the many. Said himself wrote that "Both post-colonialism and post-modernism emerged...during the 1980s and, in many instances, seemed to take account of such works as *Orientalism* as antecedents" ("Afterword" *Orientalism* 348).

such identities were coming into being – when, as Benedict Anderson has famously argued, “Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordered, hierarchical dynastic realm” (7), and thus, new understandings of “community” needed to be both “imagined” and performed.

The theory of Orientalism has been so far-reaching – both in terms of the varying fields that have appropriated it and the uses to which it has been put within those fields – that entire texts have been devoted simply to anthologizing and annotating its critical reception.<sup>4</sup> Given this enormous impact, then, it is no surprise that Orientalism would cross the Atlantic. Most of the critics who have revised the theory for a American context have retained its basic dualistic structure, which all seem to agree early Americans imported from their European predecessors – with a twist. That twist is the fledgling nation’s impulse to imagine itself as unprecedented in its democracy, virtue, justice, and industriousness not only in antithesis to the vice and lassitude of the despotic Orient, but also in relation to the corrupted Old World of Europe from which it had sprung. Further, particularly in light of American propensity to imagine their nation as a “City upon a Hill” – a term Puritan John Winthrop appropriated out of the New Testament in his 1630 Sermon “A Model of Christian Charity” while still aboard the *Arbella* – the biblical Holy Lands in the Middle East held a particular place in the hearts of early Americans. There was a chance to get a holy land right, to supplant the originary Biblical site which had degraded under Ottoman rule with their own “New Jerusalem.” The Orient – embodied by its at once impotent and lecherous leaders and simultaneously oppressed and salacious “houris” – thus functioned, in Robert Allison’s apt words, as “a lesson in what not to do, in how not to construct a state, encourage commerce, or form families” (xvii).

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Macfie and Varisco.

But the unique geopolitical context of the American colonies also significantly changed the way in which its inhabitants imagined the Orient. In fact, it was Ottoman advances in Europe that had produced the “powerful sense of geographic and religious claustrophobia” that pushed European empires westward in the first place (Taylor 26). But they were also pushed westward by a desire for new trade routes that would allow them to circumvent a reliance on the Orient for luxury goods. Their “discovery” shifted the entire center of gravity of commerce from the spice trade to imperial self-production of commodities such as sugar and tobacco, silver and gold. What came to be the United States, then, was shaped by an elaborate game in which the English, French, Dutch, and Spanish empires maneuvered with and against each other and Native American nations in order to establish prominence in commerce – a game that found a mirror in the East. American colonies, particularly on the Atlantic Seaboard, were financed by trade between Native Americans and colonials; they were largely populated by the poor and incarcerated of England and enslaved Africans, all of whom were put to work raising commodities that could not be produced in England but which could improve England’s trade with other nations; the British Parliament’s passing of the Tea Act of 1773, which effectively gave the British East India Company a monopoly on the sale of tea in the colonies in order to save it from bankruptcy, was one of the restrictions on commerce that precipitated colonial resistance; this resistance was ultimately aided by the French because they hoped that revolution would divert English resources, weakening their hold elsewhere in the world.<sup>5</sup> All of this is to say that the American nation was ushered in by a tangled web of ever-changing economic alliance and competition that constitutively affected not only its “official” foreign relations, but also its inhabitants’ way of understanding the world. For the European empires, the Orient represented “a lasting trauma” (Said *Orientalism* 59) of impressive military conquest as well as an “Afro-Eurasian commercial network” on which their own empires had been built (Hodgson

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<sup>5</sup> This latter fact later is illustrated by Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, “ostensibly to protect French merchants there...but more especially as a base of operations” from which they might attack the British in India (Hodgson 216).

197); for Americans, operating within an entirely different network through which commodities were circulated and living in a country in which one-fifth of the population would be defined *as* commodities, the Orient would come to be imagined and deployed differently. And this imagining was inherently determined by the “ethnically diverse and culturally pluralistic” landscape of the early United States (Forbes 263).

Indeed it is this diversity that scholars have identified as the major limitation for bringing Orientalism to bear on a American context. Other shortcomings have been articulated, and many of these echo those found in criticisms of Orientalism more generally. Said, for example, has been taken to task for his amputation of women from the colonial project and his adoption of heterosexist assumptions about penetrative men and passive women.<sup>6</sup> His suggestion of humanism as a viable alternative to Orientalism has likewise been challenged as jejune given, in James Clifford’s words, that “humanist common denominators” become “meaningless” when they “bypass the local cultural codes that make personal experience articulate” (*Predicament* 263)<sup>7</sup>. And *Orientalism*’s dependence on the very same binary of “fixed identities” it “abjures” (Said *Orientalism* 336), the way in which it presents Orientalism as an unchanging and unified lens used by a stagnant and homogenous West, has likewise been problematized<sup>8</sup>. U.S. critics in particular seem to work out of the fissures opened up by this last dilemma. These critics argue that the U.S. in particular never functioned as a unified or stable marker because of the way in which “racial distinctions” were “a structuring concern” of the nation (McAlister 11) – and, indeed, it is worth noting here that, from the outset, Said himself argued he never intended his theory *could* be applied to the U.S.<sup>9</sup> These

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<sup>6</sup> See R. Lewis; McAlister; McClintock; Schueller (*US Orientalisms*)

<sup>7</sup> See also McAlister; Prakash.

<sup>8</sup> See Aijaz; Appiah; Behdad (*Belated Travelers*); Crinson; Davis, Kathleen; Ellingson; Lowe; Moore-Gilbert; Rice; Schueller (*US Orientalisms*); Shohat and Stamm.

critics, however, have rightfully suggested that Americans, as both colonists and post-colonial subjects could not, and did not, make sense of themselves and the world around them through the same dichotomous processes that Europeans had used, given the “incoherence” (Schueller *U.S. Orientalisms* 3) of both their body politic and the borders of their land. As I will explain further, though Americans would in many ways replicate European understandings of the Orient, the “grid” through which they “filtered” the Orient into their “consciousness” (Said *Orientalism* 5) was inextricably colored by one of the most brutal and extreme instances of settler-colonialism before or since.

### **Orienting African American Islam**

*“Christ built the first church in Mecca.”*  
-- *Old Lizzy Gray*<sup>10</sup>

Given that the prism through which Americanist critics revise Saidian Orientalism tends to be the heterogeneity of the United States, it is curious that, for all of their other insights, few of these studies interrogate the voices of that heterogeneity. The majority of these authors agree that foundational American rhetoric deployed

raced and gendered distinctions between Oriental despotism, sensuality, idleness, moral flaccidity, effeminacy, and sexual aberrance, on the one hand, and American democracy, rigorous Anglo-American morality, industry, healthy heteronormativity, and masculinity on the other...to repress or allay fears about the wholeness and stability of the nation in the face of diverse ethnic immigration and African American and Native American presences. (Schueller *U.S. Orientalisms* 4)

Yet almost all describe African Americans (if they are treated at all) as a “presence” that threatens the “stability” of the United States rather than as both active producers and consumers of American culture. To wit, only half of the six texts I cited earlier deal in any way with African American

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<sup>9</sup> In the second paragraph of *Orientalism*, Said concedes that “Americans will not feel quite the same about the Orient” as the European subjects around which the study centers (1).

<sup>10</sup> Attributed to the South Carolinian slave, Lizzy Gray, by her obituary in 1860. See Austin 41.

cultural production<sup>11</sup>, and only two study that production in the nineteenth century, though in quite an abbreviated fashion. Further, both suggest that African American Orientalist discourse was a performance of “whiteface” through which African Americans could lay claim to a sense of imperial, and masculinized, power (Schueller “Performing”)<sup>12</sup>. Though the remaining text, Melani McAlister’s *Epic Encounters*, does argue for a unique and multivalent relationship between African Americans and the Middle East, it also insists that relationship was limited to the twentieth century. McAlister’s text is, in fact, built upon a second accepted critical notion, one that my study amends: that only “between 1955 and 1972” did “a potent combination of religious affiliation, anticolonial politics, and black national radicalism tur[n] claims upon the Middle East into a rich resource within African American communities” (McAlister 86).

The fact that forty new nation-states evolved out of a variety of anticolonial struggle during this period helps to explain the assumption that African American and Middle Eastern alliances were originally generated in that landscape. Events like the Bandung Conference – which gathered together individuals from twenty-nine nations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East and was attended by prominent black Americans like writer Richard Wright and Representative Adam Clayton Powell (though the conference was officially rejected by the U.S. government) – leave the traces of such a relationship easily mapped and accessible. The highly visible way in which groups like the Nation of Islam, the Black Panther Party, and the Black Arts movement imagined the “creative possibilities” of “Afro-American life and history” through “the Third World of which Black America is a part,” in the words of formative Black Arts author Larry Neal (39), have deeply embedded those claims within our cultural consciousness. The moment in which world heavyweight boxing champion Cassius Clay converted to Islam, changed his name to Muhammad Ali, and evaded being drafted

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<sup>11</sup> See McAlister; Obenzinger; Schueller (*US Orientalisms*)

<sup>12</sup> See Obenzinger; Schueller (*US Orientalisms*)

into the U.S. Army by declaring “I’m a member of the Black Muslims, and we don’t go to no wars unless they’re declared by Allah himself” (qtd in McAlister 92) has become emblematic. Likewise, media frenzy over the Black Panther Party’s “anti-Semitism” and founder Huey P. Newton’s assertion that he “supported the Palestinian’s just struggle for liberation one hundred percent” remain easily accessible and investigated (196). I would argue that any mention of African American alliances with the Middle East seems to invariably conjure the bow-ties and glasses of the Nation of Islam, calling attention to the way in which that cultural moment was literally marked by bodily presence and theatricality; the spectacular quality of African American expression during the period has ensured that the alliances they posited with the Middle East were likewise visible and iconic.

As might be surmised from these examples, though there were certainly secular affiliations articulated, religion provided much of the most prominent intersections between African Americans and the Middle East during this period. The rise of the Nation of Islam during this time (embodied by its most charismatic follower, Malcolm X, who eventually left the NOI to follow a more conventional understanding of Islam) has motivated a good deal of study of the roots of that organization; thus, when pre-1955 encounters between African Americans and the Middle East have been documented and investigated, it is has been almost exclusively through the lens of religion. Studies by Alan Austin, Sylviane Diouf and Michael Gomez, in particular, have persuasively elucidated a tangible Islamic presence within Africans forcibly brought to the Americas as slaves<sup>13</sup>, and the traces they left on African American culture and religious practices today<sup>14</sup>. Early Pan-Africanist and Christian missionary Edward Wilmot Blyden has also received attention for his argument that Islam might possess liberatory potential for black Americans whose choices were at the time circumscribed to “slave, ape, or puppet.”

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<sup>13</sup> Diouf estimates that 15-20%, or between 2.25 and 3 million, of slaves transported to the American colonies were Muslim (48)

<sup>14</sup> See Diouf 2, 49-70, 184-194, 198; see also Elia.

From the lessons he everyday receives, the Negro unconsciously imbibes the conviction that to be a great man he must be like the white man....To be as like the white man as possible – to copy his outward appearance, his peculiarities, his manners, the arrangement of his toilet, that is the aim of the Christian Negro....the Muslim Negro, as a learner, is a disciple, not an imitator. A disciple, when freed from leading-strings, may become a producer; an imitator never rises above a mere copyist. (Blyden *Christianity* 44)

Blyden's emphasis here on the syncretic nature of African Islam– which he portrayed as originally “Oriental” but chosen freely among Africans who have adapted “many of its traditional customs to suit the milder and more conciliatory disposition of the Negro” (*Christianity* 13) – accurately foreshadowed the way in which twentieth-century African Americans would in turn appropriate Islam.

For though these movements –Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple, the Indian Ahmadiyya movement, whose mission of “spiritual Colonization of the Western world” (Bayoumi 253) was directed primarily at African Americans, and W.D. Fard's Nation of Islam – departed from worldwide Islam on almost every major theological level, they creatively utilized Islam as a marker to situate them as ontologically non-Western. In other words, these proto-Islamic religions “relocated the source of an immutable black identity to Africa and away from North America while simultaneously erecting a transnational family to which blacks belonged” (Gomez *Black Crescent* 274). While the two earlier movements did so primarily by laying claim to an “Asiatic” heritage that emphasized a sort of spectacularly Eastern aesthetic (Turner 158), the Nation of Islam, the telling original name of which was The *Lost and Found* Nation of Islam, shifted this emphasis slightly to prioritize the unique position and legacy of African Americans. Though black Americans were posited as being distinctly Afro-Asiatic in origin, NOI doctrine incorporated discrete elements of African American spiritual and cultural practice, and enormous attention was placed on the psychological inheritances of slavery, as illustrated by the use of the letter “X” to mark the loss of one's “original” name in the forced migration of slavery. All three illustrate the struggle of African

Americans to define their communities in a context broader than the one under which they felt “colonized” – and the way in which the Orient was interwoven into that struggle.

### **Deorientation Acts**

*I had heard of excavations from Pompeii, and had read  
some little about them, but now I stood by them....No one seemed to be annoyed or thoughtful  
about it; and I thought how easy it is to get used to horrors and sadness.  
– Amanda Smith, *An Autobiography* (1892)*

Despite the acceptance of these twin theories – that Americans have been peculiarly invested in the Orient since the founding of the country, and that the mid-twentieth century saw the apex of African American investment (primarily defined as religious) in the Middle East – the gap between them has remained unbridged. A comprehensive work on the Orient in the early African American imagination has never been published, and only one full-length monograph interrogates the twentieth-century relationship outside of the framework of religion. That text, Sudarshan Kapur’s fascinating study *Raising Up a Prophet: the African American Encounter with Gandhi* astutely demonstrates the connections between the Indian independence struggle and the African American struggle for civil rights beginning in 1915. In so doing, Kapur usefully problematizes the assumption that these connections rose out of the mid-century zeitgeist, but does not situate the “fact” of those connections within a larger process of how African Americans “made sense” of Gandhian non-violence or wove the concept into their own cultural consciousness. While a second text, Bill Mullens’ ambitious *Afro-Orientalism*, ostensibly explores “the dialectical” way in which “writers of African and Asian descent” destabilized “traditional Westernized disciplinary understandings” of racial, sexual, national, and imperial identities (xli), the Orient under investigation, while defined broadly to encompass both Near and Far East, is distinctly and overwhelmingly the Far. As well, though Mullens’ theoretical contours are clearly inspired by Said’s *Orientalism* (as marked by his title), like Kapur’s text *Afro-Orientalism* documents relations rather than theorizes them, with the consummate emblem of “Afro-Orientalism’s potential for redrawing the shape of the color line”

(162) found in the marriage of Chinese American Grace Lee Boggs and black American James Boggs.

Building on an understanding of Orientalism as an active process of meaning-making rather than as a catalogue of static cultural scripts or an essentialized understanding of “alliance,” I instead explore the ways in which that color line was redrawn, reorganized, reimagined, and redrawn again through nineteenth-century African American engagement with the Orient. These interactions illuminate the delicate dances through which individuals both navigate (and in so doing, produce) an ever-shifting cultural matrix in order to make sense of themselves and the world around them. During the period under investigation here, that cultural matrix, which was intimately interlaced with a geopolitical and economic reality, depended on an increasing naturalization of binaries – East and West, black and white, female and male, body and mind, old and new, south and north. Yet the coherent functioning of those binaries was inherently disrupted by their multiplicity. It is from within that space – the disjunctures, one might say, between the varying sets of binaries – that the African American authors I study engage the Orient. These individuals, who were “dehumanized,” “defaced,” and “ungendered” (Spillers 214) by slavery and its legacy, engaged in what I term *deorientation acts*, or processes by which African American authors critically defamiliarized assumptions and expectations within the forms in which they wrote to suggest alternative racial, national, and sexual epistemologies. These authors used the Orient to deform, as it were, the proforma, in the process destabilizing the “truths” upon which their dehumanization depended.

Yet these were not “counter” narratives, or marginal discourses of resistance within a dominating culture. To read them as such is to continue to read American history from within a tradition where “Europe exorcized blackness in order to create its own invented traditions, empires, and fictions of superiority and racial purity” (Kelley and Patterson13). This dissertation attempts to add to a body of literature that gives voice to the inventedness of those fictions, resisting a sense of

history structured by the poles of the “founding fathers” who philosophically imagined our nation into being and the brutalized slaves who physically constructed it. Instead, this study works from an understanding that between those two poles was always a mass of people who not only never quite fit into those binaries but also had to be quite literally *terrorized* into accepting them as “truths” by which to structure their experience. It has been well established that encounters and alliances in the colonial period had been dictated more by class, religion, and local culture than race; in that landscape, demographic necessity and shared economic realities produced “interracial” relationships as a matter of course. The state, building on a scientific rationalism that began in the eighteenth century and gained prominence in the nineteenth, *made* people white and black belatedly. It worked obsessively to categorize according to a logic of racial purity that had long been undermined (if it had ever existed in the first place), and it policed those categories viciously. As the colonial period made its way toward the early national period, law makers and landowners systematically and cynically attempted to perpetuate a sense of racial solidarity among whites to obscure the fact that property and power were unevenly distributed, increasingly instituting draconian measures to limit the potential for the diverse underclass, who outnumbered them, to recognize this fact and join forces in rebellion.<sup>15</sup> Further complicating our sense of these binaries is the way in which, as Jack D. Forbes has painstakingly shown, the language used to delineate racial lines, even legally, was never as consistent or transparent as we might now imagine as it always was. Terms like “colored,” “black,” “moor,” or “negro” did not mean the same things in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and were defined by multiple empires in multiple contexts to multiple ends; Bruce Dain, for example, has fascinatingly revealed the ways in which white Dutch men who had fought on the side of the black rebels during the Haitian revolution were granted status as “black” so that they could remain in the country (89-90).

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<sup>15</sup> See Bennet; Berlin; Jennings; Lepore (*New York Burning*); Linebaugh and Rediker; Roediger; Taylor.

Reading the black American archive potently illustrates the constructed nature of those categories. As Judy Scales-Trent has cogently written, “When slavers kidnapped 22 million farmers and artisans from Africa, they did not kidnap and enslave ‘Negroes’ or ‘colored people’” (261). Rather, these were people who understood themselves as ethnically and culturally diverse and who were “culturally ‘unmade’” (Spillers 215) and remade as “black” by the traumas and fragmentations of the Middle Passage and its legacy. Their appropriation of the Orient as a legible cultural text through which to situate themselves as American but also to disrupt the very categories on which Americanness rested thus helps us to, in Hamid Dabashi’s words, disrupt a stable and “fictive white male” interlocutor (149) and reimagine ourselves, instead, from the perspective of “the polylocality of our historical exigencies, the polyvocality of our visions” (145). In other words, these writers reoriented us not towards, necessarily, the commonality of a “basic” humanity, but rather the commonality of peculiarity, the way in which the articulations of our identities and communities depends on an accretion of ever-shifting, interlacing, co-existing factors rather than stable binaries. Their navigations of the Orient cogently illustrate the ways in which they implicitly understood that “problems of exclusion” could not be “solved simply” through inclusion “within an already established analytical structure” (Crenshaw 140). Instead these authors pushed back against those analytical structures, which effectively served to consolidate power in a “mythical norm” through the imposition of binaries that “eclipsed or denied the other parts of self” (Lorde 120)

For what emerges in these writings, in fact, is a sort of explosion from within those “established analytical structures” in order to relocate them as a consistently shifting and relating set of poly- local and –vocal relationships. How does one hyper-objectified and ahistoricized group make sense of another hyper-objectified and ahistoricized group from within the discourse generated *by* the group doing the objectifying? For these authors, the idea that a “we” must be defined *in antithesis* to a “them” is figured as a kind of psychic colonization, a false and dangerous way of

seeing. Instead, subjectivity is imagined as a sort of borderland in which people make sense of themselves and the world around them through the various roles they embody at any one given time, roles which may or may not exceed the contours scripted for them by an exploitative economic system. Identities must be imagined *interactive* rather than oppositional, fluid rather than static, creative rather than empirical.

While this study shares an “explici[t]” focus on “the implicit” (Gates *Signifying* xx) with studies of the trickster figure in African American literature, however, deorientation distinguishes itself from *trickery* in several ways. The trickster, which Henry Louis Gates has persuasively argued as a trope central to the tradition of African American literature in his landmark *The Signifying Monkey*, was a figure of black mythology appearing throughout the African diaspora, historically invoked by black American authors and storytellers to convincingly code criticisms of the “hypocrisy and meaninglessness” of white “manners and rules” (L. Levine 116) that would normally be punished if explicitly articulated. Not least of the ways in which deorientation differs from trickery, however, is its dependence on engagement with the Orient: deorientation acts do not function by “signifyin’,” in Gates’ terms, on the hypocrisy of the domestic, but by disrupting domestic logic through an introduction of the foreign. While both deorientation and signifyin’ call attention to the instability of language, signifyin’ makes use of a vernacular and relies on puns and substitutions, while deorientation on its face looks a lot like the dominating modes it destabilizes. Likewise, the process of deorientation is somewhat consonant to, but differs from, the postcolonial theory of *mimicry* articulated by Homi K. Bhabha. Mimicry, like trickery, at once reproduces and threatens colonial discourse but, unlike trickery, is generally not imagined as explicitly resistant or subversive (though it may be functionally so). The resistant power of the mimic, instead, stems from the fact of her being “almost the same, but not quite” in Bhabha’s oft-cited configuration (*Locations* 89); mimicry undercuts colonial power, in other words, when the distance between colonizer and

colonizer shrinks. Thus, Bhabha writes, “the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (153). Deorientation acts, on the other hand, interrogate the incongruities of identity formation in a world where one passed through “a blood-stained gate” of historical nowhere-ness (Hartman 3); they assume the impossibility of concepts like “original” and “repetition,” and refract those binaries through engagement with the “outside” of the Orient. Likewise, while mimicry is often performed by “exceptional” natives who internalize a colonial disavowal of “bad” natives, deorientation acts hinge on the destabilization of what it means to be good and bad to begin with. When a domestic novelist inflects a conventionally imperialist adventure tale with elements of Afro-Oriental fantasy in order to show the ways in which what are perceived as American successes are in actuality failures, she deorients us. When a slave who traveled abroad with his master insists upon the objectivity and truth of his narrative – as was generally demanded by both the contours of travel writing *and* the slave narrative – even in the midst of taking us to places that could not possibly have existed, he deorients us. When a respected intellectual known for his rigorous intellectual writing appropriates a genre traditionally devalued as “feminine” – the romance novel – he deorients us. Crucial to the deorientation act, then, is the way in which it invokes a curious sense of disorientation in *the reader*. In other words, unlike trickery or mimicry, which disrupt systems of power through anomalous performances authors or characters employ or are compelled into, deorientation acts disrupt through an assumed, and active, relationship between reader and text.

Bhabha’s theory, however, speaks to the way in which many of these texts have been read as mimicry, as “whiteface,” as somehow “inauthentically” black because we have come to privilege black vernacular forms as more resonant to black American experience. As Elizabeth McHenry writes, while the “wide recognition” that vernacular forms “from folktales and proverbs to testifying and rapping” have received in recent years is “critical and salutary”

celebrations of the black oral tradition and black vernacular have also unwittingly undermined historical evidence that points to a long and complex history of African Americans' literary imagination, not only as readers of the 'canon' of European and European American authors but also as creators and readers of their own literature as well. (5-6)

Whether or not the texts I study here are authentic to Afro-American lived experiences in the long nineteenth century, however, is in my mind irrelevant to this study. Clearly, people who identified as African American and some of whom were *enslaved* as African Americans composed them and, as Sylviane Diouf writes, the

Middle Passage and enslavement were not an equalizing process that regurgitated a mass of men, women, and children with a set of similar attitudes and behaviors intended to help survival. Besides the realities of American slavery, the personal stories of the Africans, their ethno-cultural backgrounds, their religions, and how and why they were shipped away constituted the criteria that defined and conditioned their new existence. (209)

Likewise, the peculiar and particular experiences of African Americans within the United States, and their interactions with other Americans both white and black, helped to produce discursive strategies that were resonant to those peculiar and particular experiences. If questions of authenticity seem beside the point, I likewise do not see the value in attempting to ascertain whether these texts were operatively "resistant"; as Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo have suggested, such inquires tend to invariably lead down a rabbit hole where "little conclusion" is possible beyond "that any significant cultural practice is complicit in the power it might be think to be opposing" (1). To resolve that perpetual conundrum – the sense that even "resistance" to power is "never in a position of exteriority to power" (Foucault *Sexuality* 95) – would be well beyond the scope of this text. But the disruptive potential of the deorientation act might be further explicated through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus. Bourdieu suggests that habitus is a "regulated improvisation" that causes "practices and works to be immediately intelligible and foreseeable, and hence taken for granted." Habitus, in other words, generates a collective "common sense." Yet while Bourdieu argues that habitus functions for the most part unconsciously, and thus limits and polices what can be said,

thought, and felt, I would argue that particularly when that “consensus of meaning” (58) involves as arrant a disparity as slavery, fissures and gaps are opened up. As Hortense J. Spillers has provocatively written, “the familiarity” of horrors of slavery has not depleted their “power, even now, to startle” (209). I would argue that it is precisely this “startling” nature of the slave trade – the unreality of it, the “self evidence” of its iniquity, the way in which it produces a break where our internalized “consensus of meaning” no longer explains our reality – that creates the disconcerting space from which deorientation acts may be deployed. Again in Spillers’ words, “Such inveterate obscene blindness might be denied, point blank, as possible for *anyone*, except we knew it happened” (210). That we know it happened is so disorienting that it opens up spaces from which to *deorient* what else we know.

### **On the Past and the Post**

*“Colored men! Save this extract.  
Cut it out and put it in your Scrap-book, and use it at a proper time.”  
– Frederick Douglass Paper, 17 February 1854*

In composing this dissertation, I read across a variegated archive of neglected articles, missionary writings by and about a once notorious and now obscure woman, unpublished diaries, novels by the most canonical of African American authors, and followed a trail of footnotes to lived testimony about a revolutionary’s forgotten wife. It is my contention that it is in precisely such an archive that the “rickety structure” that was the early American nation – “tacked together,” as it had been, “in fits and starts” by several different empires (Jennings 4) – becomes most apparent. It is in such a cross-section of often-neglected texts where one can trace, quite palpably, the way in which a narrative of intrepid exploration and democratic promise came to obscure the reality that there were far more subjugated than liberated within that history. It is within that archive that one comes to realize that the insistent, nearly pathological rhetoric of liberty within the new nation was not undermined by the slavery it practiced, but constituted by it. In other words, the insistence on

freedom was a compulsive exigency of a population who knew all too well what it meant to be enslaved, and it is from within that context that African American writers engaged the Orient.

Yet a real impediment to the study of early African American writings is the difficulty in locating them; not only have many of them not survived, many of the ones that did survive remain virtually unknown in various (and often unindexed) archives. Indeed, my research has only scratched the surface of the vast archives of larger institutions such as the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center and the Library of Congress, let alone less prominent organizations. But it is also important to bear in mind, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, that "presences and absences embodied in sources or archives are neither neutral nor natural" (48). Texts survive because someone believed that they should; archives are active sites of agency and power rather than static collections of information. This fact becomes particularly significant when we note that many of the more readily accessible sources I study here have rarely been discussed within the framework of their engagement with the Orient, perhaps because their fundamental messiness, their ambivalences and biases, defy facile categorization. One cannot argue these texts unequivocally lay claim to an anticolonial, anti-racist alliance with the Middle East, for example. This is not the story of the way in which African Americans recognized in the peoples of the Orient a resonant set of subjugations and marginalizations, and what is actually expressed in these texts does not fit neatly in an ideology that privileges those kinds of explicit solidarities. Yet my goal here is not simply to fill in certain gaps in the historical record, nor to present a progressive history toward the overt and political anticolonial alliances of the mid-twentieth century. This dissertation, in other words, is not an attempt to "replac[e] one standard with another, albeit, more inclusive standard" (Alcalay 7) but to sift out the ways in which identities and, by extension, communities are constantly in a state of negotiation. Yet also inherent in this project is a complication of the privileging of the alliances of the mid-twentieth century over the ambivalences of the nineteenth. In other words, I resituate the

narrative from a teleological one that contends we have increasingly progressed in our ability to disrupt conventional understandings of national, racial, and sexual categories over time.

For if the Declaration of Independence can be read as a scientific enlightenment text par excellence in its assertion of natural laws and self-evident truths, work in the archive has elucidated that the very ability to recognize these ever so “self-evident” principles in “nature” was a perspective that had to be constructed over time.<sup>16</sup> If prodigious archival work has revealed the way in which racial categories were imagined and codified over time, so too has archival work elucidated the ways in which the substantiation of those categories occurred in ways that defy presentist understandings of them. For example, the legal records of the mid-nineteenth century document the way in which race was, quite literally, performance as much as biology: in court, racial status often hinged as much on lay testimony of how people danced, what churches they attended, and their political behavior as it did medical expert testimony about skin color, hair follicles or nailbeds.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, medical models of sexuality – which emerged conterminously with scientific racism, relatively late in the late nineteenth century – began to differentiate homosexuality from other cross-gender behaviors at the turn of the century as a means toward validating an existing – but shifting – social order by biologizing it.<sup>18</sup> The increased policing of black male sexuality (via the terror of lynching) *after* emancipation, a perhaps counterintuitive suggestion within a narrative predicated on the idea that freedom makes people more free, likewise complicates a progressive narrative.<sup>19</sup> And it wasn’t until 1913 that President Wilson codified the segregation of the U.S. Army into law. Conversely, while

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<sup>16</sup> See Ormiston and Sassower.

<sup>17</sup> See Douglas; Forbes, Gross, Hodes.

<sup>18</sup> George Chauncey has argued that “medical inquiry into deviance” during this period...can be analyzed as a response to particular changes in and challenges to the Victorian sex/gender system such as the women’s movement, the growing visibility of urban gay male subcultures, and the changing gender culture of the economy” (90). See also D’Emilio and Freedman 121-130; Somerville.

<sup>19</sup> See Hodes, Somerville.

the Nation of Islam laid explicit claim to a non-white, non-Western spiritual heritage when it appropriated Islam, the origin story it told – “the notion that black and white people did not come from the same God” (Turner 157) – simply inverted the same “scientific racism” used to justify slavery by hypothesizing that blacks and whites were separate species. What I am trying to say here is that, if we can imagine that groups like the NOI were ostensibly breaking down barriers, it was only because those barriers had to be built up in the first place, and the kind of thinking those barriers relied upon took time to accrete. Nineteenth-century engagement with the Middle East was often tentative, contradictory, and unspectacular; but its understanding of race, sex, and nation were often surprisingly flexible. Thus while we may turn to archives as a collection of artifacts that will allow us to grasp the past, the texts in that archive resist incorporation into the presentist categories and narratives that make them “graspable” in the first place. And since most of the African Americans who wrote about the Orient in the nineteenth century did not have first-hand “knowledge” of it, exploring what they knew about the Orient raises as many questions about how they knew it. The cacophonous voices that emerge – sometimes within the same author – within African American discussion of the Orient existed in a web of signification and reference that resist any one totalizing narrative. I thus do not overwrite a single narrative onto these heterogeneous texts, nor do I present the authors as rebelliously challenging dominating discourses, but rather read empathetically attuned to the way in which these texts produced moments of disorientation and dislocation within a field where they felt (and often literally were) surveilled. Given the space to tell their stories, these primary texts serve as a potent illustration of the way in which people actively come to understand the world not immediately around them – or, perhaps more accurately, the way in which people come to understand their immediate reality through the world not immediately around them – but can also reveal the way in which we bring the assumptions of our own immediate reality onto the past.

Reading these polyvocal negotiations necessitates a parallel theoretical strategy. If this dissertation proposes that African American writing about the Orient in the nineteenth century disrupted and traversed the borders of binaristic ways of understanding the world, then it itself occupies a sort of borderlands of its own. As may be obvious from my engagement with Said's theory of Orientalism from the outset, I am in conversation here with a variety of theoretical frameworks from American Studies to Postcolonial Studies, from Anthropology to Feminist and Queer Theory, from History to Performance Studies. This kind of interdisciplinarity, I would argue, is necessary to negotiate the discordant discourses of the United States as it moved from a fledgling, provincial, and often chaotic nation to a quasi-imperial one marked by "liberal developmentalism"<sup>20</sup> That is to say, if we read the archive with a sensitivity to the way in which the present shapes our reading of the past, it becomes incumbent to contextualize that process within a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. A variety of theoretical frameworks, further, helps to holistically read the socio-political landscape in which these texts participated, the landscape in which their readers read them, and which both readers and text helped to construct.

Yet despite my deep indebtedness to postcolonial theory to contextualize and understand these deorientation acts, I depart in some important ways from the recent critical trend to define the United States *as* postcolonial. I certainly align myself with this critical trend insofar as it makes its mission the revealing of "the diverse ways in which racial hegemony is articulated and maintained" and the ways in which "colonial-racial hierarchy" functions as "a *process* rather than defined and stable condition" (Schueller and Watts 11). I am inspired by the idea that a postcolonial framework clarifies the fact that, "as soon as we stop looking for Americanness" in the early writings of the

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<sup>20</sup> According to Emily Rosenberg, who coined this phrase, liberal developmentalism is marked by five things: 1) belief that other nations could and should replicate America's own developmental experience; 2) faith in private free enterprise; 3) support for free or open access for trade and investment; 4) promotion of free flow of information and culture; and 5) growing acceptance of governmental activity to protect private enterprise and to stimulate and regulate American participation in international economic and cultural exchange" (7).

nation, we fail to find it (Warner 66-67). Nor can I deny that America was, technically, post-colonial. Yet the difficulties in characterizing the United States as postcolonial when it was also, in the most brutal definitions of the word, colonizing are myriad, acknowledged, and cannot be understated, particularly when one situates the revolution as simply one step in an *evolution* where the direction of imperial conditions simply changed hands (Jennings 4). Secondly, I would point to the early nation's sense of history as a complicating factor in the alignment of the United States with other postcolonial societies, which as Franz Fanon has argued, can be marked by a desire to "re-establish sovereignty" (*Wretched* 245) from those they have been colonized under. This sense of "re-establishing sovereignty" is conspicuously absent from American writing. Cathy Davidson has, for example, argued that "Noteworthy in America's postcolonial novels is that England is rarely a site of nostalgia or reactionary longing (even for the most socially conservative American writers). On the other hand, England is hardly ever summoned up as a metaphor for evil oppression either" (22). England (and the rest of the empires from which the United States grew) as an originary site, in other words, is excised. This was a new start, notable for its unprecedented potential: a genesis self-creating and self-fertilizing. What does it mean to be post-colonial when we produced our own "founding fathers"? Likewise, because this dissertation resists a teleological narrative, I question the way in which the prefix "post" serves to reproduce an image of linear progress, particularly by subjugating discrete cultures to a common narrative that occludes the very real ways in which imperialism still exists.

### **On terms, and limitations**

*"Aladdin was a Yankee."*

– G.W. Curtis, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 1 June 1855

My understanding of the concepts of race, gender, and nation as "product[s] of history" rather than "nature" (Fields 152) presents ancillary dilemmas regarding what terms to use when describing them. The most obvious of these is the term "Orient" itself. For the purposes of this study, I use "Orient" to correspond as closely to the nineteenth-century usage as possible, which covered a

diverse region spanning from Turkey on the West through the Indian subcontinent on the East and included the nations of North Africa such as Egypt. As well, nations that we would today think of as firmly “European,” such as the islands of Smyrna and Crete, were heavily Orientalized as part of the Ottoman Empire by nineteenth century authors. But “Orient” is a slippery term, evoking a large cross-section of usage, locations, biases, and emotions. I utilize it here not only because of its historical use within the nineteenth century, and not only to mark this work’s place within a critical heritage of Saidian Orientalism but precisely because of that slipperiness. While few twenty-first century Americans would use the term “Oriental” to refer to any of the nation-states of North Africa, the modern Middle East, or the Indian subcontinent, likewise few even now would be able to precisely define where the borders of North Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent begin and end. In 2011, Egypt as stage for popular uprising and “revolution” becomes marked as distinctly *Arab*, yet as a travel destination of the pyramids and the ancient Nile is more Africanized. Similarly, most distinguish the Indian subcontinent from the Middle East but struggle about where to place Afghanistan, geographical bridge between the two, or Pakistan, indisputably part of the subcontinent geographically but, vis-à-vis a twenty-first century “War on Terror,” imaginatively corralled into the Middle East. Such uncertainties existed in the nineteenth century as they do today. And while it must be said that conflating the Middle East with Islam is erroneous – by no means is every occupant of this region a Muslim, and the desire to equate Arabs with Islam can and has presented dangerous binaries utilized to justify conflict – it is likewise true that popular perceptions then, as now, tended to do so.<sup>21</sup> Even as the African American authors I study here questioned easy binaries, many of their assumptions did rest on a conflation of the many regions of the Orient under one signifier, and an understanding of that region as heathen and primarily Islamic. Malini Johar Schueller has beautifully shown the way in which American Orientalisms did sometimes subtly

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<sup>21</sup> A major distinction to the nineteenth century, however, was the way in which Hinduism was also lumped in with the “heathen” religions of the Orient during the nineteenth century.

diverge depending on the particular portion of the Orient in question, and, when such specificity is required, I employ her designation of “Near Eastern” and “Indic” Orients (x) to refer to what we would now understand as the Middle East and Indian subcontinent specifically. When necessary, I specify further to refer to a “North African” or “Barbary” Orient to identify what nineteenth-century authors would have called the “Barbary states” – Algeria, Morocco, Tripoli, and Tunisia.

But “Orient” is not the only problematic term here. I will not refer to the writings studied here as “marginal” to a “dominant” American discourse, or as a “presence” that threatens the “stability” of that discourse. From their earliest writings African Americans have fought against such a depiction, and rightfully so. James Baldwin’s famous 1965 declaration in *The New York Times* that “I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores” (7 March 1965) was preceded by over one hundred and fifty years in another newspaper, *The Colored American*, whose editor Samuel Cornish declared

Many would rob of us the endeared name “AMERICANS”, a distinction more emphatically belonging to us, than five-sixths of this nation, and one that we will never yield. In complexion, in blood and nativity, we are decidedly more exclusively “American” than our white brethren.... (4 March 1837)

This was not simply an idealized belief of a privileged, educated few, either. Cornish’s view was shared by an elderly black woman at a prayer meeting who poignantly remarked to a correspondent for *The Colored American*, “We have worn ourselves out for the benefit of them, and I think we have a right to this country” (“What Colored People think of Colonization” 10 June 1837). This dissertation reads these writings on their own terms. Thus, I employ the term *dominating* in order to call attention to the ways in which such discourses were not stagnant but were constantly in production, dispersed, questioned, and regulated, again, often via terrorism in the literal meaning of

the word.<sup>22</sup> Further, I hope it calls attention to the ways in which such discourses prevailed by virtue of unequal access to education and print modes.

If the terms of this study must be properly clarified, so too must some of its contours. It is crucial to acknowledge the way in which, for example, this dissertation does not trace out a bilateral relationship. By virtue of its being an exploration of the way in which African Americans imagined and engaged with the Orient, the voices of those in the Middle East, North Africa, and Indian subcontinent do not appear. It cannot be denied that many of the authors studied here, in fact, never had the opportunity to engage with peoples of the Orient even as they worked through whether an ideological affiliation with them was possible or desirable. One could cynically argue, to be sure, that these authors in fact simply *used* the Orient in order to work through their own ambivalences and neuroses about national, sexual, and racial identities. While I would hope this study might inspire work on the discourses on American blackness originating in the nations of the Orient, such an investigation would be well beyond the scope of this one (or any single study, given the heterogeneity of locations). Lastly, while I have within this Introduction provided a somewhat truncated description of African American expressions of Islam in order to contextualize my study within current critical movements, and while I must by necessity engage religion insofar as Islam has historically been part of the overarching framework through which the Orient has been understood by Americans, I will not engage the specific experience of black American Muslims here. I distinguish between African American experiences of Islam in the nineteenth century and their understandings of the Orient particularly because while African Islam de facto had Arabian roots, for most sub-Saharan Africans, Islam was seen as an indigenous African (rather than imported) religion. Thus, the autobiography of Muslim slaves such as Omar Ibn Said and religious tracts by Edward Blyden – though they fall within the years of this study – will not be directly investigated.

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<sup>22</sup> See Bennett; Lepore (*Name of War*); Roediger; Wideman

## Orienting this Study

*“If...it is only a question of squatters’ rights – why, the Mayflower, a pretty venerable institution, landed in the year of Grace 1620, and the first delegation from Africa just one year ahead of that, – in 1619.”*  
– Anna Julia Cooper, *“Has America a Race Problem? If so, How Can It Best Be Solved?”* (1892)

This dissertation begins with the inharmonious, idiosyncratic and ambivalent voices of the African American newspapers in the antebellum period. In order to situate the discourses which those voices disrupted, Chapter One, “‘The Harem Keepers of the South;’ Or, Deorienting Liberty in the Antebellum Black Press,” begins with a brief history of the scientific racism used as “proof” of African Americans’ inherent inability for equality, as well as of the events which made the Orient meaningful to dominating American discourse as a whole. If the Orientalism that pervaded the popular discourse of the new American nation relied upon the binaries of East and West, profligate and righteous, feminine and masculine, then the hundreds of writings of the Orient in the antebellum black press reveal the way in which those binaries were tenuous and unstable.

Chapter Two, “‘The Dogs Provoke Me and the Woman are Veiled:’ Afro-Americans Abroad, 1850-1892,” calls upon two nineteenth century Afro-Americans who utilized conventions of the travel narrative to surprisingly similar ends despite dissimilar pretenses: David Dorr, a slave who traveled around the world with his master (only to escape upon return to the United States) and Amanda Smith, a woman born into slavery who became one of the most popular black female preachers on the nineteenth century and who served as a missionary in Africa and the Indian subcontinent. Both narratives use travel to the Orient to subtly expose the pitfalls and hypocrisies of traditional Euro-American respectability and to question assumptions about race and gender. In other words, Dorr and Smith take what we readers “know” about America and, by taking these truths abroad, deconstruct them. In appropriating a form in which the narrator traditionally takes on a mask of masculine authority and aristocracy to describe the earth that surrounds us “objectively,” Dorr constantly shifts the earth beneath our feet, consistently challenging what we

know about other nations, and also our own. Yet that text was not, as was common of most fugitive slaves, an indictment and exposé of slavery. Rather, it is a sly critique of the myth of “gentility” upon which understandings of whiteness rest. Similarly, in her journey for spiritual perfection, Smith discovers that this perfection is not aided, but directly impaired by the traditional identities offered her by the world. Smith’s bildungsroman reads clearly as a trying on of conventional roles, relationships, and identities before shedding them as she submits herself fully to God’s will.

For the larger community of black women writers at the turn of the twentieth century, understandings of the Orient not only played into the articulation of an African American aesthetic of domesticity and womanhood but also served as a means to confront the domestic conflicts that arose vis-à-vis the politics of race. In Chapter Three, “‘Not one who can’t be white and won’t be black:’ African American Women and the Orient, 1892-1903” I explore the ways in which some of these women – namely Anna Julia Cooper and Frances E.W. Harper – engaged with the Orient as a means toward contextualizing the deorientation acts undertaken by Pauline Hopkins, whose novel *Of One Blood* is, I argue, the first to articulate a diasporic, shared origin between Arabs and African Americans. Hopkins, like Dorr and Smith, destabilizes the very notion of the traditional and accepted from within, throwing off our footing ever so slightly and encouraging in the process a sort of performative self-invention and reinvention of our histories. In *Of One Blood*, Hopkins reveals the unintelligibility of race by teasing out the strands of miscegenation at the foundational level of American culture, but also illustrates the way in which “truth” is contextually defined in order to suggest African Americans have authority over their own stories. The choice to lend a science fiction feel to her novel is a deorientation act: to make fantastic, as it were, the accepted and assumed contrivances and categories of Western ways of seeing.

By the time of the Harlem Renaissance many African American authors conflated the artistic impulses of the African American race with the sumptuousness of Oriental culture. In Chapter Four, “An Orient of One’s Own: Decolonized Subjectivities in the Harlem Renaissance,” I briefly consider the ways in which the Orient was utilized by authors such as Nella Larsen and Claude McKay to disrupt binaristic modes of thinking. I contextualize this development within a burgeoning Pan Africanism movement, a crumbling Ottoman empire, and a relationship between the United States and the Middle East increasingly based on oil, and will ultimately discuss the work which most literally imagines anti-colonial solidarities between Oriental peoples and Afro-Americans: W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Dark Princess*.

Many have studied Du Bois’ involvement in Pan Africanism and his related propensity to, by the 1940s, assert an connection between Africa and the Middle East; in his own words, “the black race appears in both continents in the earliest records, making it doubtful which continent is the point of origin” (*World and Africa* 117). Yet despite the fact that a particular intimacy is implied by Du Bois’ focus on “origin,” many critics have been quick to disregard *Dark Princess* (Du Bois’ self-professed favorite piece of writing) as a “combination of outright propaganda and Arabian tale, of social realism and quaint romance” (Rampersad 204) precisely because of its emphasis on intimacy. Situating the protagonist, Matthew, within a historical context of American women’s writings on seduction and romance, I illustrate the way in which Du Bois uses domestic drama to subvert the conventional narratives America offers its citizens, to illustrate the way in which these narratives cannot accurately contain the identity of its black population, and to propose an alternative subjectivity that might be described as *decolonized*.

### **Reorienting routes and roots**

*“This is an old secret, known to Ethiopia, Egypt and Arabia centuries ago.  
I can reflect the past and the faces of those passed away,  
but the living and the future are cast by the water.”*  
– Pauline Hopkins, *Of One Blood* (1902-1903)

When Frederick Douglass translated his travel diary into the second revision of his third autobiography fifteen years after his travels, he claimed that his journey to Egypt was motivated by an “ethnological purpose,” explaining

I hoped to turn my visit to some account in combating American prejudice against the darker colored races of mankind, and at the same time to raise colored people somewhat in their own estimation and thus stimulate them to higher endeavors. (*Life and Times* 579)

Since the late eighteenth century, African Americans had lay claim to a connection to the splendors of ancient Egypt, a linkage they self-consciously proposed would not only prove their humanity and potential to whites who denied them both, but would also inspire fellow black Americans. Douglass had himself appropriated an Egyptian heritage quite intimately in his second autobiography when he wrote that while his “knowledge” of his mother was somewhat as scanty as his knowledge of his age,

There is in “*Prichard’s Natural History of Man*,” the head of a figure – on page 157 – the features of which so resemble those of my mother, that I often recur to it with something of the feeling which I suppose others experience when looking upon the pictures of dear departed ones. (*Bondage* 52).

This image on page 157 of *Prichard’s Natural History of Man* happens to be Pharaoh Ramses II:

Douglass’ claim, then, is that he can return to the mother from whom he was “so early separated” (*Bondage* 57) via an image of an ancient Egyptian ruler in the pages of an ethnographic history. In so doing, he asserted a very personal sense of ownership over the nascent “science” that was quite candid in its mission to whitewash antiquity from “the particularities of niggerdom” (“Were the Thebans Negroes” *The North Star* 27 June 1850).<sup>23</sup> The assertion of ownership over one of those most celebrated societies of antiquity in a culture that routinely policed access to even basic facts like one’s age was seen as, in and of itself, a resistant act.

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<sup>23</sup> As Josiah Clark Nott, one of the exemplars of the “American school,” argued in direct conversation with *Prichard’s Natural History of Man*, the “savagery and savagism” of “abject” black Africans both precluded ancient greatness (in that they had always been “segregated” from Northern Africa as a result of their indolence and disinterest in colonization or exploration) and established them as “irredeemable” in the future (191).

Yet what is perhaps most interesting about Douglass' framing of his trip to Egypt as primarily "ethnographic" and scholarly in purpose is that it amputates the very palpable sense of astonishment and sentiment of his journals. Gone is the Douglass who could not get over his good fortune for days, the Douglass whose wonder eclipsed his ability to sleep, like the proverbial child on Christmas morning. What is left is a Douglass who, while he briefly acknowledges the romantic sentiments that might propel one toward Egypt, "confess[es]" that it is an altogether "less enthusiastic and sentimental" motive that propels *him* (*Life and Times* 579). This is though he writes that he "enjoyed" his *European* travels "with all the ardor of a boy to whom all the world is new" (*Life and Times* 589). The shift might have reflected certain anxieties about his readership: historically, with travel writing as with slave narrative (both of which appear to have developed as genres at approximately the same time) authenticity was often an issue. Douglass, both ex-slave and traveling scholar, must have been feeling a double pressure to present a narrative that could not be accused of being fictionalized in any way; further, an academic approach allowed him to insist upon his own authority as someone who could "walk the world unquestioned, a man among men" (*Life and Times* 590).<sup>24</sup> Yet why this particular mask for only this particular location? Other shifts from journal to narrative are likewise confounding. Why rewrite the "sable children of the desert" of his journal, who appear to him to "be classed with mulattos and negroes," into, simply, "men of the desert?" How to explain the shift from "genuine Negroes" to "half brothers to the Negro," a fraternity defined primarily in terms of a cheerful work "disposition" rather than (biological) race? And if the racial distance between Arabs and black Americans grows in the translation to published work, why do Arabs simultaneously become less like "wild fowl" and more like "erect and strong, lean and sinewy" stallions (*Life and Times* 581)? In other words, what pressures and motives compelled Douglass to portray Arabs much more positively than dominating American discourse

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<sup>24</sup> See Braxton and Heglar for a cogent examination of the way in which Douglass had performed this type of masculinity authority in his earlier narratives.

but also eliminate evidence, at the level of the skin, of kinship with African Americans? It is possible to conjecture that Douglass may have been resistant to reproducing racist categories and instead found more beneficial the construction of an alliance based on an ability to find *joy* in the mundane. In other words, he may have been attempting to deorient quasi-“scientific” or naturalized “truths” as a marker of connection. But there is not enough material to support this. What is more interesting, to my mind, is the way in which these gaps and elisions, these surprises and ambivalences, alert us to the ever-shifting processes through which African Americans made sense of the Orient – and also of themselves. That Douglass would return to the United States and seven years later coincidentally use the remaining pages of his travel diary in order to scrawl, in note form, hints he found during domestic travels that might allow him to finally ascertain his age is a poignant testimony to the ways in which our impressions of others are always implicated in the way we know ourselves. It is a powerful reminder of the ways in which reading practices sensitive to the multiple positionalities of texts become necessary. Like Douglass returning to the record of his travel to reconstruct his age, we must be continuously vigilant about how we read the texts we return to when we piece together our own.

## Chapter One

### **“The Harem Keepers of South;” Or, Deorienting Liberty in the Antebellum Black Press**

*“Reader, this is not a fictitious picture. It is not an Algerine scene.  
It is a picture – a true picture – of the country founded by the Pilgrim Fathers,  
and made ‘free’ (!) by their sons in seventy-six.”  
“J.C.H.,” *The North Star* (1848)*

John Murdock, native Philadelphian and hairdresser, was “disgusted.” It was 1795, nearly twenty years after his country had declared its freedom from England, and all the theaters still staged plays entirely “foreign to the circumstances of a republican people.” Not only were those of the artisan classes – the very same people who had served to liberate their nation – forced to sit the gallery of the theater, they were also forced to watch plays written by upper-class whites about upper-class whites who, in his opinion, complacently aped the manners of those from whom they had just claimed to distinguish themselves. And so he set about to write his own play, one that would “be more consonant to the ears of Americans” (Murdock Preface to *The Beau Metamorphized* iv): *The Triumphs of Love, or the Happy Reconciliation*. Set in parlors, stables and taverns and featuring a motley assortment of characters from Quakers to Revolutionary War heroes to Haitian refugees to Irish servants, Murdock’s play took on a plethora of contemporaneous themes from the Whiskey Rebellion to Philadelphia’s yellow fever epidemic to the rise of party politics. Yet the overarching plot of *The Triumphs of Love* was exactly what its title suggested: the powers of love in forming the peculiar character of American men. Our earliest glimpse of protagonist George Friendly finds him blithely singing “I’ll kiss and hug / And shake a brogue / Like a merry, merry rogue, / But hang me if I marry. / No, no, Harry hang me if I marry – unless I could have a thousand wives” (Murdock *Triumphs* 17). Friendly croons this tune immediately after teasing his friend, the equally unsubtly named Major Manly, for an extravagant and extended soliloquy on the unprecedented freedoms of their new nation. Friendly’s rather un-American jests about polygamy are presented as betraying the

ethical and moral obligations of those who, according to Murdock, live within the “pur[e]...civil and religious liberty” the nation offers (Murdock *Triumphs* 17). But Friendly’s ultimate marriage proposal to (white) Haitian refugee Clementina, who has been “stripped of the remnant” of her “fortune” by “cruel pirates” (Murdock *Triumphs* 70) at the end of the play represents his full internalization of American values; there is no “more god-like act” (Murdock *Triumphs* 75) than granting “asylum,” in critic Ashli White’s words, “for the distressed, beautiful, and suppliant” (46).

But Clementina’s is not the only suffering that Friendly alleviates within the trajectory of the play. Earlier in the narrative, he overhears his black slave Sambo lament his own confined life and his uncertain fate should his good master die, and announces:

The untutored, pathetic soliloquy of that honest creature, has more sensibly affected me, than all I have read, or thought, on that barbarous, iniquitous slave-trade....It is cruel. It is unjust, for one creature to hold another in a state of bondage for life. Sambo, thou shalt be free. (Murdock *Triumphs* 52).

In this scene, Murdock provided his nation with the first abolitionist act that would be performed on its stage and, in fact, in Sambo produced the first representation of an African American slave in U.S. theater. This act of manumission incites another wish in Friendly, however; immediately after freeing Sambo, he casually muses: “Would to heaven, I could as easily liberate our fellow-citizens, who are slaves in Algiers” (Murdock *Triumph* 52). This moment reveals the way that these two facts – the enslavement of Africans within the United States and the enslavement of Americans captured by North African pirates – were inherently entwined in the minds of some early American citizens and thus offer a glimpse of the significance the Orient may have held for African Americans in the early days of the American nation. In this chapter, I will trace the contours of this relationship as it was imagined by African Americans themselves in the pages of the early African American press. After a brief consideration of the events through which the Orient captured the imagination of the American populace at large – the Barbary wars, the establishment of Egyptology, and the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire – I will explore the no less than two-hundred and twenty articles that were

published by four of the most successful antebellum periodicals between the years 1827 and 1860. These newspapers – *Freedom’s Journal*, the first African American owned and operated periodical, *The Colored American*, *The North Star*, and *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* – serve as an interesting case study for the ways in which some free African Americans worked through and within a dominating Euro-American framework of Orientalism. The position the African American press took with regards to the Orient was both ambivalent and ever-evolving, and potently illustrative of the way in which people actively maneuver within a familiar logic, vocabulary, and set of symbols that meaningfully “speak” to others, sometimes in order to disrupt that same logic. In so doing they neither and both submitted to and opposed the fictive national interlocutor that was in the process of being imagined and was being situated oppositionally to both the Orient and the nation’s black population.<sup>25</sup> The polyvocality of these articles complicate understandings of U.S. Orientalism as a “triadic encounter in which the Africanist and Native American presences returned to haunt and question the cultural and political hegemony of the New World” (Schueller *US Orientalisms* 10); in other words, the pages of the antebellum press disrupt the idea of a cultural and political hegemony “haunted” by its own instability and instead demonstrates that such a hegemony was inherently unstable. Antebellum blacks, who insisted they not only deserved inclusion in the West but had fundamentally constructed it (vis-à-vis their toil as slaves), did not simply “replicat[e] Anglo-American practices” of making meaning (Obenzinger 230). If the dominating sense of Orientalism that pervaded the popular discourse of the new American nation relied upon the binaries of East and West, profligate and righteous, feminine and masculine, then the writings about the Orient that litter the pages of the antebellum black press inform us about how one makes meaning about one’s self and others when those binaries collapse.

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<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Murdock’s justification for his heterogeneous cast of characters is evidence of the awareness on the part of some Americans that this fictive embodiment of the American nation was in the process of being constructed.

**“Unquestionably the most interesting portion of our globe”<sup>26</sup>**

It might perhaps come as a surprise to some Americans that the longest unbroken treaty in U.S. history is the Moroccan-American Treaty of Friendship, first signed in 1787 and renegotiated in 1836. Sultan Sidi Muhammad Ibn Abdallah, whether because he felt the need to cultivate new markets after the American Revolution had reduced traffic to Morocco’s ports or because he desired to inspire Americans to enter into a relationship with Morocco directly rather than France (from whom the United States had requested naval protection against Morocco and the other Barbary States), had informally included the United States on a list of nations to which its ports were open in 1777. That inclusion, formalized in the 1787 treaty, made Morocco the first country to publicly recognize the American colonies as a unified, and sovereign, nation. Nor do most Americans know that an original line of the Star-Spangled Banner, a poem written by Francis Scott Key commemorating American victory against Muslim Tripoli in the first Barbary War and set to an old drinking song, read

And pale beam’d the Crescent, its splendor obscur’d  
By the light of the star-spangled flag of our nation,  
Where each faming star gleam’d a meteor of war,  
And *the turban’d head bowed* to the terrible glare (“Song;” italics mine)

But the links between the United States and the countries of the Middle East predate this recognition and in fact predate the United States entirely: another uncelebrated fact is that the Americas were “discovered” by Columbus not because the Spanish sovereigns Ferdinand and Isabella admired his sense of adventure and audacity, as some elementary-school textbooks would have us believe, but primarily because they hoped a new trade route *to* the Indic-Orient would ensure a steady stream of capital to continue funding their religious war *against* the Muslims they had driven from Granada and into the North African Orient of Morocco and Algiers. One might say,

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<sup>26</sup> “Asia.” *The Colored American* 2 May 1840.

then, that the United States has been linked to the Middle East since before the idea of the United States was even articulated.

By the time of American independence, however, many European nations were locked in a conflict with the states of the Barbary Coast – Tripoli, Algiers, Morocco, and Tunis – whose pirates systematically attacked the merchant ships of weaker nations, such as Denmark, Sweden, and Italy, often taking those aboard as slaves. Meanwhile, British, Dutch, and French ships escaped harm, largely by “paying tribute” to such nations, essentially bribing them into attacking their competitors. As British colonies, America had remained under the protection of the most powerful navy in the world, and thus had remained cheerfully content with such injustice. But one of the prices that came with independence was, of course, independence. No longer part of the British Empire, the United States was denied not only British protection, but access to the British ports in the West Indies – a lost market that necessitated alternatives in the Mediterranean and East Asia. The new nation, whose primary natural resource was the sea and who was thus dependent on foreign trade for revenue, initially appealed to France for protection, but when that failed, tribute to the Barbary States seemed the only option. Few Americans supported the idea of another war so soon after their own expensive revolution, and believed, like John Adams, that the one-time gift of “two hundred Thousand Pounds” was worth the “Million annually” they would gain from trade with the East (Allison 10). But others of the early nation, most notably Thomas Jefferson, staunchly opposed the idea of tribute and saw it as incompatible with a American identity predicated on ideals of liberty and righteousness. Jefferson remained deeply invested in articulating and dispersing this understanding. In 1802, the President even co-translated a American edition of French philosopher Abbé Constantin François de Chasseboeuf Volney’s *The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empire*, a text which argued that the decline of the ancient Egyptian and Syrian empires was a result of Muslim religious and political despotism. *The Ruins* served as a warning for the new nation, and increasingly

what had begun as an economic and geopolitical conflict over “trade routes” and “territory” was translated into an ideological “contest between Christians and Muslims, between Europeans and Turks or Moors, and ultimately, between what came to be called civilizations and what the newly civilized world would define as barbarism” (Allison xv). This was to become, in many ways, a American foreign policy with staying power: the framing of economic and security concerns as cultural and moral obligations.

Publications about the Orient, from the dreamy tales of the *Arabian Nights* to Algerian captivity narratives, from histories to travel narratives (which I will explore in more detail in Chapter Two), both helped to create and were created by this political stage, and were voraciously consumed by the American public during the early national period and well into the antebellum. Captain James Riley’s 1817 account, for example, was just one of over one hundred Barbary captivity accounts published. It alone sold nearly a million copies and was reputed to have lasting significance throughout the nineteenth century, later helping to shape future president Abraham Lincoln’s stance on slavery (Baepler “White Slaves” 91). In the 1790s these exoticized and ahistorical descriptions of the despotic Orient certainly did not hurt support for the first Barbary War, which was finally declared in 1805 under Jefferson’s presidency. In much of the contemporary writings that followed, Americans, a fifth of whose population was slaves, imagined the war with (and subsequent victory over) Tripoli as part and parcel of the construction of a new American identity, distinct not only from the corrupted “Old World” from whom they had freed themselves but also from a dissolute, slave-holding Muslim world.

It must be noted that not all American authors ignored this paradox. Writers as diverse as polymath Benjamin Franklin, playwright and Chief Justice of Vermont Royall Tyler, and bestselling novelist, playwright, and actress Susanna Rowson all condemned with varying transparency the hypocrisy of bemoaning the condition of U.S. captives in Algeria while refusing to acknowledge

“where and how the War of Independence had remained glaringly incomplete” (Montgomery 615) in terms of African slaves. In Rowson’s 1794 play *Slaves in Algiers, or a Struggle for Freedom* the analogies between Americans enslaved in the Orient and those enslaved in America are veiled; Franklin used parody to undermine American proslavery arguments by writing a speech as the “divan of Algiers” (517); Tyler’s fictitious Algerine captive explicitly compared his treatment to that of Africans enslaved in America and swore that “every moment of” his life would “be dedicated to preaching against” the latter “detestable commerce” if ever he was released (106). By and large, however, these and other authors relied on the particular binaristic understanding of the Oriental world outlined in the Introduction.

As the nineteenth century continued, the Barbary Wars (the second of which occurred in 1815) were not the only situation that galvanized American interest in the Orient. For early Americans who saw themselves as fulfilling a covenant to the Judeo-Christian god, the “Holy Land” of Ottoman Palestine found itself implicitly within the “mythic core” of this “New Israel” (Obenzinger 3). And as the colonial period gave way to the early national and antebellum, another piece of the Orient was woven through the construction of American identity; as black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois mused in 1946, “it is especially significant that the science of Egyptology arose and flourished at the very time that the cotton kingdom reached its greatest power on the foundation of American Negro slavery” (*World and Africa* 99). Interest in Egypt for Americans had, in fact, commenced with Napoleon Bonaparte’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, which many authors at the time connected to their own expansion westward, analogizing the Mississippi and Nile (Trafton 16). But U.S. writers at the time also used ancient Egypt as a metaphor for their own fledgling nation not only in its imperial power but also as a warning against the religious despotism that had resulted in Egypt’s demise. For the colonists had brought with them an ideological framework that read the “mutability” of ancient empires – and particularly, the history of Rome – as a cautionary tale of

corruption and avarice. Ancient Egypt served this purpose particularly well because, as Du Bois would point out in the twentieth century, it allowed for a constitutive intricacy of the fledgling nation to be woven into that narrative: race (Trafton 36).

Indeed, interest in Egypt both grew out of and generated the emergence of what would come to be called the “American school” of ethnography. This “racial science” was the U.S. twist on a narrative that had begun in 1767, with Carl Linnaeus’s taxonomy of the natural world, which had classified humans into one of five physiognomic categories (the last being mythical): the *Americanus*, the *Asiaticus*, the *Africanus*, the *Europeanus*, and the *Monstrosus*. 1775 saw the publication of German physician and anthropologist Johann Blumenbach’s *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* and its proposal of monogenism, which dominated as the prevailing theory of racial difference in the eighteenth century. Monogenism argued that humans were members of the same species who had descended from a common ancestry, which usefully coincided with the Biblical creation story of Genesis and the belief that all humans had been descended from Adam and Eve. Racial differences in this narrative were ascribed to environmental differences, though this is not to say that monogenists believed in racial equality. Rather, many believed that though all men had originated from the same (white) race, other races had “degenerated” from that origin. The “American school,” on the other hand, espoused polygenism, a theory first articulated in the early nineteenth century and which gained momentum in the 1840s and 50s, bolstered (ostensibly) by the subsequent Darwinian innovation of evolutionary biology. Polygenism argued that different races were in actuality distinct species with biological divergences. Both camps, it perhaps need not be stated, rested on the assumption that the body was a text that could be decoded “objectively” by the scientific method, and what was decoded unsurprisingly supported hegemonic ideologies; as Nancy Stepan and Sander Gilman write, “The concepts within racial science” at this time “were so

congruent with social and political life (with power relations, that is) as to be virtually uncontested” (74).

The significance of Egypt in these debates was illustrated by a leading American polygenist Samuel George Morton’s twin craniometrical monographs, *Crania America; or A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America* (1839) and *Crania Ægyptica* (1844). The two studies, which took measurements of various skulls as its primary evidence, sought to establish the superiority of Caucasians above all other racial types, but even in the allegedly American study Morton seemed unusually invested in the racial origins of ancient Egyptians in particular. His second study, meanwhile, strove to conclusively prove that ancient Egyptian rulers were in fact Caucasian while the “social position” of blacks “in ancient times” was “the same” as it was in the antebellum U.S.: “that of servants and slaves” (Morton qtd in Schueller 37). This reading of Egypt served to justify American’s own race-based slavery yet also found itself implicitly in conflict with another popular story of the origins of slavery. Specifically, proslavery advocates had long pointed to the following prophecy written in the Old Testament to justify African American bondage:

And Noah began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard. And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without...And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. (Genesis 9:20-27)

Though the passage had left biblical scholars with questions for centuries (What did Ham do unto Noah? What are the implications that he “saw the nakedness of his father”? How had Noah known what “his younger son had done unto him”? Was Noah at fault for being intoxicated? And why had Noah curse Canaan rather than Ham?), by the 1830s, the conflation of the Canaanites with African American slaves was a common trope in proslavery literature. Augustin Calmet’s *Dictionary of the Holy Bible*, a text that enjoyed seven printings in America by the 1830s, seems to have been the first

work which explicitly connected Ham with blackness and slavery and by the mid-nineteenth century it was a common for proslavery voices to assert that “the negroes, the descendants of Ham, lost their freedom through the abominable wickedness of their progenitor” (Dalcho *Practical Considerations* 10). Yet to adhere to this scriptural reading was to undermine the idea that ancient Egyptians were white, since the Canaanites were said to have founded Egypt. Thus, Egyptologists like Morton and his colleague George R. Gliddon went through long discursive negotiations to maintain that Canaan had in fact been white, even though such reasoning undermined the biblical justification for black slavery. But “Even at its whitest,” in Scott Trafton’s apt words, “Egypt cast a dark shadow...Egypt was white but blasphemously pagan, Egypt was white but decadent and doomed to destruction, Egypt was white but succumbed to amalgamation” (9). Thus Egypt became a multivalent sign with which both white and, as I will show, black Americans were invested.

America’s antebellum period also saw the slow destabilization of what we would know now as “the Middle East” through the gradual weakening of the Ottoman Empire. The seemingly endless upheaval – from Greek revolt against Turkish rule starting in 1821 to the Crimean War of 1854-1856, when Franco-British forces helped Turkey to defend present-day Romania from the Russians – was consistently reported in the American press. Like the Barbary Wars, these conflicts were often framed in moral terms significant to America’s own identity: for example, the Greek rebellion was imagined as a clash between liberty-loving Christians on the one hand and despotic Turks on the other. Behind this rhetoric, however, were economic incentives that did not always correspond neatly to that discourse; in the case of Greece, for example, the U.S. withheld aid because it feared that getting involved would “undermine” its objections to “European conquests in the Western Hemisphere” (Oren 110), not to mention threaten its expanded trade with Turkey. Regardless, that one of the most popular pieces of mid-century American art was Hiram Powers’ sculpture, “the Greek Slave” reveals the way in which this conflict inflected American self-

articulation. The statue depicted a lovely Greek maiden, unclothed except for a cross and locket, chained, and (audiences were told) under the gaze of a sexually avaricious Turkish master.

Audiences lauded the statue as the most “beautiful and faultless representation of ‘the human form divine’” (*National Intelligencer* 25 August 1847) and were awed by its moral affect on audiences:

Its presence is a magic circle within whose precincts all are held spell-bound and almost speechless. The gray-headed man, the youth, the matron and the maid, alike yield themselves to the magic of its power, and for many minutes gaze upon it in silent and reverential admiration.... those who come to speak learnedly and utter ecstasies of dilettantism slink into corners where alone they may silently gaze in pleasing penance for their audacity, and groups of women hover together as if to seek protection from the power of their own sex's beauty. (*The Courier and Enquirer* 31 August 1847).

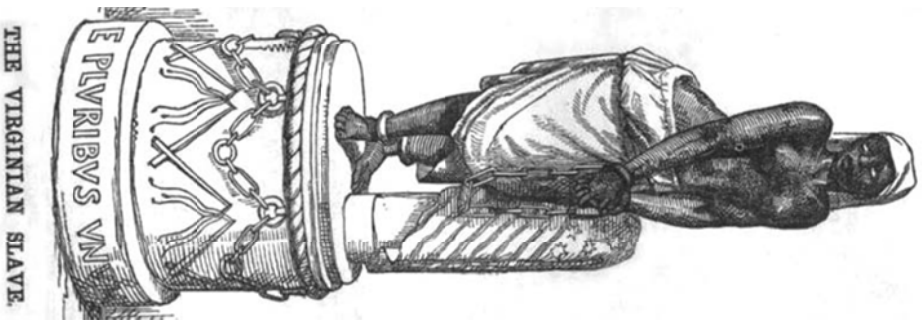
As was par for the course with antebellum America, however, with the exception of the occasional abolitionist review, none of these accolades mention the way in which the spectacular whiteness of the statute served to effectively elide the black bodies enslaved in the South.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the sculpture was chosen to represent America at the Great Exposition in England in 1851, a choice of whose irony black American authors were well aware. Williams Wells Brown, for example, notoriously placed a copy of English satirical magazine *Punch*'s parody of the sculpture, “The Virginian Slave,” next to the statue while visiting the exhibition (Knadler “At Home in the Crystal Palace” 348) while David Dorr, a slave who traveled around the world with his master, argued that America’s exhibition at the fair was composed of “all the worthless trash to be found in the States,” including “everything that was a prevailing disgrace to our country except slaves” (20). Given that the U.S.’s most famous contribution was in fact the statue of a slave, such a comment can only be taken sardonically. That the United States chose to represent itself to the world with a representation of a white, Christian woman enslaved by a licentious Oriental master while its own country struggled with slavery is an appropriately poignant testament to the way in which Americans wove the Orient into its articulations of its national and racial identities. That it seemingly imagined its self-articulation could

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<sup>27</sup> See also Brody, 67-73; Kasson 180-181; Logan 131.



Left: "The Greek Slave." Sculpture by Hiram Powers, 1851, copy from the 1841 original, marble



Right: "The Virginian Slave." *Punch* 20 (1851): 236.

rest on easy binaries, thus eliding its own “native drama” of slavery, in John Murdock’s words, was an assumption the black press nearly neurotically worked throughout the antebellum period.

**“He who has endured the cruel pangs of Slavery is the man to advocate Liberty”<sup>28</sup>**

Given the plethora of ways in which early Americans appeared to be invested in both the political situations and cultural implications of the Orient, then, one might not be surprised to find exoticized anecdotes such as the following to appear in American periodicals of the time:

The Turkish women are beautiful, though their beauty is of a different character from that of European females ... The first [Turkish woman] presented was in her fourteenth year, she was elegantly dressed, her face was covered with a veil, through which her blue eyes... shone like stars piercing a dark cloud.... at the command of her master, she walked backward and forward in the tent to shew her fine shape, and the easiness of her carriage... Her attractive charms won the heart of my German friend, who purchased this lovely girl.... (“Turkish Women” *FJ* 9 January 1829)

What one might not expect, however, is that such a description would be reprinted in the early *black* American press, by editors who were often “reproach[ed]... as exoticks” within the land of their birth themselves (“Title of this Journal” *CA* 4 March 1837). What did it mean that the black press could reprint an article portraying the sale of a young Turkish girl when the lives of so many African Americans were dictated by an auction block of their own? That black Americans appropriated the racial discourse of Anglo-Americans when speaking of certain peoples while simultaneously attempting to disprove such discourse in relation to themselves has been explored by Patrick Rael, who writes, “Blacks... who could not speak a common language with their oppressors... could not hope to change their oppressors’ mind” (16-17). Yet what one discovers on the pages of the antebellum black press is that black Americans never fully internalized such racist discourse, even in terms of an orientalized imagination. Often denied recognition as human, let alone American, African Americans could not wholeheartedly accept the oppositional – or copper-and-white, in their words – model of Orientalism. If for white Americans the Orient provided “an inverted image of

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<sup>28</sup> “Our Paper and its Prospects.” *The North Star* 3 December 1847.

the world that Americans were trying to create” (Allison xvii), the rest of this chapter is the study of the systematic explosion of an inversion. If American identity was discursively constructed as antithetical to all things Oriental, but also simultaneously imagined as *not black*, what kind of identity could black Americans construct? Could they too conceive of themselves in antithesis to the Orient, or did there exist an inherent solidarity between black Americans and Arabs as being *not white*? How could they make meaning about others to whom they only had access through what they knew too well was a racist lens? These antebellum newspapers become a locus of deorientation: a body of texts that document process rather than product, a palimpsest that presents a subjectivity that deliberately and explicitly traversed the borders of racial and national identity as they had been traditionally conceived.

By 1861, there were in publication at least thirty-eight black-owned and –operated newspapers in circulation (Washburn 23). While these newspapers provide a fruitful archive to reconstruct the way in which black Americans made sense of the world around them during the antebellum period, however, they also present some peculiar stumbling blocks. For a twenty-first century researcher, not least of these difficulties is the teleological assumption that the function of “the news” has always been to disseminate the news, and to do so “objectively.” But this assumption would be foreign to nineteenth-century American readers, writers, politicians, and editors who understood newspapers to be a particularly partisan form that prioritized the reporting of current events equally with “private letters, tall tales, anecdotes, poems, and other literary items” (Coward 14). The agenda of newspapers, as it were, was often made explicit in its motto: compare *The New York Times*’ 1896-instituted “All the news that’s fit to print” with *The North Star*’s 1847 “Right is of no Sex - Truth is of no Color - God is the Father of us all, and we are all brethren.” French intellectual Alexis de Tocqueville, upon traveling in the early Republic, marveled that there was “hardly a hamlet in America without its newspaper” and importantly noted that this allowed

“political life” to “circulate in every corner of that vast land” (qtd in Pasley 2). As the oft-cited Benedict Anderson has shown, print played a fundamental and formative role in the consolidation of nationalisms and its power was taken particularly to heart by the early Americans who were attempting to condense a national identity out of several empires, and who had declared that nation’s independence via two written texts. Scholar Robert A. Ferguson claims that “No generation” before or since these early Americans “has looked more carefully to the written word for identity” (qtd in McHenry 42) and this was certainly not lost on the early African American editors for whom literacy served as evidence of their worth as potential citizens but their very humanity at all. Thus the articles African American press made their agenda clear from the outset. As *The Colored American* spelled out, they strove, first, to speak out against slavery and prejudice; second, to unite the scattered free communities into “one heart and...one mind;” third, to promote sympathy and understanding with white folk; and fourth, to represent themselves rather than allow others to speak for them (“Why we should have a Paper” *CA* 4 March 1837).

But the underlying ideological function of these early newspapers is not the only complication the researcher must take into account. Like most of the American newspapers at the time, the African American press lacked dedicated writing staffs and few of the correspondents were “professional” journalists or writers; more often, they were simply engaged in political struggle – whether “officially” as politicians, intellectuals, or religious authorities, or simply because they imagined that such engagement was their civic responsibility. Most wrote under pseudonyms or anonymously, either as a holdover of the genteel tradition, to conceal the fact that the editor was serving as author (though such a practice was common and often assumed), or as an act of self-protection. Complicating matters even further was the lack of copyright fees and regulations, which meant that African American editors, like their white counterparts, republished pieces from other newspapers or books without attribution as a matter of course. The role of the editor in the

nineteenth century, then, was often a sort of anthologist or curator just as often as it was what we would today think of as an editor. Because the vast archive of the African American antebellum press has remained largely unexplored – whether because the short-lived, small-scale nature of most of these newspapers meant they did not survive the nineteenth century completely intact or because of continued critical bias – the majority of the articles printed on its pages remain unattributed even in 2011. Most of these periodicals remain unindexed; understandably, then, much of the research surrounding the black antebellum press has been focused on the necessary work of reconstructing histories and narratives on a macro-level.<sup>29</sup> For the most part, critical interest in ascertaining the origins of most of the articles appearing in these newspapers – barring a few “exceptional” pieces – has not been considerable.<sup>30</sup> Thus, while it is somewhat less arduous to determine whether pieces were reprints from white Anglo-American periodicals – particularly since many of those Anglo-American periodicals have been digitized – it is a good deal more challenging to conclude with any certainty whether the authors of original pieces in the black press were composed by a man or a woman, a black American or a white one. Indeed, a letter to the editor of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* cautions us against making assumptions about the readers and writers of these newspapers when the author begins a sentence late in his article, with no prior hints to this fact, “White man though I be...” (“Colorphobia” *NS* 6 July 1849). Indeed, it has been suggested that white subscribers to these newspapers far outnumbered black ones (though, it must also be noted that black readers, as artfully shown by Elizabeth McHenry, often read in communities as a matter of course). What might be

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<sup>29</sup> See Dann; Hutton; Penn; Pride; Simmons; Vogel. Jacqueline Bacon’s *Freedom’s Journal: The First African American Newspaper*, published in 2007, is a welcome addition to the field in that it provides a detailed analysis of the content of that paper.

<sup>30</sup> See Frances Smith Foster’s “Forgotten Manuscripts: How Do You Solve a Problem Like Theresa?” for a discussion of the difficulties inherent in studying the antebellum African American press and in particular in identifying the authors printed therein.

safely assumed, however, is that the article in some way spoke to what each editor saw as the mission of his paper.<sup>31</sup>

The oldest of the newspapers I investigate here is *Freedom's Journal*, the first newspaper to be established and printed by African Americans. The group who founded the paper was composed of educated black Bostonians and New Yorkers and included David Walker, whose infamous 1829 *Appeal To the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America* was both clearly influenced by the writings on the pages of *Freedom's Journal*, and, conversely, influenced the writings which appeared on the pages of *Freedom's Journal*. The first issue was printed on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March, 1827, with Reverend Samuel Cornish presiding as senior editor and John B. Russwurm serving as junior editor. That the paper was largely concerned with race may not come as a surprise; for modern readers, however, what may be more astonishing is that its writings only very rarely dealt explicitly with slavery. It would, in fact, be erroneous to label the paper as abolitionist, though it was implicitly so; rather its focus was to actively rewrite black identity – and, specifically, free black identity. As Cornish and Russwurm wrote in the inaugural edition, “We wish to plead our own cause....Too long has the publick been deceived by misrepresentations” (“To Our Patrons” *FJ* 16 March 1827). Self-representation served a two-fold role. It attempted to correct misperceptions about the nature of black identity held by the white majority, as this line illustrates, but it also actively helped to *create* such identity. This is apparent simply from the initial tagline of the paper: “Righteousness Exalteth a Nation.” Cornish and Russwurm hoped that in providing examples of righteous behavior – or, conversely, examples of unrighteous behavior that met its just deserts –

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<sup>31</sup> Alternatively, articles may also have been chosen with an eye toward sales. That being said, many of these editors, at least explicitly, were quite vocal about their antipathy toward profit-motivated practices in the newspaper industry, a sentiment, according to Frankie Hutton, one does not see among contemporaneous Anglo-American editors (43-44). *The Colored American*, for example, railed “Surely it is an awful sight to behold THE PRESS, especially the daily press, in the hands of ignorant, paltry, money-making individuals, who will sell their souls for MONEY!” (“To Our Correspondents” *CA* 21 January 1837). Antebellum black newspaper editors were insistent that their responsibility was to print articles corresponding to “the interests of the community” rather than “self interest” (*The Weekly Advocate* 21 January 1837), a sentiment which may have contributed to their failure from a financial perspective.

would uplift the race. Yet it is important to note that the tagline does not claim “Righteousness Exalteth a Race,” “Righteousness Exalteth the Africans,” or “Righteousness Exalteth the Free Black Community.” Rather, elevation of the blacks, as envisioned by Cornish – who clearly conceived of this tagline<sup>32</sup> – would serve the entire nation of the United States, for the black community was an integral piece of the American puzzle. As the editors explained in the inaugural issue, “We form a spoke in the human wheel, and it is necessary that we should understand our pendance on the different parts, and theirs on us” (“To Our Patrons” *FJ* 16 March 1827). It has been suggested, in fact, that Cornish left *Freedom’s Journal* and founded *The Colored American* largely because of this conviction.<sup>33</sup> Cornish and Russwurm, the latter of whom ultimately emigrated to Liberia, appear to have fundamentally disagreed over the issue of African American colonization to Africa, which many black Americans (Cornish included) saw as a white strategy to rid the nation of the free black presence. Although this may be apocryphal given the lack of documentation of this conflict, it is clear that after Cornish’s resignation in September of 1827 *Freedom’s Journal* began to publish much more positive articles about the possibilities of African colonization, and, meanwhile, that *The Colored American* became more explicit in its attacks on colonization as an “induce[ment]” of “one citizen to banish another, without crime, from the land of his birth and the graves of his fathers” (“Questions and Answers” *CA* 4 March 1837).<sup>34</sup>

Originally named *The Weekly Advocate*, *The Colored American* was founded in 1837 by Phillip A. Bell, who had originally worked for arguably the most famous abolitionist newspaper in America, William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator*, and who after founding *The Colored American* went on to

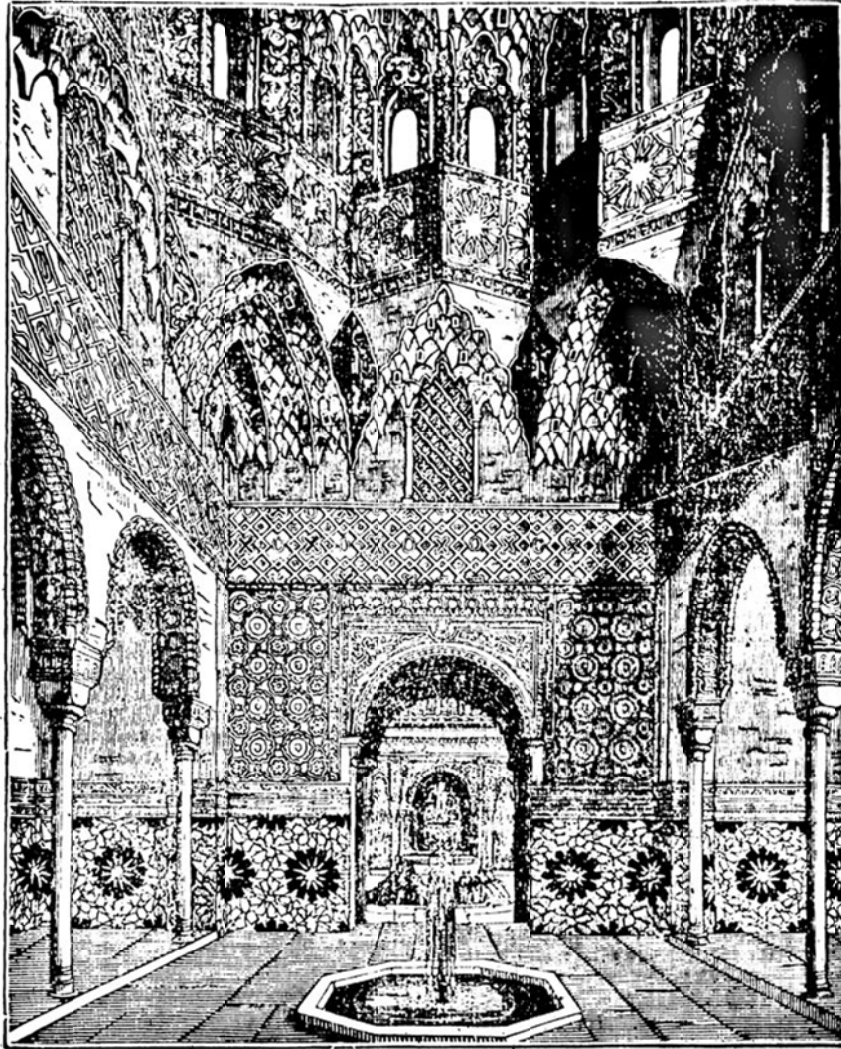
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<sup>32</sup> This is evidenced by the fact that it is conspicuously absent from *Freedom’s Journal* after his resignation in September 1827, and later reappears on *The Rights of All* and *The Colored American* nee *The Weekly Advocate*, two journals on which Cornish also served as editor.

<sup>33</sup> See Hutton; Washburn.

<sup>34</sup> Jacqueline Bacon argues that colonization was an unlikely catalyst for the dissolving of their editorial partnership (56), claiming that Cornish appeared “surprised” when Russwurm announced his support for colonization in 1829, nearly two years after Cornish stepped down as editor (55).

PICTORIAL ILLUSTRATIONS  
OF THE  
BIBLE



CHAMBER OF IMAGERY, ABENCERAGES

From "Chamber of Imagery, Abencerages." *The Colored American* 4 September 1841.

establish two of the most vital newspapers of the American West, *The Pacific Appeal* and *The Elevator*. *The Colored American* took on much of the same mission and structure as *Freedom's Journal* but as Elizabeth McHenry has suggested, “assumed a different kind of readership” and as a result conducted “sophisticated debates...largely replacing the sensational domestic tragedies and international trivia that had padded the columns” of its predecessor (106). Indeed, while much of the information about the Orient found on the pages of *Freedom's Journal* tended toward the pithy, amusing, and anecdotal, *The Colored American* favored prolonged ethnographic and biblical studies of the region, often with large pictures accompanying them. *The Colored American* ran until 1841 when, like most of the black newspapers at the time, it succumbed to the pressures of what was essentially non-profit publishing paired with difficulty obtaining advertising and a readership that often read (and thus purchased) communally.

By the 1840s and 50s, as Irving Garland Penn has suggested, “no paper was considered of much importance without the name of” fugitive slave and intellectual Frederick Douglass “connected with it” (63) and the last two newspapers studied in this chapter were both Douglass vehicles: first, *The North Star*, a weekly newspaper which began publication out of Rochester, New York in 1847 and was co-edited by Douglass and early proponent of black nationalism Martin R. Delany, and, second, *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, which merged *The North Star* and *The Liberty Party Paper* and which Douglass edited with junior editor William J. Watkins. Unlike *Freedom's Journal* and *The Colored American*, the mission of *The North Star* explicitly included abolitionist goals: in its inaugural issue, Douglass wrote that the paper meant to

attack SLAVERY in all its forms and aspects, advocate UNIVERSAL EMANCIPATION; exalt the standard of PUBLIC MORALITY; promote the moral and intellectual improvement of the colored people; and hasten the day of FREEDOM to the THREE MILLION of our ENSLAVED COUNTRYMEN” (“The Object of the North Star” NS 3 December 1847).

Douglass' papers had a more self-consciously literary quality than its predecessors, and actively sought to cultivate a Afro-American artistic tradition by regularly publishing original works of black American writers alongside more established white authors as well as through regular book reviews.<sup>35</sup> Original editorials were also a strength of Douglass' papers, and it is within this space where most of the discussion of the Orient unfolded.

Despite the clear shift from *Freedom's Journal* to the Douglass papers in terms of the assumed literary ability of the readers, all four of these newspapers shared a common goal, as I have mentioned, of giving voice to the African American community— and interestingly did not limit that representation to only the exemplars of racial achievement. Rather, the articles presented in these newspapers are consistently complicated. *The Colored American*, for example, self-consciously saw its mission to “establish by the exercise of mental and moral principles a claim to a name and place amongst men” (“What Colored People think of Colonization” *CA* 10 June 1837). Yet it simultaneously solicited articles from the average African American citizen and assured its readers that, in its pursuit of a truly “FREE PRESS,” it would print writings in spite of “One or two trifling faults in the grammatical construction of a sentence” (“To Our Correspondents” *CA* 21 January 1837). Likewise, Martin Delany later emphasized that *The North Star* was “an organ for the oppressed in this land through which all may speak” (“Editorial Correspondence”). Though the goal for all four papers was explicitly to self-represent as educated, literate, logical men, and thus implicitly deny the argument that blacks were of inferior intelligence, the editors also seem to have wanted to curate as large a cross-section of the community's offerings as possible, as evidenced by these appeals for even imperfect writings and the articles they printed that solicited average free black opinions on things such as colonization. Fascinatingly, *The Colored American* even assured its readers that they could accurately represent the situation in the south, “for our relations live in the

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<sup>35</sup> See McHenry 114-129.

South, from whom we get facts in the case” (“Increase of Prejudice” *CA* 9 September 1837). The authors and editors of all four papers explicitly present themselves as disrupting the status quo of American self-representation; one author celebrated the *Freedom’s Journal* as means to circulating the true story the white press, unwilling to jeopardize “their popularity at the South,” refused to print (“For the *Freedom’s Journal*” *FJ* 14 September 1827), while *The Colored American* justified its own existence in its ability to “bring to light” the “many hidden” realities of American culture (“Why We Should Have A Paper” *CA* 4 March 1837).

And in the strands of this palimpsestic, polyvocal web the Orient was woven with startling consistency. In these four newspapers alone, at least two hundred and twenty articles were printed that mobilized the Orient in some way, either through direct and prolonged ethnographic, racial, religious, or political discussion or as a complicating factor as African Americans struggled to make sense of their own national and racial identities (and, of course, these two types of essays often presented some overlap).<sup>36</sup> Significantly, this number appears to be greater than articles about any other region or ethnicity, including the Far East and, curiously, even Native Americans, with whom black Americans shared certain lived realities. Demonstrating the intensity of interest surrounding the Orient is the fact that many of these articles were reprinted in multiple venues. Indeed, often the editors assumed an implicit interest in the Orient, as when the editors of *The Colored American* provided an image of the Alhambra in Spain as an exemplar of “Oriental” architecture and write, “We have been desirous of presenting our readers with a specimen of the style of interior architecture and ornament, exhibited in the more splendid royal halls of eastern palaces” without any discussion of *why* (“Chamber of Imagery, Abencerages” *CA* 4 September 1841).

Interestingly, of these two hundred and twenty articles, only a small minority reflect the particular logic of Saidian Orientalism that one can trace in the dominating American press at the

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<sup>36</sup> Given the difficulties in finding these texts in unindexed periodicals, the actual number of articles would almost certainly prove to be greater than the two hundred and twenty I have found.

time. In fact, only thirty-two, or just about 14%, do. And of these thirty-two only four were original pieces of the black press, while the remaining twenty-eight were all reprints from white presses or monographs. I do not mean to argue, however, that because the vast majority of these Orientalist visions were reprints of white-authored pieces the black press was not liable for them. The choice to reprint something may not have represented a de facto acceptance of its ideas but does imply some logic behind the choice. Sometimes that logic appears quite intelligible, as when *Freedom's Journal* reprinted only those passages from a British missionary's travel journals that call into question accepted understandings of race. Certainly, the Bishop's argument that "the deep bronze tint" of Eastern Indians "is more naturally agreeable to the human eye than the fair skins of Europe" – which "give the idea of ill health" and "deformity" ("Extract from Bishop Heber's Indian Journals" *FJ* 16 May 1828) – or a French woman's "confession" that she is less beautiful than any of the "colored" ethnicities around the world ("Confessions of a French Woman" *FJ* 10 October 1828) seem to have an obvious appeal for nineteenth-century African Americans. Likewise, when *Frederick Douglass' Paper* chose to reprint only the section about Calcutta from the British *Bentley's Miscellany* (by way of the *American International Magazine of Literary Science and Art*) that focuses on the intellectual abilities of even the poorest children "of color" in Calcutta – thereby excising the parts of the article that talk about the corruption and poverty of that city – the twenty-first century critic might be tempted to conclude that providing evidence of colored peoples' capacity for learning was congruent with that paper's goals ("English Learning and Habits among the Calcutta Hindoos" *FDP* 6 May 1852).

Yet other times the logic behind the choice to reprint an article is confounding and disrupts what we in the twenty-first century would expect of these black Americans' goals, thus cautioning us to overwrite these editors with our own perspectives and assumptions. What can we do with a black

editor's choice to, given the status of African American women at the time, introduce "the observations of a French traveller" [sic] in the Orient by conjecturing:

How often must the poor Oriental females view this land of liberty with an envious eye, where the talents and virtues of the fair sex are justly appreciated, where they sustain their proper rank in the scale of society – where Generous love and reason jointly reign...("Turkish Women" *FJ* 9 January 1829)

That this particular excerpt ends with a German traveler inspecting a Turkish girl as if she is a horse and then *purchasing* her (as I quoted above) heightens the sense of incongruity here. And indeed the impulse, from our twenty-first century perspective, to believe that this article was reprinted ironically – as pointed proof of the hypocrisy of Americans who worry about the fate of Oriental females while essentially creating harems of their own – is strong. Whether or not that impulse is correct, it is also true that the opposite sentiment – that "Turkish Ladies" do not "covet the degree of liberty claimed and enjoyed by...European ladies" and that "the degree of restraint imposed upon them...is less than is generally imagined" – was *also* reprinted ("Turkish Ladies" *CA* 1 December 1838). So, too, were original opinions that any apprehension over the fates of Oriental women was "fallacious" given the United States' political disenfranchisement of that segment of its own population ("The Rights of Woman" *NS* 10 May 1850).

Thus, though there are unanswerable questions about certain choices, it appears somewhat safe to say that, while the African Americans represented on these pages did internalize certain assumptions of dominating American culture, rarely do we see Oriental peoples dismissed outright as "a race of men essentially barbarian" in black-authored articles ("Jerusalem" *CA* 11 September 1841), and such judgment calls were even rare in the reprints that were chosen. In fact, as a general rule, reprints that disrupted classically Orientalist logic appear more frequently than those that reproduced it intact: the description of an Algerian Sufi who led a resistance movement against French invasion emphasized his "presence of mind, sangfroid, and greatness of soul" ("Anecdotes of Abd-el-Kader" *NS* 15 September 1858); an account of Algerian weddings emphasized the beauty

and respectability of the event (“A Wedding at Algiers” *CA* 17 August 1839); transcripts of a “Mahometan Sermon” not only contained no implication the sermon is sacrilege, but in fact extolled its “splendid diction,” “lofty imagery” and its belief in Jesus along with Mohammad (“Varieties” *FJ* 19 September 1828).

The range of opinions and judgments on the Orient on the pages of the antebellum press powerfully testify to the ways in which there was no static discourse of power or counterdiscourse that actively opposed it in the antebellum American landscape. Nor was there a stable hegemony of national identity and those who rebelled directly against it. These articles illustrate, instead, the “multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” including “shifts and reutilizations of identical formulas for contrary objectives” (Foucault *History of Sexuality* 100-101). The Afro-American press both explicitly and implicitly announced its position as disruptive and reconstructive of the American narrative of Orientalism, claiming the Arab, “with his piercing eye and his flowing beard the descendant and representative of Abraham,” as “a colored man!” (“No Prejudice Against Color in India” *CA* 11 March 1837). But it also mobilized certain assumptions their readers held about the Orient – that it was sexually and religiously depraved space, that it was authoritarian, that it was indolent and predisposed to decline – to advance their own mission of articulating the ways in which America was also guilty of those vices. I would argue, then, that it is the ambiguous and often convoluted positionings toward the Orient in these articles that is precisely their most useful element, for these positionings most vibrantly illustrate the often messy process that underwrote the articulation of identities and communities in the new American nation. Though we cannot discount the way in which, particularly in this earlier part of the nineteenth century, the Orient was utilized as a marker for the ultimate in degradation even by the African American press (thus supporting the logic of Orientalism as we have come to know it), it was generally mobilized in order to disrupt the stories the United States told about itself (thus

undermining that same logic). In other words, if the African American press used some of the tropes of Orientalism, it was generally to subvert the very structures that make Orientalism possible – that is, the idea of the binary. If one can imagine the binaristic logic of Orientalism as a sort of see-saw – with the righteous United States towering over the oppressive weight of the Orient – what the African American press did was not to simply shift some of the sins of the Orient and transpose them to the American side, thus showing their parity. Nor, in fact, did it simply weigh down the U.S. side with its incomparable vices to prove that Americans were unrivalled in wickedness. Rather, it stretched and destabilized the fulcrum on which any comparison rested. For as a *The Colored American* writer so poignantly declared, American slavery made the “wrong...to appear the right; the right the wrong” (“Immediate Emancipation” *CA* 10 February 1838). How to weigh offenses against freedom when enslavement is codified in law? How to compare two nations if it couldn’t even be agreed who belonged to one of them? Everything, many of these articles suggest, becomes topsy-turvy in a nation whose founding document is *The Declaration of Independence* yet practices slavery: things are not what they appear, meaning is fluid, “the simple sequence of explanatory links” through which we have come to understand ourselves are unfastened (Gilroy *Against Race* 123).

**“Their features exactly resemble those of the Great Sphinx”<sup>37</sup>**

One assumption these early black writers destabilized was a Euro-centric understanding of history, and most often this destabilization took the form of appropriating ancient Egypt as their racial heritage. As I have already discussed, many Americans at the time were preoccupied with the race of ancient Egyptians, with whom they perceived an inherent kinship. This question was, as one might imagine, particularly fraught for many black Americans, for whom this ancient greatness could be seen as proof of both a past and a future in the face of slavery advocates who denied them both.

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<sup>37</sup> “Supposed Causes of the Inundation of the Nile” *The Colored American* 25 November 1837.

And while certain white authors, to whom I will return in a moment, had been hypothesizing the blackness of ancient Egyptians for some time, I have identified the earliest known *black-authored* Egyptocentric text as, appropriately enough, appearing in some of the earliest pages of the earliest periodical, *Freedom's Journal*. "Mutability of Human Affairs," a three-part essay printed in April of 1827, was printed anonymously, but was most probably the work of Samuel Cornish, whose interest in ancient Egypt seemingly exceeded that of his junior editor.<sup>38</sup> The essay highlights many of the key concerns black authors raised during the antebellum period when it came to Egypt – what was the role of Egypt in African American history? Could black Christians accept the pagan heritage of the Egyptians? Was there an inherent kinship between black Americans and what they perceived as the similarly idolatrous Arabs living in contemporary Egypt? – and as such "Mutability" serves as a useful anchor for discussing the way in which the antebellum black press approached Egypt as a whole.

The African American debate over Egyptocentrism has lingered well into the twenty-first century. Black critics such as Gerald Early and Wilson J. Moses have dismissed it as a "pop-culture...mind cure" (Early 86-87) and "folksy racial boosterism" (*Afrotopia* 5), respectively, while Afrocentrists such as Martin Bernal<sup>39</sup> and Molefi K. Asante insist such critics have simply "fallen victim to Eurocentric propaganda" (Asante 227) and are thus blinded from the truth. While I will not linger on the way in which the movement has reverberated through two centuries, suffice it to say that Egypt provoked equal perplexity among nineteenth-century black Americans. At that time, those who did reclaim an Egyptian heritage did so largely through the writings of several white authors, most notably Volney's *The Ruins* which, as I mentioned earlier, was translated by Jefferson in 1802 as a means towards circulating the lessons the new American nation might take from the

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<sup>38</sup> As ascertained from the amount of articles published about ancient Egypt during the time *Freedom's Journal* and *The Colored American* were under the editorship of Cornish as compared to Russwurm.

<sup>39</sup> See Bernal and Moore.

despotic history of Islam. Though Volney focused primarily on the cycles of decline within the Orient, African Americans were drawn to this work because it also identified the ancient Egyptians and Ethiopians as having been black, a conclusion based on the writings of ancient Greek historian Herodotus:

Those pile of ruins, said he, which you see in that narrow valley watered by the Nile, are the remains of opulent cities...There a people, now forgotten, discovered, while others were yet barbarians the elements of the arts and sciences. *A race of men now rejected from society for their sable skin and frizzled hair*, founded on the study of the laws of nature, those civil and religious systems which still govern the universe. (21; italics mine)

African Americans were similarly intrigued by another French author, Abbé Henri Gregoire, who reaffirmed the notion that the ancient Egyptians had been black in his *An Enquiry Concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties and Literature of the Negroes* of 1808. Yet this was an idea by no means proposed exclusively by the French. In 1827, American Alexander Hill Everett published his *America, or a General Survey of the Political Situation of the principal Powers of the Western Continent, with Conjectures on their future Prospects*, in which he argued that black Americans, by virtue of being descended from Egypt, “must be regarded as the real authors of most of the arts and sciences which give us at present the advantage over them” (“European Colonies in America” *FJ* 13 July 1827). It is clear that Cornish and Russwurm read Everett’s work, for an excerpt of it, entitled “European Colonies in America,” was published in three installments in *Freedom’s Journal* during July of 1827. Cornish and Russwurm also reprinted an article treating this theme from the *African Repository*, the journal of the American Colonization Society, in 1825.<sup>40</sup>

In “Mutability,” Cornish illustrated his facility with contemporary debates over race by immediately rooting himself in Biblical exegesis, identifying himself as “a descendant of Cush,” the “grandson of Noah.” Classifying himself this way presented him with two clear advantages: first, it

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<sup>40</sup> The race of this author is ambiguous but the distance she employs in discussing African Americans – including lines such as ““How are *we* astonished...when *we* reflect that to the race of Negroes, at present of slaves and the object of *our* extreme contempt *we* owe our arts, sciences and even the very use of speech” (italics mine) – suggests she is white.

proved a familiarity with the Bible which, as we have seen, was considered by many to be the foremost authority on both history and the future; second, in identifying with Cush rather than with Canaan, another of Ham's sons, Cornish could refute the lineage by which pro-slavery authors justified black enslavement. Printed in *Freedom's Journal* shortly after "Mutability," "The Curse of Canaan" – an article originally published in *the New York Observer* – likewise challenged the interpretation that the "slavery of Africans" was the "fulfillment" of Noah's invective. The author of this latter piece pointed to the "clear and distinct fulfillment of the prophecy" in order to establish that it could not, then, apply to black Americans; her logic was that the curse had already been executed on "the descendants of Canaan, the person designated in the prophecy." The author continued to invoke a lineage which identified Egyptians and Ethiopians as descendants of Ham, but did not explicitly connect these civilizations with any particular race, instead arguing that the one biblical interpretation "too plain to need proof" is that god condemns slavery ("The Curse of Canaan" *FJ* 4 May 1827).

Meanwhile, Cornish, in "Mutability," did explicitly connect black Americans with ancient Egyptians precisely through skin color, again vis-à-vis Herodotus:

Mankind generally allows that all nations are indebted to the Egyptians for the introduction of the arts and sciences; but they are not willing to acknowledge that the Egyptians bore any resemblance to the present race of Africans; though Herodotus, "the father of history", expressly declares that the "Egyptians had black skins and frizzled hair." ("Mutability of Human Affairs" *FJ* 6 April 1827)

But in doing so, he could not help but then entangle himself in another series of dilemmas, which was primarily ancient Egypt's status as an idolatrous, decadent – and perhaps most importantly, slave-holding – nation inherently at odds with Christian beliefs. That the press consciously recognized this as a stumbling block towards laying claim to an ancient Egyptian heritage is evidenced by a reprint of a dialogue between Moses, Pharaoh, and his compatriots in which the latter characters one by one parrot the arguments of American supporters of slavery – slaves are

happy, amalgamation would follow freedom, abolition will ruin the economic prospects of the country (“Dialogue between Moses, Pharaoh and Others” *CA* 20 October 1838). Complicating the matter even further, Egyptian slaves were a group with which African Americans had *also* long associated. As “A Member of the African Society in Boston” wrote in 1808, “When Joseph speaks of himself as coming down to Egypt, he saith, *I was stolen and brought down here and sold*. So, many Africans may use the same language, or similar expressions – I was brought to America and sold” (Dickson 118). Because of the common history of oppression and slavery, an association with “God’s chosen people” – evidenced in much of black popular culture throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – was appealing. African Americans at this time, then, were conflicted between wanting to be “children of Pharaoh as well as the children of Israel” (Moses *Afrotopia* 47).

Some chose to reconcile this conflict by rationalizing the acts of the Pharaoh, as did the author of *The New York Observer’s* “An Apology for Pharaoh,” reprinted in *Freedom’s Journal* in July 1827. “Interpreter,” as the author dubbed herself, used Biblical interpretation in order to essentially prove that Egyptian slavery “was not as hard as several kinds of modern slavery” (“An Apology for Pharaoh” *FJ* 29 June 1827), an argument, incidentally, that was later replicated in David Walker’s *Appeal*. In this, “Interpreter” came dangerously close to appropriating the logic of American slavery, such as when she argued that the Pharaoh might have obstructed Moses’ leading of slaves because he might have thought it “his duty, in *kindness* to them, to keep them where they were – give them enough to eat and wear and do” (“An Apology for Pharaoh, concluded” *FJ* 6 July 1827). Yet she acknowledged this resemblance in logic, claiming that there is a distinction between the situations: namely, that Egypt made no pretense toward being a democratic nation. “Perhaps few,” she wrote, “if any” Egyptians “maintained the doctrines, that personal ‘liberty was an unalienable right.’” In other words, “Pharaoh was an ignorant pagan;” for America, a Christian nation, there exists no such excuse: “We believe that God wrought the miracles; and the general truth is that God hates

oppression” (“An Apology for Pharaoh, concluded” *FJ* 6 July 1827). That the author “Veritas” composed a long argument some twelve years later concluding that “A careful examination of all the provisions of the Mosaic law in relation to servants” shows “that they were not slaves, that they were not reduced from persons to things, that they were servants by their own consent, and for a fair compensation” (“Did Moses Authorize Slavery?” *CA* 2 February 1839) speaks to the way in which this was a lasting dilemma for slavery-era African Americans attempting to create a sense of lineage and history, and the way in which some might reconcile these problems by reframing the more unsavory aspects of Egypt’s history. Others, like Cornish, chose to rewrite Egyptian splendor onto Ethiopia, thereby associating African Americans with a “blameless race” who nonetheless were “equally civilized to” Egyptians in that there was not “any great difference as to the state of the arts and sciences in the two kingdoms” (“Mutability of Human Affairs” *FJ* 13 April 1827).

Either way, in an Egyptocentric imagining, assumptions about history became inverted: the ancestors of slaves became the learned educators, while the masters’ ancestors were “hordes of naked barbarians” (“Prejudice against Color in the Light of History” *CA* 18 March 1837). Specifically, ancient Africans (via Egypt and Ethiopia) were placed as the educators of what dominating Western discourse portrayed as the pinnacle of ancient achievement (the Greco-Roman empire) who were “in a state of the grossest ignorance and barbarity, living, like the beasts, upon herbs and acorns” while the Egyptians produced the foundation for all modern arts and sciences. Europe, meanwhile, becomes entirely “unknown” – literally turning the Hegelian idea of black peoples as standing outside of analytical history in its head – and “certainly as barbarous, as ignorant, as brutal” as Africans “can possibly be at the present day” (de Vastey “Africa” *FJ* 7 February 1829). All modern knowledge became “blackened” in this rubric, and many African American writers used a sardonic tone in pointing this fact out. Some scathingly indicted white mathematics students refusing to desegregate their classroom but studying Euclid, “a negro who

flourished some three thousand years ago!” (“Prejudice against Color in the Light of History” *CA* 18 March 1837); others irreverently declared that Herodotus and other Greek intellectuals must have been “Ignoramuses” and “numskulls” when it came to the so-called “law of nature” pro-slavery advocates called upon as evidence to the inherent quality of racial prejudice (“Prejudice Against Color” *CA* 5 September 1840). Yet other authors did have some ambivalences about claiming ancient Egypt based on the testimony of ancient *whites*. One author, Samuel R. Ward, mused, “There are those who deny the Egyptians were black. Herodotus says they were black, and I can’t bring myself to believe that Herodotus, the father of history, did not know black from white when he saw it.” Yet he could not help but caution against basing one’s sense of racial worth on the belief that “A white man says it, and it must be true,” instead urging his audience to reorient their sights on the achievements of the contemporary diaspora: writers like American Phyllis Wheatley and Russian Alexander Pushkin, “black statesmen of Brazil,” or black Revolutionary War soldiers (“Origins, History, and Hopes of the Negro Race” *FDP* 27 January 1854).

But extricating oneself from the structures established by dominating white discourse was, of course, virtually impossible given that most of the information to which blacks had access was produced by whites. This difficulty was particularly evidenced in the ways in which African Americans negotiated the presence of Arabs in contemporary Egypt; if black Americans were the descendants of ancient Egyptians, then were they in some way related to the Arabs living there presently? And, further, could African Americans trust the representations of that potential kin that they had access to, coming as it did from white informants? In much the same way that black Americans vacillated between linking themselves to the Egyptian empire as well as to the chosen people this empire oppressed, they vacillated in how to position themselves vis-à-vis the peoples of the Orient. While some authors did go to great pains to separate ancient Egyptians from contemporary Arab Egyptians – in one case, arguing that the ancient black Egyptians had been

driven eastward by Arab invaders, that “China should be considered as a colony of Egyptians,” and that African Americans and the Chinese “have one common origin” (“For the *Freedom’s Journal*” FJ 24 August 1827) – most authors appeared more ambivalent. In general, the races of both the Indic and North African Orient were presented as part of a spectrum of “colored” folk that included black Americans – but opinion about how much black Americans should align themselves with the rest of that spectrum varied. That ambivalence is well illustrated in “Mutability,” where Cornish simultaneously imagined Egyptians as “an ill-looking and slovenly people, immersed in ignorance and sloth” (FJ 20 April 1827) but also asserts that *both* blacks and Arabs were “descended from Cush” (FJ 13 April 1827). And yet, he wondered, are we “to suppose that the present race of Arabs have degenerated, while the original black colour has remained good?” Finally arguing that such a hypothesis is impossible – no doubt because the very same one was used to justify the enslavement of Africans – he concluded, like many of his contemporaries, that skin color is entirely the result of climate and that it has little to do with potential: “who can convince us that the intellectual powers of man are inferior because nature’s God had tinged his complexion with a darker hue? The doctrine is contrary to all the evidence we have of creation.” If a people are degraded, he further argued, it must simply be because “*customs have never placed us in situations to manifest these virtues, and to exhibit [them] to the world*” (FJ 13 April 1827). There is a self-consciousness here: how can Cornish judge Arabs based on the appearance they “present to the eye of an observer,” when by and large those observers viewed through a racist lens? It was a question that was to haunt Cornish – along with the rest of the black press – for the rest of his publishing career, as evidenced by the competing images of Arabs which worked their way into his papers.

**“All slave mongers TURKS, wicked cruel and hateful, be their names HASSAM, SELIM, JAMES, JUDAS, or HENRY”<sup>1</sup>**

When the antebellum black press shifted their focus from Egypt to the Barbary States and the Ottoman Empire, the stance Samuel R. Ward had admonished – that one might be skeptical of basing one’s sense of racial self worth on the “truths” white men had recorded – was often echoed. In these writings, the press often worked within the familiar vocabularies of dominating American “truths” in order to apply them to United States itself. Though the second Barbary War was completed by 1815, twelve years before the publication of *Freedom’s Journal*, the rhetoric of these wars had lasting power for the African American press, as it did for the American public as a whole. Reprints of articles written contemporaneously to the Barbary Wars, some as early as from 1788 or 1793, that railed against the hypocrisy of slave-holding Americans for deriding Algerian slavery, were often found in these antebellum papers. But even in 1841, twenty-six years after the second Barbary war, African American writers appropriated the imagery of the Algerine pirate to indict American slave dealers. These metaphors were often lifted wholesale from dominating American understanding of the Barbary pirates as barbaric: the prohibition of black Americans from providing testimony in court was described as “a law that would disgrace an Algerine pirate’s vessel” (“American Slavery and Its Effects upon the Slaveholding Population of the South” *NS* 7 April 1848) while more than one article refers to slaveholders as “legalized pirates” (“Victims of Land Pirates” *NS* 21 September 1849; “A Letter to the American Slaves from those who have fled from American Slavery” *NS* 5 September 1850). That this was perceived to be an accessible and meaningful vocabulary through which to “make sense” to others is evidenced by another article’s rhetorical question: “Would not any white man have used desperate means to have prevented a sister from being carried to Algiers, by a man in affinity with Algerines?” (“Trial for Abduction” *CA* 2 January 1841). Likewise, wealthy black abolitionist Robert Purvis beseeched readers to “imagine

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<sup>1</sup> “The Greek Slave” *The North Star* 3 October 1850.

your wives and children to be trembling at the approach of every stranger, lest their husbands and fathers should be dragged into slavery worse than Algerine – worse than death!” (“Selected Appeal”).

The Barbary wars thus served as a legible cultural script through which to communicate injustice well after those wars had concluded. But the way in which the Orient provided the antebellum African American press with a fruitful avenue through which to navigate their own ambiguous status as Americans is particularly evidenced through coverage of the more contemporary “Eastern Question.” This entailed, as I mentioned earlier, the conflicts surrounding the crumbling Ottoman Empire, from Greek revolt through the mid-century Crimean Wars. During this time, the Afro-American press’ attitudes toward the Ottoman Empire shifted in ways that reveal their divergences with dominating American framings of the Orient. While the African American press was quick to point out the obvious parallels between the black Americans and Greeks held in bondage, they still veered from dominating American rhetoric about the Ottoman forces, sometimes overlaying various sources’ take on the same incident, thus destabilizing the “facts” of battle. *Freedom’s Journal*, for example, published at least nine articles in as many months during and after the Greek revolt; in one such article, *The London Courier* is quoted as reporting that the Turkish “government is stated to have been engaged in making every preparation for war, but nothing inconsistent with the usages of the most civilized States” while *The London Times* disagreed, arguing that the Sultan’s actions “bespeaks more obstinacy and less cunning than we were willing to give him credit for” (“Latest from Europe” *FJ* 29 February 1828).

Particularly after Greece’s liberation, however, more ambivalence about the conflict, which had developed into struggle between the crumbling Ottoman Empire and the rapidly expanding Russian one, was articulated. Russwurm, for example, reluctantly wrote in the summer of 1828: “we confess, we...think it highly probable that the Russians will be allowed to prosecute their designs

against Turkey, without encountering the slightest opposition from any power” (“Latest from England” *FJ* 6 June 1828). Tellingly, at that point he began to summarize reports about the battles rather than reprint them outright, characterizing Turks as “defend[ing] themselves with the most daring courage” (“Latest from Europe” *FJ* 29 August 1828). Russwurm’s proclivity to focus on Turkish tactics such as obtaining “supplies of water for inhabitants” and securing villages (“Latest from England” *FJ* 26 September 1828) likewise reveal a distinct but subtle shift in framing that deoriented the assumed barbarity of the Turks. It was not solely Russwurm who did so, either. Particularly as the Russo-Turkish conflict pressed forward, several of the authors in the black press explicitly saw themselves as distinguishing themselves from the dominating American press, whose “sympathies” were “directed towards Russia, rather than to the cause of liberty” (“Speech of Frederick Douglass” *FDP* 18 August 1854). One article in *The North Star*, for example, quipped, “Even the *Times* ceases to have anything to say in” the “autocrat” Czar’s defence” when he suspended diplomacy with Turkey after the Sultan refused to extradite Russian refugees (“Foreign News of the Week: Turkey and Russia” *NS* 26 October 1849).

The portrayal from which these authors saw themselves departing was exemplified by the white abolitionist newspaper *The National Era*’s seven-part essay on the Russo-Turkish conflict, which presented a thoroughly Orientalist framing. This framing rested upon assumptions that Russia, though also a despotic nation, had more democratic potential than Turkey, who had proven itself to possess a “fatal gravitation toward decay and decomposition” (“RUSSIA - TURKEY - No. 4.----- GENIUS OF MAHOMETANISM” *The National Era* 26 August 1847). This torpor, the author argued, was illustrated by the lack of Turkish dominion over their land, an archetypal viewpoint for the nation who had colonized its own land by claiming the same thing in order to decimate the Native Americans who lived there :

Of Turkey, which men have rendered a country of misery and famine, the Almighty seems to have intended to have made a land of promise...and in return for all these gifts, these

glorious gifts, what have the inhabitants done? They have left the land uncultivated, and the mountains unsearched... Too indolent to work out the natural riches of their soil, they are too jealous to permit others to do it for them. (“RUSSIA - TURKEY - No. 2” *The National Era* 12 August 1847)

In using this logic, the author implicitly invoked the Americans who had likewise been gifted “a land of promise” by god and had suitably cultivated it. Naturally, however, the author is not terribly concerned with “What is in the mind of the Emperor” when it came to slavery (“RUSSIA - TURKEY - No. 2” *The National Era* 12 August 1847).

The black press, on the other hand, was significantly less inclined to gloss over this issue. As early as 1838, Cornish had run pieces complicating the idea of the Orient as more tyrannical through a comparison of its system of slavery with the American one, a comparison that seemed to come out in favor of the Turks (“Turkish Slavery” *CA* 9 June 1838). And, amazingly, throughout the antebellum period the African American press reprinted articles from proslavery periodicals, allowing their absurdity to speak for themselves; in one of these cases the article reprinted is from the *Journal of Commerce* railing against the Ottoman Empire for enslavement of “beautiful” and “gentle” Circassian (modern-day Adyge) women (“Circassian and American Slavery” *FDP* 11 August 1854). That the black press would republish such articles is testament to the ways in which it did not simply use print to disseminate explicit arguments against slavery and prejudice but to destabilize a larger process of understanding the world. In other words, the reprinting of a proslavery newspaper’s arguments against slavery in an abolitionist newspaper deoriented its meaning.

But following the suppression of the Turkish slave markets and after Turkey provided asylum to democratic Hungarian insurgents defeated by Russia and Austria in 1849, the black press more explicitly sided with Turkey. And while some articles wryly noted the way in which “certain extraordinary advantages in trade” were at the root of official American support of Russia despite the “antagonism of the fundamental principles” behind the two “empires” (“American Ambition and Europe’s Dilemma” *FDP* 18 August 1854), other authors saw this as more than simple

economic strategizing. For as Frederick Douglass sarcastically noted in a speech reprinted in *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, how could the United States “take side with oppressed freedom, so long as the chains of slavery bind the feet of many millions of her subjects?” (“Speech of Frederick Douglass” *FDP* 18 August 1854). The axiomatic tone of Douglass’ statement that America, being a despotic nation, could only align itself with other despots belies how disruptive such a statement was, given the foundational American rhetoric of freedom and liberty – not to mention that rhetoric’s dependence on the Orient as the ultimate in despotism. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, African Americans – David Walker being most famous among them – appropriated the language of the Declaration of Independence quite self-consciously not only to prove their own capacity as republican citizens but also in order to reveal the way in which white Americans seemingly could not “understand” their “own language” (Walker 78). In other words, like a proslavery paper’s antislavery argument re-presented on the pages of an antebellum black newspaper, the writings of these black authors called into relief the gaps created by the “circumlocutions,” as John Quincy Adams would call them (qtd in McHenry 28) white Americans had resorted to in order to justify slavery. In so doing, they defamiliarized that language or, one might say, made it foreign. And the Orient was consistently woven into this process of disrupting assumptions of foreign and native, familiar and strange. Witness the “Serious Thoughts” composed for *Freedom’s Journal*:

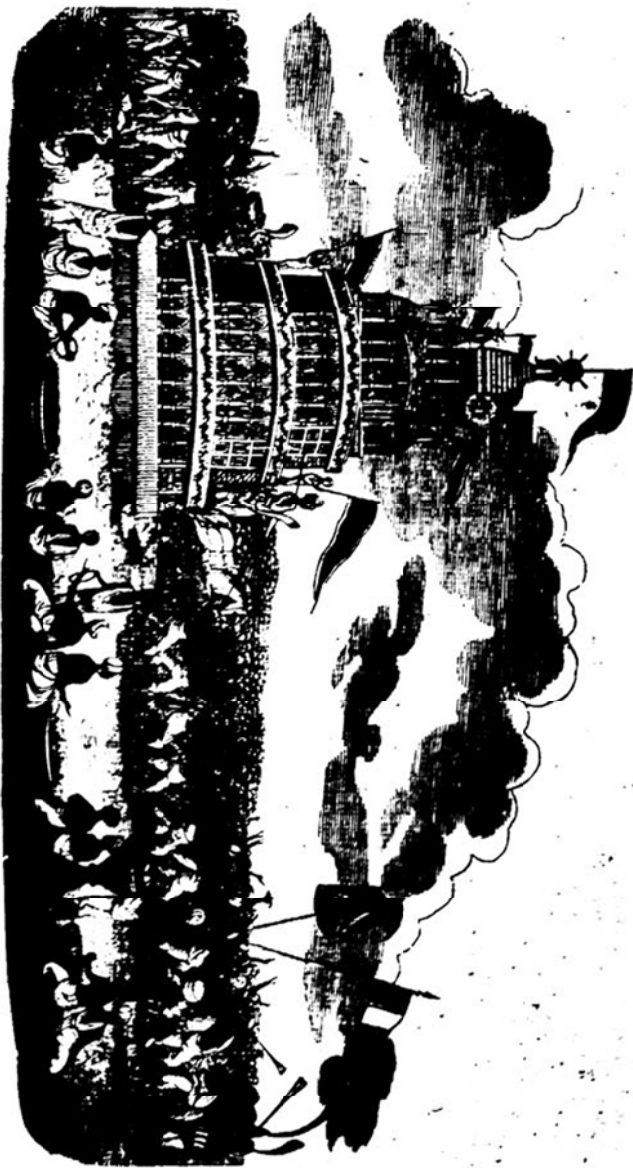
More than half a century ago, the different States of this great Confederacy, combined in publishing that ever-memorable document (the Declaration of Independence) in which all men are declared to be born free and equal; and they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to support the principle. Yet...the very same Confederacy continues to hold more than a million and a half of their brethren in the most cruel bondage....Tell it not in America, publish it not in the streets of our cities, lest Mohomedan Turkey bring us into reproach and make us a hissing and a by-word. (“For the Freedom’s Journal: Serious Thoughts” *FJ* 29 June 1827)

This author not only disrupted the “self-evidence” of American superiority here but also deoriented its originary myths. This latter deorientation was achieved by evoking founding Puritan John

Winthrop's sermon, which had imagined the colonies as "a city upon a hill" that would become an infamous "story and a by-word through the world" should it fail in its mission of Christianity. That day has come, the author seems to be arguing, for American slavery has ensured the United States is a "by-word" uttered by even those Americans had perceived as the ultimate "by-word" themselves. This kind of trope was common throughout the antebellum African American press and it would be possible, certainly, to argue that it relied on an assumption that America *should* be inherently superior to these nations. It is true that many of these articles reasoned that "it is a hundred fold more sinful for a Christian" to hold slaves than a Turk, thus assuming an inherent moral superiority to Christians ("Why Always Harping at the Church?" *CA* 8 September 1838). But others took this a step further to claim that Muslim Arabs were in fact *more* civilized than Christian Americans. Sultan Abdülmecid I, the Ottoman ruler who had granted asylum to the Hungarian activists was, for example, portrayed as a noble, freedom-loving leader from whom American leaders needed to take an important lesson:

...the noble Sultan and the follower of the false prophet, rejects with indignation the barbarous demand of the Christian Superior, and at the peril of bringing upon himself and his people the gigantic power of Russia... extends the arm of generous protection to those helpless refugees. The Sultan has based his conduct upon his sacred book, the Koran, and in so doing, has shown himself to be more Christ-like than very many who brand him and his nation with upholding the religion of "the pit." The Christian may well learn humanity and magnanimity at the feet of the humane Sultan. ("The Sultan and the Czar" *NS* 9 November 1849)

But what is notable here is not, necessarily, that authors sometimes flipped the binary of Orientalism on its head by asserting that American "republicanism and Christianity" were "both put to shame" by the Orient ("Mehmet Ali and Slavery" *CA* 14 November 1840). What is notable, rather, is the way in which these authors reveal the way in which the binary was flexible. To imagine the Sultan as at once the follower of a "false prophet" *and* Christlike, or to imagine America as reaching both the depths of barbarism *and* the heights of democracy simultaneously called into question exactly what terms like barbarism and civilization, immorality and righteousness, slavery



THE CAR OF JUGGERNAUT.

From "The Car of Juggernaut," *The Colored American* 8 August 1840.

and freedom meant. These articles took the clarity of those terms and muddied them up. In so doing, they complicated assumptions about the way in which American identities were constructed, assumptions we still accept as relatively straightforward today. These authors gave voice to the way in which the categories and discourses we seem to assume arrived with Winthrop on the *Arbella* stable and whole were in fact constructed, deployed, and navigated unevenly.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it took (often strategic) work to perpetuate the myth that these principles had always-already been inherent to the nation. These discourses were utilized by various populations at various times to include and exclude various populations at various times: by Americans to both mark and distance one's European roots, by upper class white Americans to proscribe working class whites socially but embrace them racially in order to reify race-based slavery, by Native Americans to include themselves as "forgotten" founding fathers (Apess 105) or to indict white Americans for failing to live up to their own ideals. At root in the antebellum black press' engagement with the Orient was the larger question of how to make meaning within a system that had hinged on the assumption that "MIGHT MAKES RIGHT" ("Treachery, Vile and Unblushing" *CA* 3 February 1838) when one of the things that might had claimed, ever so eloquently, as right was black enslavement.

And though the antebellum black press often complicated understandings of the Orient precisely by asserting its superiority (both in terms of might and moral "rightness"), this was not always the case; other times the logic of conventional Orientalism was deployed to surprising ends. In one case, degradation itself became a marker of freedom. Mobilizing a popular legend, originating in the fourteenth century narrative *The Travels of John Mandeville*, and still taken as fact in the nineteenth century American and British presses, one author derisively declared that Hindus who, in a state of religious frenzy, threw themselves under the wheels of chariots carrying statues of the god Jugannath during an annual procession "live free and die voluntarily" ("For the *Freedom's*

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<sup>2</sup> See Poovey.

*Journal*’ FJ14 September 1827). Americans who imagined this and other “heathen” rituals as evidence of the “deluded and degraded...nature” of the Orient (“Festival of the Swinging of Krishna” CA 19 September 1840) are meanwhile condemned for ignoring the “class of degraded beings, abject, miserable beyond description; who have been cruelly torn from kindred and country, inhumanly yoked with brutes, and fettered to the soil!” (“For the *Freedom’s Journal*’ FJ14 September 1827) in their own nation. Other articles maligned Americans for decrying India’s caste system when they themselves were “intimately” attached to a caste system of their own (“Hindoo Caste” CA 11 November 1837). This was, actually, a classification antislavery leader Charles Sumner attempted to legally establish in his defense of a young black child forced to enroll in an all-black school instead of a closer white one, because systems of “caste” were considered illegal as a “violation of equality” (“Argument of Charles Sumner, Esq.” NS 8 February 1850).

But the press did not simply use the Orient to highlight the way in which slaves were victims of slavery or to suggest that white American indifference toward slaves made them more Oriental than the Orient itself. Rather, they argued that slavery infected the entire body politic by constricting its ability to actualize the civic and religious values Americans held up as what most defined their nation. Slavery turns America into a coquette who “styles herself” with “the beautiful mask of liberty” only as a means to obscure “the hideous features” and “deformity” that lies beneath (“From a Eulogy” CA 27 March 1841). Its insidious nature does not simply leave a certain portion of the population vulnerable to cruelty but threatens the entire nation by strangling “the tender sympathy of man” (“Immediate Emancipation” CA 9 March 1839) like a disease. The democratic foundations of the nation “become[s] blunted and encrusted in cruelty” (“Horrible Murder of a Slave” FDP 23 December 1853), making it unrecognizable to itself. Slavery fundamentally distorts all Americans – slaveholders or otherwise – because in order to respond to “Weakness, which calls for protection” with indifference or cruelty one must betray one’s own humanity (“Varieties” FJ 21

November 1828). And this perversion of humanity was not simply a choice; it was dictated by the law, the very thing which Americans thought set them apart from the anarchic Orient. While Turks were free to “extend to the noble Hungarian exile...the divine rights of hospitality” Americans were disciplined from helping “the most needy or meritorious of all their countrymen, who dare deeds of valor and heroism, for the sake of their own freedom and manhood” (“To the Friends of Freedom” *FDP* 22 January 1852). Freedom thus became a multivalent sign *through* discourse about the Orient – not only are some citizens denied it on a literal level, those who supposedly possess it are restricted from embodying it by assisting those who don’t. Referring to the incarceration of Daniel Drayton and Edwin Sayres, two white men who attempted to aid seventy-seven fugitive slaves escape via a schooner, one author invokes Turkey as a “civilized” country while the United States becomes “a self-condemned hypocrite” for imprisoning its true heroes; America becomes a land of “chains” while Turkey (imagined here as part of “Europe”) wears “a crown of glory”. Such injustice becomes “accursed and nameless,” unimaginable (“Drayton and Sayres” *FDP* 25 December 1851): the rational blurs into the perverse. The republic becomes a world of the “infatuated despotism” and “caprice” (“Letters from a Man of Colour” *FJ* 14 March 1828), of the “arbitrary will” of the “tyrannical, cruel, and despotic” slavemaster (“Immediate Emancipation” *CA* 10 February 1838).

Indeed, even before the Ottoman empire halted its slave trade and granted asylum to the Hungarian dissidents, the antebellum black press railed against the American system as more unjust and tyrannical than Oriental despotism precisely *because* it codified its injustice in law, the very thing which Americans pointed to as the embodiment of their rationality. As early as 1827, articles claimed that the constitutive legality of American slavery – that is, that the nation had been articulated formally in a document that allowed slavery – made it particularly abhorrent. These authors argued, further, that, because the “concentration of stupendous evils” of America were “carried on in name and by the authority of the law,” that evil became systemic rather than an

aberration (Letter to the Editor *FDP* 28 January 1853). Or as Wilbur M. Haywood, a repeated correspondent for *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, put it, “The Koran made hospitality the first duty of the Moslem; and we have recently seen its influence on the world....But it remained for American sages, in the afternoon of the nineteenth century, to give humanity an important lesson by demonstrating that *liberty* and *slavery* would coalesce, and that one could not exist without the other!” (“Dangers and Duties of America” *FDP* 24 June 1852). Because of this, its foundation of “self-evident” “truths” becomes destabilized – and the dichotomies undergirding those truths collapse.

African Americans emphasized this point by disrupting the opposition between American and Oriental sexualities in particular. Notably, harems – the most popular stand-in for, in Malini Johar Schueller’s words, the “mysterious, inaccessible, and sensual” (*US Orientalisms* 83) Orient or, in Robert Allison’s words, the easiest way to “gratify the prurient appetites of Western readers” (61) who could still imagine themselves on the moral high ground – were rarely brought up by the black antebellum press independently of the status of American slaves in the South. It is true that the antebellum African American press used the word “harem” quite often; but rarely was this in reference to the Orient and almost always did it refer to the Southern slaveholder and his “concubinage,” which made, according to one author, a “Turkish harem” look like “a cradle of virgin purity” in comparison (“Politics and the Pulpit” *NS* 13 June 1850). An author in *The Colored American*, for example, commented on a reprinted ad for an escaped slave, retorting that slaveholders fear abolition because they “tremble for their harems” (“Who are the amalgamators” *CA* 7 July 1838); another quipped, after recounting a theft a white southerner reported after sleeping with a black prostitute, “it would be cheaper for ‘our Southern brethren,’ when travelling, to take their harems along with them” (“Trials of our Southern Brethren” *CA* 22 September 1838). Other articles ask what the emotional and moral effects on Southern women are if they “can only claim to

consider” themselves “as the head slave of the Harem” (“Horrible Murder of a Slave” *FDP* 23 December 1853).

Ultimately, then, the press did not reiterate teleological American understandings of the U.S. as intrinsically superior to the Orient. Nor, actually, did it simply subvert that understanding to argue that it was inferior to the Orient. Rather, it complicated the idea of easily defined borders – or of a binary dependent on such borders – completely. America could not define itself in antithesis to the Orient, the press revealed, because it was its own antithesis. Slavery turns the land of liberty into something repulsive, a “vast abomination, which seethes and smokes” (“Politics and the Pulpit” *NS* 13 June 1850), a “hundred-headed Hydra,” an “idol” so “barbaric” that it makes the Orient “laugh” at the “lunacy,” and “shrin[k], aghast, horrified, disgusted, stunned with indignation” (“America Gone Mad!” *NS* 13 October 1848).

While it might be said that the explicit use of the Orient in the antebellum press was as a yardstick by which to measure the United States – a means through which to bring into relief the hypocrisies of the latter – within that dynamic, comparisons became not simply comparisons but a deorientation of the terms on which such comparisons could rest: boundaries between self and other, foreign and native, were destabilized. Homi K. Bhabha has famously asserted that postcolonial subjectivities articulate themselves in the space between the “synchronic panoptical vision of domination – the demand for identity, stasis – and the counter-pressure of the diachrony of history – change, difference.” These tensions speak through a “mimicry” that is at once a “disavowal,” a “resemblance” that is simultaneously a “menace” (86). The authors of the black antebellum press made meaning about themselves and the world around them through a somewhat consonant process but did not simply replicate, with modification, the structures of “Otherness” undergirding American identity. Rather, they revealed the way in which America possessed its own Other, making itself unrecognizable to itself. Through its palimpsestic form, the African American

press made “every man feel, that in every other man he sees but another self” (“To the Friends of Freedom” *FDP* 22 January 1852) – in other words, it disrupted the idea of a binary to replace it with a sort of intersubjectivity, a sense of self predicated on each person’s multiple positionings and the ever-shifting ways in which those positions overlapped with others. In the following chapter, I will further interrogate the way in which the boundaries of self and other, foreign and domestic, were blurred through the deorientation acts performed by two African Americans who literally traveled outside of the borders of the United States.

## Chapter Two

### “The dogs provoke me, and the women are veiled:” Afro-Americans Abroad, 1850-1892

*“We don’t understand anything anyone says,  
and they do not understand what we say.  
We manage to get on by motion – almost perpetual motion –  
but we get through”  
Amanda Smith (1892)*

Frederick Douglass informed the readers of his third autobiography that when he wanted to remember the mother from whom he had been ripped in infancy, he returned to a drawing of ancient Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II.<sup>1</sup> But fellow fugitive slave David F. Dorr called upon a different image. While Dorr dedicated his 1858 travel narrative *A Colored Man Round the World* to his “own mother,” she is not the devoted parent of Douglass’ narrative, who walked twelve miles back and forth in the dead of night just to assure Douglass that he was “somebody’s child.” She did not live in a 9- by 7- by 3- foot attic crawlspace for seven years just to insure the freedom of her children, like the most celebrated female fugitive slave author, Harriet Jacobs. And while William Hayden also dedicated his fugitive slave narrative to the black mothers who, he claims, are “set apart to raise and educate families” (3) and who are thus integral to the future success of the race, Dorr does not invoke this inherently uplifting role. Dorr’s mother may well have been as dedicated, tenacious, and resourceful as any of these mothers. Yet she is not marked by her presence, but her absence; and, more significantly, the way in which that absence allows her to be both nowhere (“wherever thou art, whether in Heaven or a lesser world”) and yet everywhere, “whether around the freedom Base of Bunker Hill, or only at the lowest savannah of American Slavery” (Dorr 7). In other words, Dorr’s mother becomes the every(American)man, representative of both the best (“freedom”) and worst (“slavery”) American culture has to offer. Dorr departs from the

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<sup>1</sup> See Introduction 32-33.

conventional depiction of female slaves, particularly at the hands of male fugitive slaves, who tended to foreground the way in which their fundamental femininity was undermined by exploitation both physical (through rape and beatings) and emotional (through the separation of families). Dorr takes the black female body and resituates it not simply from abjected and dehumanized commodity (“breeder”) to the most celebrated moments of American bravery and democracy<sup>2</sup> but as both: the two are interdependent, built upon each other, inextricable. This is not a “distortion of the dominant culture” (Schueller “Performing”) but a reconfiguration of what (and who) that dominating culture is.

While Amanda Berry Smith, freed slave turned acclaimed preacher and missionary, explicitly attributes her family’s freedom to her father’s hard work – “He had an important and definite object before him, and was willing to sacrifice sleep and rest in order to accomplish it” (18) – the narrative she tells implicitly assigns credit to her mother. For it is the illicit emotional intimacy between Smith’s mother and her young mistress – who she converts to the kind of “shouting, hallelujah” Presbyterianism (A. Smith 19) the girl’s white family deems improper – that secures her husband the opportunity to buy their family in the first place. Smith’s mother, Mary, becomes the hero of Smith’s early reminisces, literally “push[ing]” her husband “aside” on three separate occasions in order to protect their family, who assist fugitive slaves in the Underground railroad, from slave hunters (A. Smith 34). Mary is not only able to subdue these slave hunters physically, but verbally: we are told that “she opened her mouth and for one hour declared unto them all the words in her heart” in a public square until the “rich respectable” whites of her town join in the public defamation and the slave hunters depart. Yet Mary’s ability to evade a more literal bloodhound (a vicious neighborhood dog) along with these metaphorical ones makes her illegible within her

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<sup>2</sup> While the Battle of Bunker Hill was technically a loss for the Americans, the heavy mortalities suffered by the British Army, who outnumbered rebel troops by nearly 3 to 1 and who were technologically superior to those troops, marked the battle for some as the beginning of the end for British domination over the United States.

community, who can only read her power as “some kind of a charm” (A. Smith 35). Smith uses this moment – the discontinuity between Mary’s explanation (“I didn’t stop to think about that dog”) and her community’s ability to understand it (“this was the wonder to everybody around”) – to introduce the way in which it is precisely within those gaps and aberrances that one might find “God’s wonderful deliverance” (34-35).

Like their rather unconventional depictions of their mothers, David Dorr and Amanda Berry Smith utilize the form of the travel narrative to surprisingly similar ends despite dissimilar pretenses. Dorr was a slave who traveled around the world with his master and fashioned a narrative presence that calls to mind, in Hilton Obenzinger’s distinctive words, “a hedonistic New Orleans dandy” (228). Smith, a preacher and missionary in Africa and the Indian subcontinent, regularly interrupted the pious account of her spiritual growth with the voices of god and the devil. Nonetheless, both use travel to subtly expose the pitfalls and hypocrisies of traditional Euro-American respectability, to deorient the meaning assigned to the categories of race and gender, and to disrupt the naturalization of binaristic thinking. And while the seeds of these arguments are sown through their narratives, they come to their most potent fruition while in the Orient. If it has been convincingly argued that the primary impulse shared by nearly all nineteenth-century American travel writing to the Orient was the “ineluctable tension between what is expected and what is found” (Yothers 1), Dorr and Smith strategically deorient this impulse to show the divergences between what is expected and found of American identities. These two texts take what readers “know” of the United States and, by taking these truths abroad, deorient them. The way in which these authors represent their mothers mirror the distinctions in their overarching deorientation acts; Dorr’s text slyly disrupts our ability to distinguish between the genteel and the vulgar, the “real” and the fictional, the domestic and the foreign, while Smith’s privileges the fluid, the unconventional, the illegible.

### **Cultivated coarseness in David F. Dorr's *A Colored Man Around the World***

David Dorr, a New Orleans slave and self-described “quadroon,” traveled around Europe and the Near East with his master Cornelius Fellowes between the years of 1851 and 1854.<sup>3</sup> When Fellowes failed to enact his promise of manumission upon their return Dorr escaped to Ohio, where in 1858 he published, at his own expense, a narrative based on the diaries he had kept while traveling. Unlike fellow fugitive slave William Wells Brown’s more widely read and studied *The American Fugitive in Europe* (1855), however, there are few signs of Dorr’s slave past in his travels around the world. Brown situates his travels within an extended discussion of both his enslavement and his escape; Dorr limits mention of his slave origins to the dedication to his slave mother and a brief acknowledgment of his fugitive status in his Preface. If not for this latter paragraph, the reader might miss the fact that Dorr traveled as a slave altogether.

Indeed, it might be argued that the very title of Dorr’s text – *A Colored Man Around the World* – serves as his first deorientation act. Like his slave status, Dorr’s race only appears twice in the narrative: once in the title, where it assumes a somewhat spectacular quality, and then in the Preface, which opens with the words “The Author of this book, though a quadroon, is pleased to announce himself the ‘Colored man around the world’” (Dorr 11). The act of “announcing” himself as a “colored man” here is key: it signals a certain amount of performativity in the role of since, as a quadroon, Dorr can pass as white and apparently does for most of his travels. In fact, the purpose of this announcement seems unclear when we approach it from within a tradition of nineteenth century black American writing: Dorr does not use his narrative to explicitly indict slavery, to prove his own moral and intellectual worth, or to denaturalize racial prejudice by showing how it “vanished” abroad (Brown 98). Nor does he imagine his travels as fulfilling an explicitly

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<sup>3</sup> “Quadroon” in the nineteenth century referred to a person who was “one-quarter” African American (and, thus, “three-quarters” Caucasian).

“ethnological” purpose as Douglass had.<sup>4</sup> Though he does assert the blackness of ancient Egyptians, this is assumed and taken for granted rather than argued or proved (a point to which I will return shortly). In other words, Dorr marks his text as “colored” without meeting any of the expectations of what such a “colored” travel narrative should or would look like: he subverts assumptions. It is my contention that ultimately, this disruption extends through the entirety of his narrative. Dorr appropriates the overdetermined tropes of travel writing – a genre marked by the (usually masculine) authority and aristocracy of a narrator who describes the earth that surrounds us objectively – and deforms them in order to shift the earth beneath our feet, consistently challenging the concept of objective “knowing.”

And Dorr quite self-consciously calls upon this collective “knowledge.” His text, like most nineteenth century travel narratives, is appropriately citational. At strategic moments, Dorr refers to his expertise in appropriate travel behavior as dictated by guide books<sup>5</sup>, knowledge of the way in which other travel narratives approach the history of the countries in which he travels<sup>6</sup>, and marks his narrative as a departure from these traditions<sup>7</sup>. His literary and historical allusions are likewise copious, and reveal an appreciation for the ways in which travel narratives functioned as “bourgeois forms of authority” (Pratt 5) that established and reproduced the incontrovertibility of their authority through the cultural capital of literacy and learning. Despite the clear evidence of his learning, however, Dorr at the outset calls attention to his lack of authority when he writes, “In offering this book to the public, I will say, by the way, I wrote it under the disadvantage of having access to no library save Walker’s school dictionary” (12). It could be argued that, being a fugitive slave, Dorr appropriated a nearly ubiquitous characteristic of the slave narrative here; fugitive slaves often apologized for the way in which they could, in Henry Bibb’s words, “make no pretension to

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<sup>4</sup> See Introduction 32.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Dorr 18.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Dorr 55, 98-99, 113, 120-121, 142.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Dorr 12, 55, 93.

literature” given their education in “the school of adversity, whips, and chains” (xi). Yet in a text that adroitly quotes Shakespeare and Homer, Goethe and Byron, a claim of the lack of literary pretention is a perforation that alerts us to the way in which this author’s self-fashioning is not always what it seems. That Dorr likewise never accounts for the way in which he attained literacy in a country where blacks were legally denied that right – an even more ubiquitous trope of the slave narrative<sup>8</sup> – further alerts us to the kind of narrative presence he cultivated.

For like the everywhere-and-nowhere black mother that has undergirded all aspects of American history, Dorr moves beyond proving that one can be both black and genteel, both slave and purveyor of knowledge; rather, he deconstructs what it means to be a gentleman – as he does when he inverts the universalized American from white male to black female – in the first place. At no part of this narrative does Dorr attempt to prove that he is morally and intellectually equal to the white men with whom he travels and encounters, nor does he imply he is their moral or intellectual superior. He assumes a particular narrative presence that is usually the result of cultural capital to which slaves generally did not have access, true, but when one interrogates the actual “facts” Dorr narrates from that position, it becomes clear that they subvert all expectation.

What I am arguing is that it is facile, from our critical vantage point, to assume that in the nineteenth century authors would see terms *black* and *aristocratic* as mutually exclusive, and thus read any conflation of those terms as evidence that “Dorr performs whiteness in order to better create a subversive form of blackness, one which questions the working class ideological affiliations of antebellum black culture, but one which also indicts the hierarchies of the slaveholding society” (Schueller “Performing”). My argument builds on this one, however, to suggest that Dorr does not simply perform, but lifts the curtain on the stage of travel altogether. In exposing what happens behind its cultured veneer, Dorr’s text reveals the way in which the genre of travel writing itself

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<sup>8</sup> See Olney 152-153.

served to both construct and perform a respectability that was, in fact, tenuous at best, and in so doing denaturalizes the assumed categories and binaries through which we understand the world. Dorr's narrative is not a performance of whiteface in a black text but a series of strategic choices (the first of which is to identify as black in the first place) that deorient our static understandings of blackness and whiteness, working-class and bourgeois, and the assumptions of sexuality that undergird those categories. It is likely because Dorr cannot be contained by those readings that he is rarely granted extended analysis and has been cited as an example of anything from early black erotica (DeCosta-Willis 92) to black ministerial writing (Davis 36) – a seemingly amusing contradiction that is telling. Those who do discuss him in any detail tend to emphasize the way in which his “gentlemanly tone” (Marable and Aidi 20) either “lack[ed] in irony” and was “used a means of legitimizing the cultural and moral privilege of the narrating subject” (Sweeney 149) or, in a more positive reading, “challenged the prolific sentiment that one could not be both [slave and American] at the same time” (C. Nelson 48). But I would posit that Dorr does more than simply “assume the coveted role of independent, well-heeled young bachelor” and “imagin[e] himself as a knowledgeable traveler and bon vivant” (Stowe 61); for if we look closer, the “leisurely, gentlemanly” and “aristocratic selfhood” (Schueller “Introduction” xi) that Dorr apparently projects cannot be contained by that interpretation. In other words, Dorr's text does not simply disrupt dichotomies between gentility and slavehood through Dorr's ability to embody both; rather it reveals the invented and performed qualities of these categories in the first place. If we carefully explore the way in which the text itself produces meaning about aristocracy or gentlemanliness, we realize it directly disrupts those assumptions: Dorr's text does not prove a black man can be as aristocratic as a white man, but deorients *whiteness* from within.

The natural place to look for what it means to be an aristocratic, white American male would be the only such figure to be discussed in any detail within the narrative: Dorr's master, Colonel

Fellowes. It is important to note here that Fellowes, besides being identified in the Preface – where Dorr provides his address along with his status as a slave master, for reasons which might become more clear shortly – does not appear within Dorr’s narrative until thirty-nine pages into the narrative. By virtue of his Preface, however, the fact of Dorr’s enslavement is woven into every moment of this text implicitly, like his mother’s ubiquitous body, and thus what becomes more interesting to think about is not whether the said-unsaid of his slave status is an appropriation of whiteness, but how and why he chooses to deploy *Fellowes* at all.

Fellowes’ first physical appearance is only mentioned in passing, when Dorr mentions that he “saw...Mr. Fellowes of the first Fellowes & Co.” greeting another gentleman and agreeing to an overnight visit (Dorr 39). Notable in this scene, the significance of which I will return to shortly, is the way in which it is presented as a distanced and casual observance rather than as a moment in which Dorr, as Fellowes’ slave, would likely have been involved. Fellowes then recedes again until about halfway through the narrative, when an entire chapter, entitled “Col. Fellowes Learning Dutch” (Dorr 69), is devoted to him. Dorr begins this chapter “I must now introduce the reader to an American ‘merchant Prince,’ better known by his associates as the ‘Prince of Good Fellowes’” (61). Note again the lack of reference to the fact that Fellowes legally owns Dorr, a point we already know because Dorr has disclosed it to us in the Preface. The extended description of Fellowes’ body, in fact, becomes even more conspicuous when one realizes the relative absence of Dorr’s own all-seeing but completely disembodied narrative presence. Dorr takes his own “hypervisibility” and turns it on to his white master, whose skin, we are told, is “the color of last year’s red apple all free from decay,” and whose hair is “light for black” (61). Significant here is that the term “red” is used to describe only two others in the narrative: first Queen Victoria, whose “color,” Dorr writes, “was too red and masculine for a lady” (23); and second, a black American man who Dorr meets in Turkey and who offers his “red” hand to the Sultan (141). The description, then, seems to carry

some connotation of ambiguity at best. That his hair is “light for black” seems another careful choice of phrasing. Dorr’s description of Fellowes defies clear racialization: we “know” him as a white man; we “see” him as “red” and “light for black.” His appearance is questionable, which is in keeping with his business practices, practices that, Dorr suggests, rely quite heavily on cultivating sexual tension between his young clerks and the daughters of the southern planters with whom he deals. An extended description of Fellowes’ shady business practices, sardonically characterized by Dorr as “sound on the goose” might elucidate Dorr’s thoroughness in offering Fellowes’ address in the introduction despite the fact that such explicit identification was presumably dangerous for a fugitive slave in a post-1850 world where law enforcement officials in free states were legally mandated to arrest fugitive slaves.<sup>9</sup> Dubious business practices notwithstanding, Fellowes is described as “naturally aristocratic.” Yet Dorr’s definition of the term highlights its *unnatural* quality: “he can descend from his sphere into the vulgar without knowing it” (62). Here, the aristocratic is marked not by its respectability, but by its crudeness, and the unaffected way in which Dorr presents such a definition deorients the stability of these categories.

This American businessman, further, is on multiple occasions portrayed as engaging in acts of antagonistic charity, so enjoying his power to make the indigent Dutch, “with their large wooden shoes, jum[p] after the grochens” (Dorr 68), that he extends his stay in Holland. Dorr explains:

for example, if a group of ragged girls comes around him begging, he will instantly feel his pockets, and take out all the change, but most of it would go into the hands of the prettiest or cleanest. Or if a group of little boys are the beggars, he will give the most to the smartest and exclaim, “he is a smart little fellow.” And sometimes he is conscious of this partiality, and tries to evade it by throwing the coin among the boys to scuffle for it, but this trait of his is so marked, that he will be sure to throw it on his favourite’s head....He laughs heartily when his boy catches it, as if it done his soul good. (62)

Here is Fellowes’ aristocracy in all its vulgarity. Later, attempting to “corroborate” the rumors that he is a “Count of New York” (Dorr 68), Fellowes throws coins of both large and small

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<sup>9</sup> “Sound on the Goose” was a colloquialism that tended to refer to someone reliable or true, but was appropriated by pro-slavery groups to signal their loyalty to that peculiar institution. See Redd and Etcheson.

denominations at a mass of impoverished people without any forethought, delighted by the acrobatics of the poor in attempting to catch the currency. Yet Dorr leaves ambiguous who has the last laugh when he depicts Fellowes' subsequent terror upon being mobbed by that group (68-69). Interestingly, this moment calls into sharper focus a later one in which Dorr avoids the same fate when he "procure[s] an immense quantity of the smallest coin" in Ghent, asks the doorman of his hotel to tell the "hundred beggars" who pursue him that he will give them all his money if they "cease to follow" him, and then leave the coins to them "to divide among them" (78). The implication, though subtle, is that Dorr, a slave, trusts and embodies true republicanism more so than an exemplar of its successes.

Yet, again, it is important to note the ways in which Dorr, even as he deorients what we "know" of respectability, rarely presents himself as an alternate paragon of respectability. Indeed, Dorr represents himself as "being as genteel as and leisured as the master he ultimately escaped" (Dickerson 56) – which is to say, not very genteel. Rather Dorr presents all aspects of the U.S. white, aristocratic male traveler, even when that implicates him in less than respectable behavior. For Fellowes' vulgarity is not the idiosyncrasy of a slaveholder who, as we already know from the Preface, was dishonorable enough to renege on his promise to set his slave free. Actually, Dorr tells us, Fellowes "treated me as his own son, and could look on me as [free] as a man as walks the earth." It is "local law" and "old bachelor principles" that obstruct Fellowes from following through on his promise of manumission (Dorr 12). The invocation of generality – "local law;" "old bachelor principles" – here allows Dorr to translate Fellowes' principles outward. And, indeed, the United States is not reflected particularly positively in these pages. We might recall from Chapter One, for example, the way in which upon visiting the Great Exposition in England Dorr disdainfully wrote of the US Exhibition and its choice to exhibit Hiram Powers' sculpture of a Greek Slave. He further muses, "I understood that a South Carolinian proposed taking half a dozen naughty and sinewy

negroes to the Fair, but was only deterred from that proposition by the want of courage to risk six fat, strong and healthy negroes to the chances of escape of slavery to freedom” (Dorr 20). Dorr is “ashamed” by the way in which the country of his birth chooses to represent itself when it could have instead sent “one of our ordinary Steam Boats” or other worthwhile “arts” that more accurately embody the ingenuity of the nation (19).

That this is the kind of identity the United States is projecting outward may explain why Dorr is reticent to advertise the fact that he is American. In his own words: “I didn’t pride myself much...on my nationality, lest I would have some unprofitable fame” (Dorr 52). He avoids Americans who are “broke” and want to share their “misfortunes” (Dorr 43) but he likewise finds himself repulsed by those who have plenty of wealth and attempt to “to pass” themselves “off” as “real American gentlem[en]” (Dorr 155). Dorr, a black slave embodying the subject position of a cultured and traveling white man, uses the crudeness of a rich white “upstart” (Dorr 156) or a American “gentleman” who, during a French ball, sat with “his foot on the table,” gnawing on tobacco in “profound soliloquy” (Dorr 40), to call attention to the ways in which such identity is always something we are trying to “pass off,” whether we are a black a man who can pass for a white gentleman or a white man trying (and failing) to pass for the same thing. Thus Dorr is not simply “performing whiteface,” but showing the performance inherent in whiteness.

Similarly, when he identifies himself as a Southerner early in the narrative, it is clear that he does so to make a mockery of himself (and Southernness) by using the affiliation to explain some of his more provincial perspectives, as when he goes in search of a famous hotel in Liverpool, England:

I had been taught at Orleans that the “English could whip all the world, and we could whip the English,” and that England was always in great danger of being starved by us, and all her manufactories stopped in double quick time by Southern cotton-planters...I, under this dispensation of knowledge, looked around to see a towering “St. Charles or Verandah,” but when I saw a house looking like all the rest, I came to the conclusion that the English were trying to get along without making any improvement, as it was not certain how long we would permit her to remain a “monarchial independent nation.” (Dorr 14)

Dorr is indeed behaving like a Southern gentleman in this scene, but it is not a particularly flattering portrayal of what Southern masculinity is. Thus Dorr is not positing that white gentlemanliness is vulgar because of its implication in the slave system, but that white gentlemanliness is vulgar by definition: it is simply a façade of culture beneath which lies all manner of coarseness, impropriety, and bluster.

The most compelling way Dorr's text illustrates this point, however, is through its display of the ways in which "a man is a good deal like a dog in his particulars" (15), a theme which carries throughout the narrative. Dorr could have, in fact, not inappropriately renamed his narrative *A Man is a Good Deal Like a Dog Around the World*, as he makes it a point to foreground the ways in which travel reveals the most "uncommonly savage" parts of our "nature" (Dorr 15). In Malini Johar Schueller's words, Dorr "fancies himself an empowered hero with constant access to the maidservants that wait on him" (*US Orientalisms* 106); indeed, Dorr desires women throughout Europe, and portrays himself as a virile, charming man who is desired in return. At one point, for example, he flirts with a ballerina in an ice cream parlor in Paris, with whom he shares his ice cream because when she asks him whether his was as good as hers, he responds "As the color was different I could not say" – a clear double entendre (Dorr 89). I disagree with Hilton Obenzinger's assessment, however, that Dorr "assumes the prerogatives of gentlemanly cultivation, taking as his right the pleasures of the tourist" precludes any commentary on racial or social categories (228). It is true that Dorr is startlingly open about his sexual desires; indeed, a contemporary reviewer called the narrative "a graphic and racy sketch" (qtd in Schueller "Introduction" xiii). Its candidness seems to explode it out of what we have come to expect from the genres of travel writing and African American literature of the nineteenth century, the former of which dictated that the "pleasures of the tourist" be hidden while the second felt it incumbent to "prove just how cultivated a Negro can be" (Obenzinger 228) But that the same reviewer could assert that Dorr "would readily pass any

where as a white man (and an excellent white man, too)” (qtd in Schueller “Introduction” xiii) we have to ask whether it behooves us to read this narrative according to preconceived ideas about what it should look like. If a black man taking on the privileges of an aristocratic white man and describing all manner of “exotic encounters and erotic exploits” (Obenzinger 228) could become “an excellent white man,” what does that mean about whiteness? Particularly considering the mythology of black men as “bucks” marked by their “deviant sexuality” (Hill Collins 56), does the fact that Dorr’s “racy” sexual desire is accepted as part and parcel of evidence of his “excellent” whiteness confound conventional binaries? Indeed, in appropriating a “cultured” genre where the pretense is an ability to describe the world objectively, Dorr becomes an unwieldy narrator whose text shifts our footing just enough to show us that the world we think we’re standing on doesn’t exist. Tourism turns from a civilized and enlightened mode of observation and control to an unrestrained orgy of ““looking! looking! looking!” often quite literally at women’s bodies (Dorr 32). And Dorr can represent it as such precisely because he is *overlooked* himself.

### **Deoriented Truths, and Who Knows Them**

Interrogating the ways in which the slave narrative conforms to the form of the picaresque, Charles Nichols writes, “the servant sees his master’s nakedness and human weakness as well as his power and wealth” (283). In Dorr’s case, it is precisely this ability to “see” that grants him his textual power. Dorr’s narrative does in fact conform to some of the conventions of the picaresque novel, which Cathy Davidson argues in an early American context allowed authors to “explore a full range of contradictory impulses within the nation” but still avoid “both censure and censorship through its indeterminacy, for just what or who is the butt of the joke or the actual object of serious discussion is not fully certain” (248). As I have already shown, Dorr’s treatment of Fellowes and the other Americans in this text certainly straddle that indeterminate space. If the rather dubious and ambiguous example of Fellowes throwing coins to only the most attractive beggars is provided as

evidence, in Dorr's words, that Fellowes would "have made a profound judge, his heart and talent alike is so justly qualified" (61-62), this is a sly undermining of both Fellowes and the American judicial system. But Dorr does more than call into question his master's gentility; he likewise calls into question the very pretension of the objective or authoritative narrator upon which the travel genre depended.

Dorr self-categorizes his narrative as a "book of overlooked things" (12) and, late in the narrative, admonishes his reader "don't accuse me of trying to become conspicuous by asserting more than others, for you know nothing about it and I do" (93), thus acknowledging the way in which his narrative departs from others that have come before. What remains unsaid, but is implied, is that his access to these "overlooked things" is predicated on the fact that he, as a slave, is an overlooked body himself. His body is entirely excised from the narrative, and he often refers to his ability to "pass unnoticed" (Dorr 27). His slave status does generate, at moments, a sensitivity to power relations; he observes that in Syria one can buy "absolution right off, for any mistake, or bad intention" if one has the money (Dorr 116), and ironically notes that while admission to a particular holy site in Palestine is free, "no pilgrim can come here unless rich, and no rich man will go away without giving something to so sacred a place as the tomb of our Savior" (Dorr 185). As Brian Yothers writes, observations such as these were "infrequently seen among American Holy Land travelers. Perhaps because of his position as a slave, Dorr is able to see a basic fact that many of his compatriots fail to mention: the privileged status of the American traveler" (93).

But in fact moments like these are relatively rare within Dorr's text and the "overlooked" truths he seems more intent on exposing have little to do with class – unless it is the lack thereof. Instead, Dorr often uses his own "overlooked" status to investigate compromising tourist attractions, on more than one occasion blatantly following people "to solve" the "mystery" of "Why gentlemen with pretty mates" would leave parties before they were over (40). In a key chapter

entitled “The Secrets of a Paris Life, and Who Knows Them” (87) Dorr masks his observations with the following introduction:

Reader, can a man dream with his eyes open? or can a man see with his eyes shut? Before you say no, bear in mind that man is the shadow of his maker; and life, a dream. As to the latter part of the query, the answer may be emphatically no! Then let me dream of what I saw. (87)

Throughout the chapter, Dorr interjects to remind us of the ruse of the dream: “Whilst I was dreaming, the pillow became insufferable, and I must say it awoke me. I thought I looked out the window...I jumped into bed and soon fell asleep, and soon got into the old habit, so I dreamt” (90). It is no coincidence that the chapter focuses on the courting rituals of the French, as well as some of the more pornographic “amusements” Parisian men partake in, which, Dorr writes, “language is inadequate to express the vulgarity of” (95). That he then assures us of his veracity at the end of the chapter – “I ought to know something about it,” he insists (Dorr 93) – makes him even more unruly as a narrator. Dorr presents a more truthful picture of travel, he assures us, yet some of the more shocking pictures he presents are framed as dreams. Meanwhile, he deadpan relates “facts” such as the way in which the city of Naples imprisons “all women found and proven in adultery” and proceeds to force them to “sho[w] their nakedness” to tourists for “25 cents” (Dorr 107), or the nudist “macaroni manufactory” in Rome:

The way they make macaroni in Rome, is thus: when it is hot or warm, the men stand by the aperture that squeezes it in to a reed-like shape, and wind it round their bodies until they are totally covered or mantled, and then they walk in great haste in a circle until it is nearly cool, after which they walk on aforesaid platform and unwind themselves...after which they box it for export. That which is made for home consumption is not made on so extensive a scale, and different ideas of neatness is needed lest it affect home consumption. (Dorr 00-101)

Dorr is clearly in jest here; and yet he narrates this scene with the same tone he does any other of the sights whose truth he is adamant about. That no critic who has written about Dorr has approached these moments of the text calls attention to their disruptive quality; that Dorr both adheres to the convention of insisting up on the truth of his travels but deliberately presents coded truths, half

truths, and outright lies makes him uncategorizable. Which is precisely the point: Dorr fuses the multiple forms – the slave narrative, the travel narrative, the picaresque – in order to construct his own, one as illegible according to traditional assumptions as his experience as a “quadroon” have been. Dorr’s text dismantles the foundational myths of race and class; yet it also disrupts our expectations of narrative altogether. Appropriately, it disrupts assumptions about the Orient as well.

### **A Colored Man Around the Orient**

That *The Land and the Book* (1852), missionary William Thomson’s three-volume guide to the Holy Land was the antebellum American bestseller surpassed only by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* speaks to the popularity of Holy Land and Oriental travel narratives within that landscape. Indeed, Hilton Obenzinger writes that the number of American travelers to the Holy Land alone quadrupled from 5000 in 1845 to somewhere between 10,000 to 20,000 during the 1870s (xvii), and many of these travelers wrote about their travels, increasingly emphasizing their personal perspectives over the factual or pragmatic aspects of traveling, perhaps because guides had become more readily available.<sup>10</sup> While many of these travel narratives “contemplated biblical narratives at their source in order to reimagine – and even to reenact – religio-national myths” (Obenzinger 5), many also fed into and were fed by the concerns of slavery, despotism, and sensuality with which popular plays, novels, and essays about the Orient grappled. While these travel narratives – whether written by Protestant missionaries, archaeologists, and biblical commentators or the more literary-minded professional adventurers and travel writers – were by no means entirely obsequious to Christianity or entirely derisive toward the Orient, some commonalities do appear. At its best the Orient was depicted as an exotic, dreamlike expanse that inspired wonder and spirituality; at its worst it is a corrupted, heretical, degenerating backwoods. But in almost all cases the author referenced the changelessness of the Orient and its inability to progress, and even those who were

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<sup>10</sup> See Kalfatovic 247-248.

not invested in ascertaining the truth of Biblical narratives in the Holy landscape note some disappointment with the state of disrepair of holy sites and their commercialization.

As with the rest of his narrative, Dorr both reproduces and disrupts these conventions. Dorr's first interaction with the Orient precedes his actual travel to the Orient, however; narrating a ball in France he suddenly exclaims, "I swear by my father's head, I see a live Turk! Turban! sack hanging between his legs, more empty than Falstaff's! one of the genuine breed that followed Saladin to the plains of Palestine and stood before Richard's battle-axe with his scimitar!" At first glance, this sighting seems unremarkable for its typically Orientalist fashioning of a hypervisible (he is reduced to his turban and Oriental clothing), static (he is one of the "genuine breed" dating from the Crusades), and feminized (an observation so obvious it needs no further explanation) Turk. Yet Dorr slyly complicates this understanding, first by jovially speculating, "Perhaps the next will be the amiable countenance of 'Blue Beard,'" thereby calling attention to the way he is reading this Turk: as imaginary, as fairy tale, as myth (38). Secondly, Dorr's comparison to Falstaff recalls the same Shakespearean reference just ten pages earlier, when Dorr characterizes *himself* the same way when he smuggles cigarettes past a customs officer. The reference seems apropos to Dorr if we read Falstaff as "an experiment in a kind of imagined autonomous, autotelic subjectivity" who "resists being tied down to any single identity and instead continually reinvents himself" (Grady 610-612); that Dorr is linked to this Turk via the reference – regardless if it is a positive one – is significant, particularly when we remember Dorr's relationship to other *Americans*. Again, nowhere – despite the alliances readers might project given Dorr's voice and ability to travel – does Dorr explicitly align himself with whites.

But the reference to Falstaff is not the only way he connects Oriental and black bodies in this first encounter. Dorr also quickly moves his discussion from the Turk to what he terms "other incomprehensibles," most notably a "fine looking, yellow skinned man" who happens to be "a very

rich quadroon from Louisiana” named Cordevoille. This Louisianan, who had sold his successful tailoring business to move to France and live with a (white) French wife, looks “the very picture of a gentleman,” in Dorr’s estimation. Though this “inferior Appollo” is in every way superior to the “old Turk and his beard” it is important to recognize that they are both, like Dorr, “incomprehensibles,” connected by their anomalous identities within the white power structures of France. This is emphasized by the introduction of Fellowes into the scene; again, this is actually the first moment during which he is seen in the narrative (though he is not, again, acknowledged as Dorr’s master). That Fellowes is introduced here solely in relationship to this black man is notable. He must, in fact, remind Cordevoille of who he is by stating, “Mr. Cordevoille, don’t you know me? I patronized in your tailor’s shop five or six years.” Cordevoille not only “seem[s] to be a great object of respect,” meanwhile, but understands the obligations of a gentleman when he invites Fellowes and his traveling partner, “to his country seat” (Dorr 39). The white men, Dorr continues, “being high toned gentlemen of sense” feel obliged to take him up on this offer, “not so much for pleasure and information, as for giving Mr. Cordevoille to understand that they understood the duty of gentlemen” (39-40). Thus these white, slave-holding men must *prove* that they know what it means to be a gentleman to this black man. Dorr demonstrates here that identity is contextual; had they been in the United States, it is unlikely the invitation would have been extended, let alone accepted; these “gentlemen” would not have needed to prove their gentility, since it would have been assumed through their status as Southern white men. This situation, which would have been “incomprehensible” within the narrative Americans were used to reading, seems as much a fairy tale as the Turk with whom it opened.

Similarly connecting Oriental and colored bodies is the fact that the first individual Dorr sees when he crosses what he identifies as the threshold between Europe and Asia is a “large, fat and shiney [sic] black African” (119). Dorr narrates that the African man “attracted the attention and

caused amusement for the passengers; and some one threw some orange peelings on his naked rotundity as he was half lying on his back with no clothes on above his loins....After his patience gave out, he turned lazily around and looked up, like a duck at thunder, and shook his head; they followed up this amusement until he got agoing on the gibberish dialect, and that was more amusement yet” (119). Thus this literal “incomprehensible” is treated almost as an animal in a zoo, and while it is unclear if Dorr joins in to this subjugation, it seems clear that he is not willing to critique it within the space of his narrative. He does, however, provide a translation of the African’s “gibberish”: “it was merely, ‘according to his ideas of decorum, he had not been treated gentlemanly, and that he would remember it if ever we came to his country, and that he would not consider us worth taking note of” (Dorr 119). That this half-naked slab of “meat” (as Dorr says he resembles) lectures Europeans and Americans on “decorum” seems comic – what could he know about civilized behavior? Yet while Dorr remarks upon both his appearance and dialect as being cause for amusement for the passengers, the African is allowed the final word here and Dorr does not comment on it further. In some ways Dorr allows the African to simply state the obvious: it *isn’t* gentlemanly behavior.

If Dorr’s entrance to the Orient is marked by a “black African,” this moment is recalled when he is in Egypt, a space he established as being black in ancestry, when he uses nearly the same – albeit ethnocentric – description to refer to ““some great, fat and lazy Arab” (173). But this hardly appears to be a case in which a kinship between the two – or of either with Dorr – is asserted, though Dorr does claim ancient Egyptian heritage as his own. Dorr’s presentation of these origins, however, are decidedly unusual in that he assumes blackness rather than attempts to prove it; after a long chapter showcasing the achievements of “the first,” as Dorr states “skilled animal on earth,” Dorr ends with an understated, “Such were Egyptian kings of olden time, though black” (170). This is taken a step further when, in a discussion of the Nile, “the days of Pharaoh and Jupiter

Hammon” (175) are evoked though such “days” are over nineteen centuries apart. That Hammon, the first African American slave to be published, makes an appearance here when he was a American slave, born in America – and certainly well after the “splendid” and “rich” days of Pharaoh (Dorr 175) – conflates African Americans with ancient Egypt. Further, it implicitly answers the common logic racists whites invoked to prove that Egyptians were, in actuality, white: if they were black, why then were black Americans so disempowered and uncultured now? The tradition of African American literature is framed as the answer to this question. But if African Americans are the legitimate heirs to ancient Egypt, who then were the “treacherous people” (again in Dorr’s words) living there currently? Unlike certain members of the antebellum black press, whose conclusion was to announce that Arabs were in fact part of the “colored” world, Dorr is not willing to make such a leap. The Arabs of Egypt and Palestine, where he visits directly after his travels to Egypt, are portrayed in much the same way they are in traditional travel narratives – greedy and uncultured. Yet, again, in its blurring of various “incomprehensibles” Dorr’s text works from the ultimate conviction, as Dorr quotes at the end of his text, that “Man, white in Europe, black in Africa, yellow in Asia, and red in America, is nothing but the same man differently dyed by climate” (192). Even if Dorr does not explicitly claim a diasporic allegiance with these Oriental peoples, as African Americans would increasingly do over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, his travels allow him with an interstices to work through understandings of the body and of identity actively engaged with, but never completely dictated by, dominating American understandings of race, sexuality, and nationality.

This is further illustrated by the fact that he spends much of his exposition of Constantinople focused on another black man who is located in a rather fluid position within the narrative. The man is Frank Parrish, a American “ginger-bread color[ed]” man who “looks like a man in every sense of the word” and who is convalescing in Constantinople after being shot while

saving the life of his (white) traveling partner from Arabs who had attempted to murder him. Parrish has the gall to shake the Sultan's hand during a parade, much to the "approbation of all present" and the admiration of Dorr. In fact, Dorr imagines the Sultan recognizes that "his loyal subjects were but as infants, by the giant-like man who stood over them" (127). Though the Turkish subjects are literally "dwarfed" by this strong, heroic black man, one cannot read this as an appropriation of the Orientalist logic that imagines Americans as the robust superiors to the enfeebled and parochial Orient. As I have already shown, nowhere is there a portrayal of a gentlemanly American on these pages; and lest we assume that this is the moment where Dorr presents us with one in the form of a black American, Dorr's characterization of Parrish disrupts this. For one, Parrish, whose appearance is notable for being "a la Turquoise" in every way (Dorr 126) is certainly not unquestionably "Western" here. As becomes clear when we re-encounter him later in the text, Parrish is something of a shape-shifter whose travels allow him to, like Dorr, take on a variety of roles divorced from his "reality" as a black barber from Nashville. Secondly, he is feminized *himself* when Dorr crosses paths with him again in Athens, when he is found sliding down "a celebrated stone" that is rumored to be a protection against "female barrenness" (138). This huge, intimidating man who acted the hero in saving a white man from lawless Arabs "look[s] like a fool" (Dorr 139) in this context, when he is visibly terrified of sliding down a rock women have fearlessly descended for the last "three thousand years" (Dorr 138).

Thus while Dorr appears to reproduce an easy and conventional binary between Frank Parrish and the Turks around him, the multiple levels of representation here subtly and slyly complicate the functioning of those easy binaries. Like the invitation white slaveholders must accept to prove their gentility to a black expatriate, shifting contexts disrupt our ability to "see" and "know" with any one lens. And while the Sultan and his subjects are infantilized and feminized by Dorr's description – the Sultan is portrayed as "a weak looking man" who "knows nothing of the rest of

the world nor cares for it” (127) – it is important to note that the Sultan’s incompetence as a leader is portrayed as being no worse than the French Louis the Fifteenth, who Dorr claims even the French “readily admit” made a “better sultan than a king of France” (86). His descriptions of the political systems of France and Turkey are in fact strikingly similar in tone and language (Dorr 86, 128). Both populations are presented as utterly indoctrinated into an unthinking glorification of “ancestral rights” (Dorr 86). I am not arguing, however, that this similarity is some backhanded recuperation of Turkey. Like his own implication in the seedier parts of travel, Dorr does not insinuate that the Orient is in any sense a better government than France. Nonetheless, the expected dichotomy, in which a Western power is de facto stronger, smarter, and more just than an Oriental power, is disrupted. Neither is this simply a derision of “the Old World” of Europe, for while Dorr claims that “from what he has seen in the four quarters of the globe,” the “federated government” of the United States “is destined to be the noblest fabric ever germinated in the brain of men or the tides of Time” (11), one wonders if such integrity has remained strictly a thought “in the brain of” its citizens, given the depiction of Americans on these pages. Indeed later, on his way to Egypt – in one of the only spaces where he explicitly denounces slavery – Dorr declares, “I will say, that of all the German kingdoms, Austria is the most despotic; but she hates slavery more than the ‘freest government in the world.’ Austria tyrannizes over man, but she cannot tyrannize, chattelize, and prostrate their rights with impunity, anymore than Washington, Jefferson, or Henry could” (162). For while the republicanism of the United States is unmatched in its potential, not until “*the will of the whole people*” is represented can that potential manifest in any lived way (Dorr 12). Until then, it is no better than the Old World or the Orient.

And certainly in a representation of all of the vulgar entertainments across the world – from the way in which “ladies” purposefully hold up their skirts “at “just the right height to attract attention” (50), a trope that is used multiple times throughout the narrative, and in multiple

countries, to the sex shows of Paris (95) – the harems of Constantinople (128) and the belly dancers of Cairo must make an appearance (177-178). Yet these appearances subvert our expectation. As I have been arguing, the conventional portrayal of travel upheld it as taken by refined folk seeking culture. Meanwhile, the Orient was generally portrayed as a “wicked mix of political tyranny and wild sex.” And if the “images of unrestrained sexual activity” there (as portrayed by travel narratives, newspapers, novel and plays) may have “gratified the prurient appetites of Western readers,” they also served a policing function insofar as they defined appropriate sexual conduct (Alison 61). But because the idea of Western sexual restraint has already been amputated here, the significance of the Orient is likewise unhinged. In fact, in comparison to the rest of his travels, the Orient comes off as positively tame. Women in Turkey are “a source of low spirits to a man from off the waters” because, veiled, they are “like spirits or shadows, and cannot be seen” (Dorr 122). The women, who are almost mythical and are described on more than one occasion as “nymphs” (Dorr 122, 128), become impossible to consume. That this is a source of “low spirits to a man from off the waters” makes clear that part of the culture of travel is in fact this kind of sexual tourism (and, indeed, Dorr is careful to note the appearance of women in every location, as though fulfilling a checklist of tourist attractions to mention). Dorr presents himself as near-frenzied with the desire to see these Oriental women, constantly repeating “she must have been pretty,” “I would have given five pds to lift her veil; I know she was pretty” and “I swear she was pretty” (123). And lest we misunderstand Dorr’s concern for these veiled women as being a matter of their oppression, Dorr at one point even offers to purchase one of them, thereby tangibly evoking the way in which Euro-American men are much like the dogs of Constantinople when it comes to “hymenial adventures” (121). Dorr collapses the idea that American men can be distinguished from Oriental men through their understanding of the ways in which “social virtue and stability rested on female virtue” (Alison 62).

Dorr's attempt to buy a Turkish woman might, of course, also speak to the way in which Turkish lives are not valued to even the most subjugated Americans (and this recalls for us some of the articles of the black press as well). But Dorr's representation of these women emphasizes not so much desire for the women themselves as for interactions between *men*. Consider, for example, the interaction Dorr has with the guide who informs him he can purchase the Turkish woman he so passionately desires to see. Most of the scene narrates the transaction between Dorr and his male guide than any detail regarding the woman (or Dorr's desire for the woman) herself. In fact, the interaction culminates with Dorr asking of the guide whether "he thought the girl would admire" Dorr and the guide replying he had "no doubt" she would (123-124). The point I make here is not that, in Eve Sedgwick's words, "we are in the presence of homosexuality" nor actually that "we are in the presence of male heterosexual desire, in the form of a desire to consolidate partnership with authoritative males in and through the bodies of females" (38). I would argue, instead, that Dorr does not simply assert his masculinity through his relationship with males at the expense of the "unreal, inactive, fragile, diminutive, and mystifying, yet inviting" (Schueller *US Orientalisms* 106) women of the Orient. Rather, Dorr situates himself somewhere between homosocial heterosexuality and homosexual desire, a desire that appears nowhere in the text *except* in the Orient. The chapter "Constantinople," for example, begins with Dorr traveling from Naples to Constantinople via two cities, the first which Dorr identifies as Syria and the second Smyrna (now Izmir in Turkey). Though Dorr identifies them as Greek, both of these cities are heavily Orientalized, thresholds that prepare Dorr for the veiled Oriental women he will soon meet. Interestingly, however, it is the beauty of *men* which piques the desire for women: "The men were quite handsome for such a rough country; four or five young men and myself, were determined to see some of the Syrian ladies, if possible." In their subsequent hunt for women, Dorr and company are distinctly *feminized*; when they find a woman (who turns out to be not a woman at all, but a



Portrait of Amanda Berry Smith. From *An Autobiography. The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith the Colored Evangelist; Containing an Account of Her Life Work of Faith, and Her Travels in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, India, and Africa, as an Independent Missionary* (1893)

statue), they pass “respectfully by her” and quickly turn around “just as you have seen a young lady walk a little ahead of her companion, to have an excuse to look back at some young gent.” When they realize their mistake, the men have a good laugh and take off, “skipping down the hill toward [their] vessel” (Dorr 115). And later Dorr is less interested in the Sultan’s harem than a highly sexualized description of Frank Parrish, who carries “as large a hickory stick as ever a man carried to be a stick,” a fact which Dorr seems to imply does not escape notice of the Sultan, who “cast his eyes on” Frank’s “great form, and seemed to be interested.” Dorr, in fact, only mentions the women to suggest that they looked “at Frank the entire time through their eyelids as if they liked the look at him” (126). Since the women are veiled, one wonders whether Dorr’s assertion of their desire is accurate or a projection of his own. This homo-social/sexual playfulness disappears once Dorr has left the Orient, thus suggesting, in a move that anticipates much of the writing of the Harlem Renaissance, that Dorr finds this space one particularly appropriate to working through all understandings of his body, be they racial or sexual.

### **Orienting genre in Amanda Berry Smith’s “own” Autobiography**

If Dorr’s text deorients the familiar conventions of travel writing, the picaresque novel, and the slave narrative to create something entirely his own from which to deorient our assumptions about race, class, gender, and nationality, Amanda Berry Smith’s 1892 *An Autobiography. The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist* likewise resists clear categorization.

Appropriating conventions of American slave narrative, spiritual autobiography, the bildungsroman, and the travel narrative, Smith reveals the way in which traditional understandings of gender and race must likewise be blurred, blended, disrupted, and defied in order to achieve true spiritual growth.

A glance at the title page clearly situates Smith within the conventions of the slave narrative at the outset. As opposed to Dorr’s simple “A Colored Man Round the World, by a Quadroon,”

Smith's follows her already-lengthy title with a subheading: "*Containing an Account of her Life Work of Faith, and her Travels in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, India, and Africa, as an Independent Missionary.*"

While Smith, like Dorr, establishes both her race and her travels immediately, she departs from him in her subsequent emphasis on her authenticity as an author. This stress on autobiography as an "integral part of the title" (Olney 152) – a claim in this case doubly emphasized by the fact that, in its first printing, the binding of Smith's book also read "Amanda Smith's *Own Story*" (italics mine) – is a classic convention of the slave narrative. As is the portrait of Amanda Smith, along with her signature, that comes even before the title page. Perhaps most evocative of the slave narrative is the introduction by white missionary JM Thoburn, an English missionary in India, paired with several pages of "testimonials, letters, etc." – "specimens of the many," she informs us – she has received throughout her career (A. Smith 466) that are meant authenticate both the "truth" of her narrative and her spiritual gifts. Reading Smith's narrative alongside Dorr's, one is struck by the lack of these materials in Dorr's case – no photograph, no authentication – and this mirrors the differences between their embodiments within their texts. Like the mothers they describe, Dorr is a slippery narrator whose body is excised from his narrative, while Smith's physical presence is a fundamental concern of hers. While Dorr appropriates a genre typically thought of as being aristocratic in order to deconstruct it from the inside out, Smith's narrative plays with a genre established by the completely disenfranchised, and at first glance appears to orient itself according to those conventions.

But only initially. After all, Smith was an unusual figure – a woman born into slavery who without formal education or official authorization and support from the church became one of the most well-known evangelist preachers of the late nineteenth century. The only female and only black member of the National Holiness Camp Meeting Association, in fact, Smith's "success as an evangelist helped persuade Methodist church officials to sanction public ministries for women"

(Israel 2). Smith emerged during what some historians call the Third Great Awakening, a American religious movement characterized by its postmillennialism and focus on social justice; the Methodist Holiness movement which emerged during this time was specifically marked by “camp meetings,” or religious practices where people would quite literally camp out, listen to itinerant preachers, and worship together.<sup>11</sup> The Holiness movement was also animated by the pursuit of freedom from voluntary sin (and, ultimately, “sanctification” from original sin). In this context, the underlying theme of Smith’s text becomes the excavation of how accepted conventions of American life are in fact forms of “sin” one can, and should, abandon .

But particularly at the start of her narrative, Smith’s text appears to follow the guidelines of the forms in which it was deemed appropriate for a black woman to write. Like many fugitive slave narratives, Smith establishes herself as a resisting author; she claims she writes not from any belief of self-importance but because she has been entreated to do so time and again by her friends. Yet a close reading reveals that Smith does not deploy this convention in the usual way. While Harriet Jacobs – again, perhaps the most well-known female fugitive slave – resists the call to write because she feels she is “altogether incompetent to such an undertaking” and spends an entire page asking the readers to “excuse” her “deficiencies” (335), Smith explains: “As I was constantly on the go and had no time to think about it, and certainly none to write, things remained thus until after my return from Africa” (III). The tone here is crucial. Although Jacobs is *also* too busy to write, it is because of the necessity of working, in her words, “diligently for [her] own support, and the education of [her] children” – which in turn forces her to write “at irregular intervals” and between “household duties” (335). Smith’s being “on the go” rings decidedly differently: she portrays herself at the outset as a jetsetter too busy with god’s work for such frivolity. Household duties, children, and

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<sup>11</sup> Postmillennialism, as opposed to premillennialism, was marked by an interpretation of the Biblical passages of Revelations that suggested the second coming of Jesus would occur after a Golden Age of Christianity. Premillennialism, on the other hand, suggested Jesus would return after an apocalyptic period of tribulation.

marriage are not invoked here, as would more commonly be the case in nineteenth century women's writing. And despite the fact that towards the end of her narrative she does acknowledge her own lack of education, it is not a central impediment to writing, as it is portrayed by Jacobs and most other slave authors – even, as we saw, David Dorr, who resisted most other conventions.

That Smith's narrative clearly acquires its contours from the genre of the slave narrative – she begins her narrative with the standard “I was born” introduction, and dutifully discusses how she came upon literacy, for example – is testament to the fact that she perceived herself as falling within a particular tradition of black writing. Equally telling, however, are her divergences, which speak to her need to self-fashion an identity apart from these conventions. In fact, the further we get into Smith's narrative, the more it becomes clear that experiences of slavery – or the systemic injustice and violence that was perpetuated in its wake – take up very little space in this narrative. Smith, writing after the end of the Civil War, does not use her narrative as a “cheerleading exercise[e] to urge continued opportunities for integration of blacks into American society” (Foster 150); in fact the only time the war is mentioned is when her first husband enlists in it. Rather, Smith seems to take one of the “controlling motifs” of the slave narrative – that of “the freeing of an authentic identity from the chains of the false one foisted on the slave by southern society” (S. Smith 13) – in order to deorient our assumptions about “authentic” and “false” identities. In other words, like Dorr's, Smith's narrative does not seem particularly interested in proving that African Americans could achieve success and flourish within the American system if they were free to do so; rather, the text disrupts the naturalized assumptions on which that system is based. The world Smith inhabits, the text implies, is not simply founded upon on the denial of “authentic” identities within the slave system. Rather, we are all asked to perform “false” identities, whether black or white, male or female, slave or free; true perfection only comes when such binaries are rejected, blurred, or blended into something entirely new.

Some of Smith's deviations can be accounted for by the fact that she was also working within a tradition of nineteenth century African American spiritual narrative – a tradition represented most notably by *The Life and Religious Experiences of Mrs. Jarena Lee* (1836), *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience and Travels of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw* (1846), *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (1850), and *A Brand Plucked From the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch by Mrs. Julia A.J. Foote* (1879). And indeed, her narrative often reads like an account of “the soul’s journey not only from damnation but also to a realization of one’s true place and destiny in the divine scheme of things” (Andrews 6). What distinguishes her from that tradition, however, is that in her journey for spiritual perfection, Smith is not aided, but directly impaired by, the traditional identities offered her by the world. Like Dorr’s, Smith’s narrative is quite literally her “own,” and blends conventions from several genres into a bildungsroman in which she tries on those conventions before shedding them as she submits herself fully to god’s will. And in Smith’s text – again like Dorr’s – physical travel provides the space through which she can metaphorically travel in and out of traditional identities, a theme that becomes most explicit when she is traveling through the Orient.

**“I don’t know just how I looked, but I felt so wonderfully strange:<sup>12</sup>” Alternative performances**

If we recall the way in which Smith’s mother becomes incomprehensible to her town as a result of her strength and fearlessness, Smith’s bildungsroman is structured around a congruent sense that conventional narratives likewise limit spirit. Smith frames her first marriage, for example, with an all too well-known script:

In September, 1854, I was married to my first husband, C. Devine, by the Rev. Nicholas Pleasant, a Baptist minister in Columbia. My father did not object to my marrying, only on the ground that I was rather young, and I thought so, too, but still, like so many young people, I said, "But well, I know I can get on." Then there was the fellow saying all the nice things he would do for me, and I believed it all, of course. (42)

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<sup>12</sup> A. Smith 79

Smith's use of "of course" and "like so many young people" here alert us to the fact that she believes her story to be formulaic in some way. Given the level of detail she provides for so many of her other experiences, that this is all she imparts of her first courtship assumes the reader's familiarity with this particular narrative. There is very little else to explain; she has simply "believed it all," bought into the narrative that if there is a "fellow saying all the nice things he would do," the natural conclusion is to marry him. The entire span of her relationship, described in just a few short sentences, is likewise recognizable: "it was not long before I wished I had not believed half he said, though in many things he was good....he could talk on the subject of religion very sensibly at times; but when a strong drink would get the better of him, which I am sorry to say was quite often, then he was very profane and unreasonable" (A. Smith 42). The distance with which Smith describes her marriage, it must be made clear, partially arises from her reality as a domestic worker. In a world where one is forced to live with the families one serves, rather than one's own family, in order to survive, stories of domestic bliss become few and far between. Be that as it may, however, Smith's narrative departs from a good portion of African American literature at the time, which often stressed that "loving, harmonious familial relations" were the "natural impulse of blacks" (Foster 135) in the face of a dominating culture that insisted upon their deviance and pathology. Despite the fact that Smith apparently wrote to a primarily white audience, however, her narrative does not strategically deploy sentiment or domesticity; she does not rely upon an assumed universality of the emotions of a wife and mother. In other words, unlike Harriet Jacobs, who fused the slave narrative with that of sentimental fiction in order to more accurately portray the peculiar oppressions of slave women but also to more effectively reach out to her (presumed white) female audience, Smith's text employs a more traditionally "male" emphasis on the solitary hero.<sup>13</sup> In fact, in Smith's narrative, marriage and motherhood are unsentimentally portrayed as unavoidable facts of life for women at

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<sup>13</sup> See Braxton, Sidonie Smith, Valerie Smith.

best; at worst, they become a distraction, an impediment to spiritual growth and good works. If, as Valerie Smith argues, the slave narrative as a genre was more “compatible with received notions of masculinity” (28) than femininity because it “mythologized rugged individuality, physical strength, and geographic mobility” (34), the way in which Smith manipulates the genre challenges our assumptions about femininity. In other words, Smith’s text takes the dominating ideology’s understanding of “True Womanhood” and systematically reveals the way in which the last two of the “four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Welter 21) actively inhibited one’s ability to fully embody the others.

For just after she is married, Smith falls ill and has a vision, the first of many throughout her life. She recounts:

I went to a great Camp meeting and there seemed to be thousands of people, and I was to preach and the platform I had to stand on was high above the people. It seemed it was erected between two trees, but near the tops. How I got on it I don’t know, but I was on this platform with a large Bible opened and I was preaching from these words: -- “And if I be lifted up will draw all men unto me.” O, how I preached, and the people were slain right and left. (Smith 42-43)

This vision reads quite literally as a call to arms: Smith must preach, but she must also slay. Smith awakens from this vision, interpreting it to mean that “God had spared” her “for a purpose,” and swearing to thereafter “live a Christian life” (43). But, Smith implies, she initially misreads this message from god precisely because of her preconceived ideas about what it means to be a woman and live a Christian life. Indeed, explaining her rationale for remarrying – this time a preacher named James Smith – after her first husband dies in the Civil War, Smith writes, “One reason for my marrying a second time was that I might have a Christian home and serve god more perfectly. I thought to marry a preacher would be the very thing.” (57-58). This logic, she explains further, is based on the way such a life “looked:”

I had *seen* and *known* the influence of a minister’s wife, and how much she could help her husband or hinder him to a great extent in his work....I thought how nice it will be to be able to do so much good, and beside *to be spoken of as “rev. Mr. and Mrs. Smith.”* I thought I

saw it clearly, and I said, yet after all *this looks like the Lord's will*. At that very hour Satan had gained the victory over me and yet I did not know it was he. (A. Smith 58; italics mine)

Smith's emphasis in this passage is on the outward appearance of the situation: she recounts the way in which other reverends' wives appear, and expresses her desire she wants to be looked at and "spoken of" in the same regard. What she "sees" and "knows," however, actually clouds her vision, for this marriage, like the first, is duplicitous. Despite his religious occupation, James Smith is "indifferent" to most religious practices. Smith writes that shortly after their marriage "I saw that my husband did not seem to be interested and studious as he had been, and when I would speak to him about it he would be cold...I knew from the way he expressed himself all was up for my good work as a pastor's wife" (58-59). Contrary to what she has expected based on her observations and assumptions, her marriage is not the means through which she accesses religion, but – particularly given her husband's propensity to disprove her religious beliefs – a direct impediment to it. She has been led to believe that she can see god's desire in a conventional route – that of preacher's wife – but in reality she must detach herself from convention in order to reach her full potential as a preacher *herself*.

But in order to do so, Smith must "slay" the part of her that "knows" what it means to be a good Christian woman, to disregard some of the natural concerns of the domestic life which, if we are to understand Smith, are peculiarly exploitable by "the devil" (to whom I will hereafter refer to without quotations, as per Smith's usage). Time and time again such concerns – working to support one's family, washing, cooking, childcare, lack of time, exhaustion – becomes the means through which Satan prevents Smith from spiritual growth. In one such moment, a quite formative one that ultimately introduces her to Methodism and thus sets the wheels in motion for her to become a preacher, the devil attempts to thwart her plans for attending preacher John Inskip's church for the first time. Because of her sense of what it means to be a good wife, Smith is hesitant to go because she knows that if James returns home while she is at church, "he would be vexed" (A. Smith 73); the

devil meanwhile persistently exploits this sense by insisting she ought to go to a closer church – since Inskip’s is quite far away – so as not to “catch” trouble (A. Smith 73) or be the cause of James’ “sin” of anger (74). Similarly, Smith’s “mother heart” (A. Smith 319) is not a commonality with which to sympathize and relate with her readers, but a vulnerability that Satan attempts to exploit. By turns he attempts to prevent her from attending church services by planting vivid images in her mind of her older daughter accidentally harming her infant (A. Smith 75), stop her from donating to charity by pointing out her own child’s lack of shoes (A. Smith 171), and obstruct her from undertaking missionary work in India by insisting she will die and leave her child an orphan (A. Smith 245-246). That Smith acknowledges the way in which domestic and familial concerns can get manipulated by Satan is not to say Smith advocated for women eschewing marriage and family, I should be careful to note. Yet it would be equally egregious to suggest she advocates such a path, either, since the only moment on which she explicitly comments on this issue (rather than speaking through her interactions with the devil) is when she attempts to persuade her daughter – who also, “like so many other young people,” could not “hear reason or anything” – not to marry young (A. Smith 220). Regardless, she is in fact deeply concerned with making religion accessible, writing that she has “had some of the richest blessings” while engaged at the “wash-tub and ironing table,” and assuring her readers that “the blessing of sanctification” does not rely upon “isolation from all the legitimate duties of life” (A. Smith 103). The logic of Smith’s text is that it not the “legitimate duties” of life that preclude a fully spiritual life, but our conception of “good womanhood.” Washing dishes might not prevent “the soul’s communion with Jesus” but being constrained by the narratives we overwrite onto that task very well might.

For the feelings “natural” to a mother and wife are not the only Smith interrogates as impediments to spiritual growth. If Smith, like Dorr, does not explicitly attempt to prove the ways in which African Americans are deserving of racial equality or explicitly critique the system that

withholds it from them, she instead deorients the more subtle ways in which one's enemy is found inside oneself, the way in which one internalizes "truths" that reinforce one's oppression. For the insecurity Satan exploits most often in this narrative, in fact, is not worry about children, or exhaustion from work, or husbands that expect their wives to stay at home. Rather, it is a sense of racial self consciousness. Smith's narrative, in many ways, is a bildungsroman of coming into, and then out of, not racial consciousness itself, but the *consciousness of race as a liability*. Early on, Smith is sensitive to the hypervisibility of her racial status and the way in which it imposes particular narratives on her; her anxiety about her conspicuousness seeps through almost every spiritual endeavor she attempts because she is all too aware "how sensitive many white people are about a colored person" (197). She explains to us, "I had a very keen sense of propriety; I had been taught so, and Satan knew it" (A. Smith 77). That she has been "taught" this sense of propriety – a thinly veiled way of saying she has been taught a sense of inferiority – denaturalizes it; she is afraid of what white people will think of her not because she fears that they will do her "harm, or anything of that kind" but because "they were white, and were there, and I was black, and was here" (A. Smith 80). In other words, she fears them because the status quo demands it. It is only once god "helps her" to "take the timidity out" of her that she is strengthened enough to speak and begin her preaching career; the implication is that if she accepted the place her sense of propriety dictated, she would not have done nearly as much good as she ultimately does. Thus, the narrative reads as a coming-of-age story in which she sheds her feelings of insecurity despite the fact that not much has structurally changed surrounding her role as a black woman; the way she *interprets* it has. She has, in essence, decolonized her thinking from convention, and lives by a larger spiritual code that turns the "great mountain" of race into "a mole-hill" (A. Smith 80). Smith is not disavowing her race by pointing to its "absolute smallness" (A. Smith 37) – though she admits that many of her contemporaries did in fact label her "a white folks' nigger" because of her popularity with white audiences (A. Smith 232;

452-453). Rather, throughout the narrative Smith is careful to explain the ways in which it is not her sense of blackness she sheds – just as it is not the necessity of attending to the “legitimate duties” of life she escapes – but the way in which she approaches blackness. Her sense of what blackness *signifies*, the way it is expected to be performed, has changed. Smith pushes up against the constraints of propriety, the sense that she must be unobtrusive and not make anyone uncomfortable, the sense that she must be “imitative” (A. Smith 162), and instead performs a unique and spectacular version of blackness.

Smith’s acceptance of her hypervisibility is actually depicted as a conversion process in and of itself. During one of her earliest experiences at a camp meeting in Maine, Smith is continually pursued by a mob of curious white onlookers; she writes,

There had been a great crowd all day, and everywhere I would go a crowd would follow me. If I went into a tent they would surround it and stay till I came out, then they would follow me. Sometimes I would slip into a tent away from them. Then I would see them peep in, and if they saw me they would say, ‘Oh, here is the colored woman. Look!’ (183)

Smith, unnerved by this apparent lack of manners, is then soothed by god into realizing that the beauty of a “picture” does not change simply because it is gazed upon. Thus Smith comes to terms with her objectification and re-presents herself, shouting “I have got the victor! Everybody come and look at me!” (184). Smith herself acknowledges the advantages she has gained by accepting her status as anomaly: “And now, the change is, instead of Amanda Smith, the colored washwoman’s presence having a bad effect on a meeting where ladies of wealth and rank are gathered to pray and sing His blessing, they think a failure more possible if the same Amanda Smith, the colored woman, cannot be present” (198). She has, in essence, altered what it means to be objectified. Blackness turns from “inconvenien[ce]” (A. Smith 116-118) to “beaut[y]” (A. Smith 185, 266); something which imposes restriction from without into something that can be deployed outward from within in order to effect change in the world.

**“So that was my best idea of the grand old ocean. I have learned a great deal about it since then.”<sup>14</sup> Expectations Abroad**

It is within Egypt that this deorientation of the meaning of blackness is made most manifest. Up until her travels, Smith has written a narrative of shedding a sense of the inherent inferiority of blackness; when she arrives in Africa is when she most palpably reframes it as a privilege. This is though Smith undertakes her journeys with a racist framework bestowed upon her from white “science:” an almanac her parents procured when she was a child that had contained “horrid” images of “Africans in their costumes and huts, and Indians in their wigwams, great boa constrictors, bears, lions and panthers (A. Smith 215). But what she sees upon her first lived encounter with the Orient is “so beautiful, so different from what one sees at home:”

The great old historic Egypt! Egypt that I have read of in the Bible! Can it be possible?...who are these men coming off in the boats? There are four or five boats, all manned, each with six, eight, ten or twelve men – black men – my own race. I had been so long without seeing any of my own people that I felt like giving three cheers!” (A. Smith 295)

The landscape and history of Egypt become immediately inseparable for its population, unusual for the literature of Smith’s time. Rather, the overwhelming trope surrounding Egypt was to express wonder at the ancient greatness while deriding the “treacherous people,” in Dorr’s words (164), who were clearly unable of proper stewardship of that legacy. And as we have seen in Chapter One, while many African American authors during the nineteenth century felt comfortable claiming the history of Egypt, they were often much more ambivalent about establishing kinship with the “natives” there. Smith, however, not only immediately claims Egyptians as her “own race,” but continues:

I never saw such scientific rowing in my life. They stood up instead of sitting down, but, Oh, how perfectly they bent to their oars. They had on little red skull caps, with black tassels on the top, and neat black alpaca coats. I presume they were Mohammedans, as they dressed just like the Mohammedans in India. Many of them were fine looking men, black as silk and straight as arrows, well developed, and independent as kings. They moved about

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<sup>14</sup> (242)

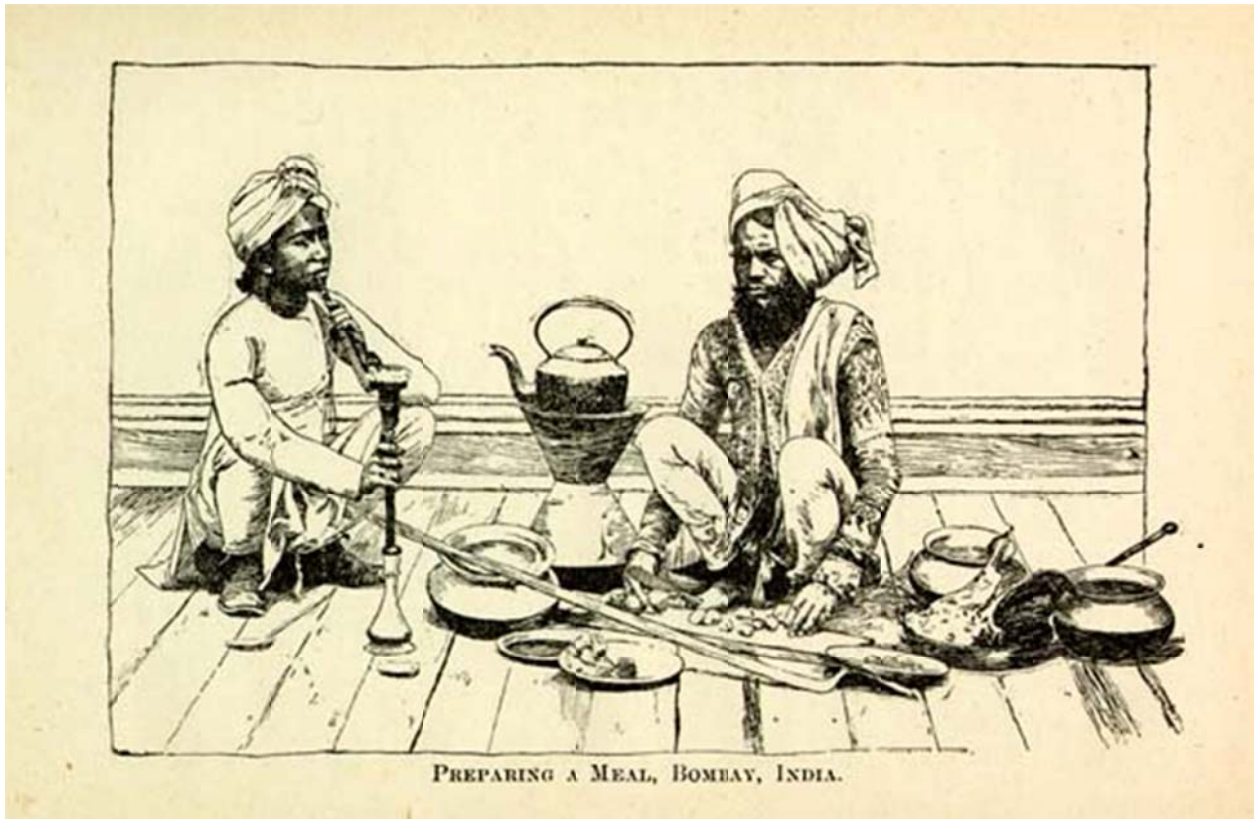
and did the business intelligently, and with promptness and ease. They didn't know what it was to crouch to any man. I felt proud that I belonged to that race when I saw such nobility in ebony. (295)

Smith's emphasis on the "scientific" rowing, professional demeanor, and "promptness" of these Egyptians all seem direct oppositions to a American racist tradition that imagined Africans and African Americans as being, if artistic, certainly never scientific. Far from incompetent and indolent, these Africans do not embody the natural servility many racists argued was inherent to Africans – they do not know what it is like to "crouch to any man." Though she may not state her "ethnological" endeavor here, clearly Smith shared Douglass' concerns implicitly.<sup>15</sup> She continues: "I remembered it was the birthplace of Moses, and the hiding place of the infant Jesus from the cruelty of Herod, the king. And out of all the world round it pleased God to bestow this great honor on the black race, which ought to be held in everlasting remembrance. And I prefer being black, if for no other reason than to share this great honor with my race" (A. Smith 295). In this moment – in her encounter with Egypt – Smith pushes forward the deorientation of racial meaning she has been attempting throughout the narrative; the inconvenience of hypervisibility is not simply reinterpreted into a power that can be deployed, but a preference, something she would choose "if only" in order to share a particular heritage with Egyptians.

Despite her status as a missionary, the fact that the men with whom she feels a kinship are actually Muslim seems to be of little concern to her. In fact, when hearing of a Qu'ranic school, she writes that other missionaries tell her "it was a wonderful sight to see" and wistfully notes, "How I should have liked to have seen that school" (A. Smith 298). This wonder and toleration cannot be explained away by the originary significance of Africa for Smith; in other words, Smith does not ignore the Islamic element of Egypt simply because it is part of Africa and she imagines herself connected to its legacy. In fact, Egypt is by far the most positive of her descriptions of Africa;

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<sup>15</sup> See Introduction 32.



*From An Autobiography. The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith the Colored Evangelist; Containing an Account of Her Life Work of Faith, and Her Travels in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, India, and Africa, as an Independent Missionary (1893)*

Liberia gets no description of this sort while Sierra Leone is “a very busy looking place” where “A great many come on board to get work. They are called coolies. Some of them opened my trunks and helped themselves” (A. Smith 332). The thieves of Sierra Leone are in marked contrast to the impoverished of Egypt, who are presented as “scientific” runners who are “polite” and supplicate “gracefully;” when they offer to carry Smith up to the pyramids (A. Smith 297). While they are represented as picturesque elements of the landscape of Egypt, this is, nonetheless, by far the most appealing picture of the poor that Smith presents throughout the narrative.

Yet if Alexandria is presented as a “beautiful city” – so modern that its “large and spacious” houses, “large, fine hotels,” “ice cream parlors,” and “beautifully lighted” streets seem “more like England or America than Egypt” (A. Smith 296) – India shocks Smith with its difference. One of the most striking disparities between Smith’s first impressions of Egypt and her first impressions of India is that while the former relies heavily on detailed descriptions of the (albeit mostly male) human beings who live there, in India the population is not mentioned at all for quite some time. In fact, Smith’s journal passes through the events of nearly two weeks in India without a mention of Indians, until finally she notes, “We go to the Maila. It is like what we would call in this country a fair. Oh, the hundreds of people. Oh, to see the heathen idol worship!” (300). Thus Indians are an undifferentiated swarm of hundreds of “heathens,” a significant difference from the “black as silk” Egyptians whose clothing and rowing style Smith describes in detail and who, despite their misguided religious practices, are considered kin to her. We are alerted to this shift in focus in Smith’s lens – a move from Biblical heritage to colonial history – when, early on during her stay, she visits the Memorial Gardens at Cawnpore, and writes, “How dreadful the story of the Cawnpore well, where so many were massacred and thrown in at the time of the great Indian mutiny” (300). The “mutiny” to which Smith refers – also called by turns the “Uprising,” “Rebellion,” “Revolt,” and “First war of Independence” of 1857, depending on who you ask – was a year-long insurrection by

mostly Muslim Indian soldiers of the British Indian Army who felt that the introduction of cartridges greased with pig and cow fat was “defiling” to Hindu and Muslims alike (Paxton 4). The uprising played a huge role in colonial mythology, and in particular the siege of Lucknow to which Smith refers, where 200 British women and children were killed, was deployed by British media to justify increased colonial power. As Nancy L. Paxton writes, “Certainly, it is no accident that the dominance of this particular version of the colonial rape narrative which makes Englishwomen and their innocent children into a precious national sacrifice coincides with the most martial phase of British imperialism, between 1870 and 1914” (6). Yet even with this lens, it is in India where Smith’s text, like Dorr’s, most explicitly dismantles what is considered “civilized” living and shows that its archaic framework and enslavement to convention is an impediment to progress. We are introduced to this unexpected framework when she is traveling to Nagpur, and notes

There are generally two roads; a native road, and an English road; the English roads were better, as a rule; they generally kept in their provinces good roads; we were on the English road, so we had to turn out and go down the native road, which was very rough, because they never mended them, or made any repairs to them (A. Smith 301).

Whether this is an indictment of native incompetence or English selfishness is unclear here; though Smith was certainly acquainted with segregation, if the latter is meant of an example of it, it is certainly a subtle indictment at best. But the discussion of separate roads is further complicated by an interaction she has with her driver. She tells us that she and her traveling companion (a missionary named Jennie Frow) “thought [they] had got a very stupid driver” when they “got to a place where the bullocks would not go on” and the driver, who she reiterates “seemed to be stupid,” will not force them to push forward. She continues:

It was very dark, and there were no lights; and when we got out and walked ahead two or three yards we saw the great danger we were in; if the bullocks had gone out, they would have surely broken their necks, and we might have been killed. (A. Smith 301)

By emphasizing that they “thought” they had gotten a very stupid driver but one who, it must be inferred, knew the danger ahead of them, Smith calls attention to the way in which it is certainly

possible that the natives might indeed hold knowledge that the presumed more intelligent Westerners might not. Yet for the most part Smith does not interrogate dominating Euro-American identities through a positive reading of native experiences. Rather, like Dorr, she does so through a deconstruction of the dominating identities themselves.

Upon arriving at her destination, a camp meeting in Nagpur, Smith becomes acquainted with a British Colonel whose ten-year-old daughter is so inspired by Smith's preaching that she, Smith tells us, "acted out her position by beginning to do something." She seeks out the "derzy," or tailor, of the household and

began to tell him about what Jesus could do; and as she could talk the native language as well as a native, he listened to her; and she kept it up til he got so interested he asked her for a Testament; and so she got a Testament, and made the old man promise that he would read it. He was greatly pleased with it. (302)

In clarifying the function of "derzies" for her American audience, Smith explains, "All the clothes to be made or mended are given to these men, and they sit down in a corner that is arranged for them, and do the sewing. They come and go, morning and evening, and are very quiet. They never pass about through the house only at their work" (302). The tailors are literally effaced; their silence and unobtrusiveness both calls to mind Smith's previous sense of propriety and highlights the way in which these men are not "seen" by the colonial class. Despite the fact that they make "all" the clothing in a household, they are apart from it. Only a child would think to interact with them in any other way, because a child has not yet internalized the way in which she is meant to see – or not see, as it were. She still has the ability to "ac[t] out of her position," a phrase with some ambiguity: is she embodying the responsibility she, as a part of the ruling class, has; or is she deviating from her responsibility to reproduce a particular status quo? Regardless, salvation for this man – as Smith interprets it – is transmitted not through the traditional colonial system, but through the anomalous circuits of a black American female preacher and a young British girl who can "talk the native language as well as a native." The overriding anxiety of colonial culture, the acculturation of English

children into the non-English society with which they were surrounded, is transformed here into that child's strength. If for many colonial families, relationships with the natives threatened a kind of "moral and physical contamination[n]" (Stoler 112) and, as a result of this anxiety, "narratives about English children lost to their colonial families and communities began to emerge as a major theme in Anglo-Indian fiction" (Paxton 165) around the same time Smith was writing, Smith's narrative reorients this towards spiritual power. In other words, the daughter's ability to straddle an ambiguous identity – her attachment to her servants, her ability to speak like a native – are at once the very things the ruling class feared and her most valuable potential for doing good. And indeed, most of Smith's writing in India is marked by these two ideas – the unconventional means to which one must resort if one wants to find a "pathway of light in the midst of the darkness" (x), and the idea of the colonial status quo as not one of those pathways but in fact a form of darkness.

This latter point is explicated in what at first glance appears to be an impenetrably protracted discussion of a bottle of wine and brandy she is given by the Colonel and his wife. The alcohol is presented in a picnic lunch she is given for her travels away from Nagpur, and brings Smith – a "staunch teetotaler," in her own words (303) – a good deal of anxiety. She writes of feeling obliged to accept the gift, "The enemy wanted to make me believe that" the colonel's wife "would be greatly offended, and that now I would undo all the good work that I might have done." In other words, propriety has come to haunt her. Smith travels along with the alcohol, fearing all the while that "somebody would see it" and that she "would not be able to explain it" (A. Smith 305). When she arrives at her destination – a camp meeting whose subject, unbeknownst to her, is the dangers of alcohol – Smith recounts the hours of testimony given at this meeting about natives who were given alcohol by the colonials and became alcoholics. "Better let them die," summarizes one man (A. Smith 306). Later, Smith offers the wine to a native Christian woman who is *actually* dying, and another missionary responds, "She used to like it very much. *They* used to have it, of course, *in the*

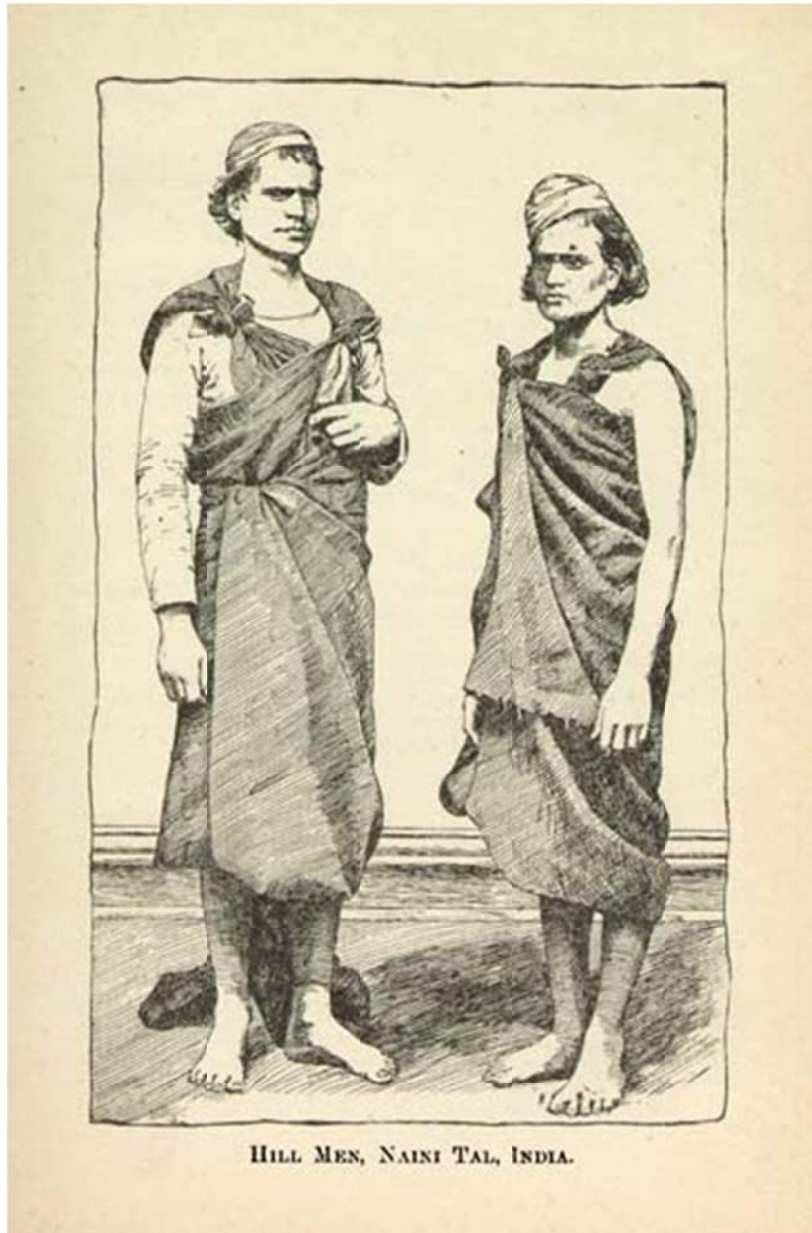
*families where she had been so long*, and she had got to like it, and it might be the means of diverting her mind. I had rather she would die without it.” (304; italics mine) The colonial families for whom this woman worked are a corrupting influence; they “divert the minds” of the natives rather than spreading progress. This supposed “gift” from the Colonel and his wife, then, becomes a symbol of the less savory gifts of colonialism.

Further, the colonial system often, in Smith’s illustrations, stands in the direct way of spiritual progress – and certainly missionary work. Specifically, Smith provides a discussion of a missionary named Mrs. Wheeler that palpably illustrates the ways in which missionaries, in Maina Chawla Singh’s words,

lived in remote areas, sometimes as a single nuclear family, speaking local languages, adapting to local food habits and mingling freely with the ‘heathen’ in a bid to bring him closer to Jesus. The missionary home meant to symbolize familial (real Christian) love and ...with its easy accessibility disturbed colonial spatial arrangements, possibly the most visible markers of race and power. (48)

Mrs. Wheeler, who Smith praises for being a “pioneer,” lives in an isolated area of the country but manages to perform “missionary work in the zenanas,” preach freely in “some open space in the village” and “dispens[e] medicines two or three times a week, as the case might be” (307). Often used as a synonym for harem in nineteenth century writing, the zenana traditionally referred to the part of a home where the women were sheltered; Mrs. Wheeler’s ability to preach in “some open space” marks her as being a very different type of woman than these native ones. Yet while there are “some English officers’ headquarters” close by – the only whites within miles – and the officers bring their wives from time to time, Wheeler is set apart from them as well. In fact, Wheeler is more at home among the villagers since the white women are “far from being Christian, and have but little sympathy with missionaries and their work” (A. Smith 307). Further, because she lives alone (or occasionally with another woman missionary), she is looked at “with a kind of suspicion” because she has rejected the pretense of the necessity of masculine protection. Rather, Wheeler fashions a

self that appropriates male privilege and authority, such as when she insists on building her own house, something “no woman had ever been known” to do (A. Smith 307). She becomes, as Smith tells us, “her own architect and superintende[nt]” and is so unrelenting in her authority that Smith recalls seeing her “counting tiles from six o'clock in the evening till nine and sometimes ten o'clock at night.” Wheeler’s assertion of dominance offends the sensibilities not only of the British elite but the natives who work for her; Smith tells us that “The native men whom they had to deal with, felt like some of the English officers who were there. They thought that a woman had not sense enough to build a house, and if she had she ought not to do it, for it was lowering her dignity as a woman.” The native men and the English men are both upholders of rigid gender roles; they subscribe to the same belief in the kind of “true womanhood” that a lady should never get her hands dirty, lest it “lower” her “dignity.” All comments about Wheeler’s dignity to the contrary, however, it seems the men simply obscure that they feel threatened by her authority through a pretense of concern, since ultimately they give Wheeler a “great deal of trouble” and consistently delay her work (A. Smith 307). However much trouble it brings her, Miss Wheeler insists upon merging a more masculine authority with her womanly work in the zenanas, and it is through this breaking of binaries that what Smith perceives as progress in India is manifested. Smith’s examples of good works are entirely framed between constructed binaries: between colonized and colonizer, between male and female. Despite the controversy surrounding female preachers which underlies the text in general, at no other point in the narrative is this so called into relief. India more than any other space in this text serves as a point where fluidity in race, gender, and nationality is figured as being used to positive ends. The little English girl speaking the native tongue can spread Christianity; the missionary woman who acts like a man (much to the chagrin of both Indian and English men) to build her own house is a productive force in her community. Meanwhile the stagnant colonial status quo is



*From An Autobiography. The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith the Colored Evangelist; Containing an Account of Her Life Work of Faith, and Her Travels in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, India, and Africa, as an Independent Missionary (1893)*

portrayed as fairly useless – a contagion of alcoholism, impotent to take care of its women and children.

Yet it would be egregious to suggest that Smith is in any way empathetic to the Indians who she encounters, who like the derzies, are part of the woodwork. Sometimes picturesque, sometimes grotesque, they never speak but provide a stage on which Smith's text can deorient our assumptions of race and gender. This is certainly not a case of anticolonial sensibilities; if Smith recognizes any analogous injustice between herself and the peoples of India, it remains unsaid. Nor can it be discounted that Smith's version of progress is predicated on an inherently ethnocentric belief that the natives must be brought to the light of Christianity. For much of her travel, Smith does in fact seem to internalize the colonial power structures, hiring boys to carry her up steep mountains and describing in detail the "outfits" she chooses for them, as though to construct her own harem. That being said, reading the narrative according to its own logic – the assumption that the spread of Christianity would allow degraded peoples, whether in the United States or abroad, to become "sanctified" as she has – Smith's narrative suggests that this can only be done through a systematic dismantling of the internalized understanding of what it means to be black, or white, or a woman, or a man. Smith repeatedly embraces the seemingly contradictory, the discordant, and the incongruent not in order to resolve them into a cohesive whole, but in order to show the ways in which it is the slippages between what is expected and what is found where one can cultivate an authentic sense of self.

### Chapter Three

#### **“Not one who can’t be white and won’t be black:” African American Women and the Orient, 1892-1903**

*“With all her vaulted independence, the American woman of to-day  
is as fearful of losing caste as a Brahmin in India.  
That is the law under which she lives, the precepts which she binds as frontlets  
between her eyes and writes on the door-posts of her homes,  
the lesson which she instills into her children with their first  
baby breakfasts, the injunction she lays upon husband and lover  
with the direst penalties attached.”  
Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South* (1891-1892)*

The “Literature Notes” columnist for *The Woman’s Era*, the official organ of the National Association of Colored Women and the first newspaper printed specifically for and by African American women, sat writing in December 1894. Which new books to recommend for this holiday season? Her readers generally looked to the paper, which was “devoted to the interests of Women’s Clubs, Leagues, and Societies throughout the country” (“To Our Correspondents...”), for “useful suggestions” concerning the elevation of both their families and their race (“Boston: The Woman’s Era Club”). Naturally, then, Mrs. N.F. Mosell’s *The Work of Afro-American Women* must be reviewed; in documenting the flourishing “work” of African American women, the book did for her community “what had already been done for other women more favorably circumstanced”. The reviewer was particularly pleased, she noted as she composed her review, that Mrs. Mosell had not “omitted to mention that great army of women workers, the home-makers...to whom as a race we owe far more for our advancement and improvement than we do a few teachers or scribblers here or there.” As for the other books, Phillip’s Moxom’s *The Aim of Life* would do well; it was “designed as an aid to young people in the development of noble characters.” Of course a few novels would have to be recommended; she took care to endorse only the most “elevating and inspiring.” And Dr. Trumbell’s *Studies in Oriental Life*, as “instructive as it was inspiring,” would nicely round out her recommendations. “Particularly valuable as an aid to the Bible,” she explained thoughtfully, the

work would serve to shed light on “the things that are difficult to understand in Bible history” through exposition of the current “social customs and inner life of the people” of the Orient (“Literature Notes” *The Woman’s Era* December 1894).

Reading this review in 2011, one is struck by the incongruity of this choice; it seems quite a conspicuous departure from the other texts. Yet it is positioned as similarly “instructive” to texts whose explicit missions were to inspire “nobler and better” race work. The logic, it appears, is that an elucidation of Oriental customs in the nineteenth century would provide a stronger comprehension of the Bible, which would in turn allow women to become greater paragons of Christianity in their homes and communities. But the implication – that an understanding of one’s domestic concerns might be enhanced by an excavation of the “social customs” and “inner life” of those of the Orient – reshapes what we mean by “domestic concerns” in the first place, and indicates the way in which representations of an African American domesticity were informed and reformed through perceptions of the Orient. And indeed, for the larger community of black women writers at the turn of the twentieth century, understandings of the Orient not only played into the articulation of an African American aesthetic of domesticity and womanhood but also served as a means to confront the domestic conflicts that arose vis-à-vis the politics of race. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which two of these women, Anna Julia Cooper and Frances E.W. Harper, navigated the dominating discourse of Orientalism in their own figuring of African American womanhood. The engagement of these two texts – Cooper’s book of polemical essays and speeches *A Voice From the South* and Harper’s novel *Iola Leroy* – with the Orient speak to the ambivalences and anxieties, the fissures and slippages, that occurred when African American women worked through discourses that had systematically devalued them. Ultimately, I use these works as a means by which to contextualize the deorientation acts of a novel which may be read as the first to articulate a

diasporic, shared origin between Arabs and African Americans: Pauline Hopkins' unwieldy melodrama-turned-science-fiction, *Of One Blood*.

### **Reorienting the Sex of the Nation: Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice From the South* and Francis E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy***

Like the reviewer of *The Woman Era's* "Literature Notes" – who argued that African Americans, "as a race" were more indebted to "home-makers" than "a few teachers or scribblers here and there" – Anna Julia Cooper acknowledges that while "Preachers and Teachers are helps" in the "regeneration" and "retraining" of the African American race, as fundamental as "rain and sunshine are to plant growth," the essential "root" of the "plant germ" lies within the home, and, specifically, within the "mothers in those homes" (63). In her collection of essays *A Voice From the South* (1892), Cooper powerfully dissects the way in which imperialism as a hegemonic ideology has undergirded much of Western and non-Western civilization alike and, further, advocates for an ontological shift toward what she defines as a more "feminine" ethos that does not conflate progress with oppression. She rails:

Whence came this apotheosis of greed and cruelty? Whence this sneaking admiration we have for bullies and prize-fighters? Whence the self-congratulations of "dominant" races, as if "dominant" meant "righteous" and carried with it a title to inherit the earth? Whence the scorn of the so-called weak or unwarlike races and individuals, and the very comfortable assurance that it is their manifest destiny to be wiped out as vermin before this advancing civilization? (Cooper 73)

Cooper's project suggests a new understanding of power, one that achieves its strength not through "greed and cruelty" but through an increased emphasis on the lessons taught by the "mother heart" of the nation. Cooper's tactic differed from Amanda Smith's, who pressed up against the ways in which women were interpellated precisely into those "feminine" forms of sentiment. For Cooper, however, the recuperation of the kind of ethics of care associated with the feminine allowed her to push forward a more overtly feminist agenda of equal rights for women – for how else to absorb these lessons without giving more priority to the actual women from whom they come? – and,

interestingly, also where she brushes up against the Orient, in an encounter that reveals the way in which some of fundamental anxieties many nineteenth-century African Americans felt about the East intersected with the ones they felt about their West. The gaps, elisions, and silences opened up by the misalignment between Cooper's explicit mission and her imagining of the Oriental world speak powerfully to the way in which the Orient was repeatedly pressed up against and tested, rejected and incorporated, in the articulation of a black American identity; and the way in which it was used to mediate both reactionary and radical impulses, often simultaneously.

For the Orient literally appears at the outset of this argument; the first essay in *A Voice From the South* begins with an exposition of the why and how the “noble and ennobling ideal of woman” so crucial to the sustenance of “modern civilization” does not exist in the Orient (the answer, Cooper hypothesizes, lies in the Orient's lack of Christianity and feudal system within its history). If Cooper politicizes motherhood, situating it as a viable model for power relations, she achieves her goal partially by deploying some of the mechanisms of Orientalism – namely, by imagining it as the corrupt and enervated antithesis to the democratic potential of a dynamic United States. Yet riding under the surface of Cooper's lamentations against the “vices and inanity of Oriental woman” is an anxiety about the way in which black women were used, perceived, and treated in the United States. In Cooper's understanding, the women of the Orient lack the “special and real influence of women” that nurtures and sustains a civilization; yet the “promiscuous housekeeping” of the American South was precisely her *raison d'être* for writing in the first place (G. Brown 503). If, as Malini Johar Schueller explains, “the harem had functioned as a site onto which Western travelers could project their erotic fantasies and act out their desires for domination” (118), then the widely circulating images of the black woman in the nineteenth century likewise served as a “dumping ground for those female functions a basically Puritan society could not confront” (Christian 2). Thus while Cooper disparaged the way in which Oriental women were a “figment” of a man's imagination,

without agency or affect on the world at large, she admits that, within dominating American discourse, black women were likewise figured as unrestrained sexual beings who could breed but not mother. Cooper is quite transparent about the economic impulses undergirding the mythology that “a Negro woman cannot be a lady” (64) – such discourse justified the systematic exploitation of black women as both producers of commodities and reproducers of more slaves – and explicitly deals with the epidemic of sexual abuse of black women that legacy engendered well after slavery. Cooper thus appears to use a circular logic here, attempting to deploy preexisting American prejudice against the Orient to eliminate – vis-à-vis what she perceived as the nation’s desire to distinguish themselves *from* the Orient – a misogyny they shared with the Orient.

Likewise, Cooper’s use of organic metaphors to figure nations as fundamentally domestic spaces – that is, her argument that nations can be imagined as a “seed” or “embryo” (54) that need proper tending at the level of the “root” (62) to progress – utilizes and destabilizes the same set of prejudices. Beginning with these twin assumptions – first, the “vital” force of women in the “regeneration and progress” in a nation (60) and, second, the utter abjectness of the Oriental woman – Cooper concludes that despite the occasional “brilliant minds” and imperialist leaders of the Orient, there is ultimately a “worm at the core” that will arrest meaningful progress in the Oriental world. Because the Oriental “homelife is impure,” in other words, there can be “no soundness at the root, no life-giving sap, permeating, strengthening and perpetuating the whole” (54). By grounding her argument, as it were, in agricultural imagery, Cooper strategically utilizes and deforms the foundational American logic of dominion. Originally stemming from the Genesis 1:28 passage in which Adam and Eve are directed to “fill the earth and subdue it,” the “development of capitalist markets in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” shifted interpretation of this decree, as Jill Lepore skillfully traces, to subsequently extend to an understanding of private property as the “defining character of social relations, the defining character, even, of an individual’s identity.” In a

American colonial context, this understanding of ownership justified conquest of Native American land; since the colonists claimed that “only land that is fenced in, tilled, and built upon can be owned,” they could argue, in the other words, that Native Americans “could not own land” (Lepore 76). Further, colonists could justify a particularly brutal relationship with these people because their form of social relations (as evidenced by their lack of property) was inherently “savage” – a history Cooper explicitly disparages in her text. Cooper reframes this impulse from one in which one must *own* land to the ways in which one must *nurture* it, yet she likewise appropriates it by using the nomadic lifestyle of “the Arab” as a marker for his inability for nurture: “Home to him meant his present camping place. That deity who, according to our western ideals, makes and sanctifies homes, was to him a transient bauble to be toyed with so long as it gave pleasure and then be thrown aside for a new one.” The Orient’s lack of private property becomes a marker of deviant sexuality, the multiplicity of homes mirroring the excesses of Oriental degeneracy and carnality. With so many roots to water, Cooper suggests, it could not be a surprise that the Orient lacked “life-giving sap.”

But Cooper straddles this characterization of the Oriental as simultaneously effete and hypersexual tenuously, for when she quotes at length what she derides as the “Barbarian brag” of scientist Percival Lowell, she explicitly undercuts the ideologies that make those characterizations possible. Specifically writing of “Far” (and not “Near”) Orientals,” Lowell writes that “they are not of those who will survive. Artistic attractive people that they are, their civilization is like their own tree flowers, beautiful blossoms destined to never bear fruit.” Cooper indignantly responds that such a prophecy by the “scion of an upstart race” is ludicrous, continuing

In the few hundred years, we [Westerners] have had to strut across our allotted territories and bask in the afternoon sun, we imagine we have exhausted the possibilities of humanity. Verily, we are the people, and after us there is no other. Our God is power; strength our standard of excellence, inherited from barbarian ancestors through a long line of male progenitors, the Law Salic allowing no feminine modifications. (74)

Cooper indicts the mode of Western seeing here and in so doing undercuts her own judgments on the Orient as well. Cooper's depiction of the imperial arrogance of the Western world blurs the boundaries between the Orient's itinerant homes, "toyed with" only "so long as" they "gave pleasure," and the Westerner's promiscuous "strut" of colonization. That the Westerner imagines he has "exhausted the possibilities of humanity" despite his devaluation of the very figures who bear humanity recalls the Orient's "lack of life-giving sap;" in inverting the paradigms which she has deployed earlier in the narrative Cooper potently illustrates the way in which nineteenth century black American encounters were always-already entangled with the problem that, as Cooper phrased it, "no man can prophecy with another's parable" (Cooper 154). In other words, Cooper well understood that the structures and knowledges through which she attempted to make sense of the world likewise served to rationalize her oppression. She writes of white understandings of African Americans:

Some have taken up the subject with a view to establishing evidences of ready formulated theories and preconceptions; and, blinded by their prejudices and antipathies, have altogether abjured all candid and careful study. Others with flippant indifference have performed a few psychological experiments on their cooks and coachmen, and with astounding egotism, and powers of generalization positively bewildering, forthwith aspire to enlighten the world with dissertations on racial traits of the Negro. A few with really kind intentions and a sincere desire for information have approached the subject as a clumsy microscopist, not quite at home with his instrument, might study a new order of beetle or bug. Not having focused closely enough to obtain a clear-cut view, they begin by telling you that all colored people look exactly alike and end by noting down every chance contortion or idiosyncrasy as a race characteristic. (Cooper 140)

Thus her engagement with the Orient is overdetermined by her awareness of the fundamentally constructed nature of authority, the way it seeks to naturalize "Barbarian brag," a fact she approaches and circles uneasily yet never quite admits. In the increasingly positivist world of the turn-of-the-century, where the "institutionalized apartheid" (Somerville 1) of Jim Crow and scientific racism colluded to reify boundaries between races and the introduction of mass markets and mass advertising, along with the eugenics movement, effectively served to increasingly segregate the

“concerns” of women<sup>58</sup> and men, Cooper struggled to advocate for “an ethics of accountability,” in Vivian M. May’s words – a reorientation of power toward cooperation rather than domination, polyvocal and subjective rather than binaristic and “objective.” And yet dominating, oppositional Orientalist discourse was constituent of that argument. Ultimately, *A Voice From the South* reveals that, even for a black American woman ambivalent about casting her stones with what she perceived as the degradation of the Oriental woman, the Orient played a fundamental role in the working through ideas about what it might be to be a feminist nation.

If Cooper uses the houri – or heavenly harem of virgins some Western writers believed (and continue to believe) to be the ultimate goal of Islamic faith – as something of a cautionary tale to warn Americans of the ideology that follows when a nation refuses to grant women equality on earth, Frances E.W. Harper uses a black woman who she characterizes as a houri in order to push forth the agenda she shared with Cooper – to infuse the United States with a more feminine ethos. Like Cooper, Harper challenged a society built on the violent and imperialistic ideals of “brutal and cowardly men” (“Woman’s Political Future” 435) in her essays and speeches. But unlike Anna Julia Cooper, Harper moves closer to the deorientation acts undertaken by the other authors in this study. Her 1892 novel *Iola Leroy* is a bildungsroman in which the protagonist of the novel “comes into” race quite by accident when she, after having been raised and educated as the white daughter of a plantation owner, finds herself to be “inventoried with the rest of the property” after his death (101). Upon this realization, Iola devotes herself to the dual work of uplift of her newfound race and her sex, work that is made difficult, Harper elucidates through the plot of this novel, precisely *because* of her race and sex. Yet despite these hardship, Leroy tenaciously strives to embody her

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<sup>58</sup> Economic historian Joel Mokyr calls the shift *homeward* of women in the turn of the twentieth century the “Ruth Schwartz Cohen problem,” named after the author of the same name whose *More Work for Mother* “raised...one of the more intriguing puzzles of modern economic history;” that is, “why did homemakers work longer hours in their homes in the century after 1870, despite the growing mechanization of household activities?” (198-199). Mokyr, writing from an economic standpoint, suggests that changing ideas about childhood, new paradigms of “domestic science” informed by biological discovery of germs, and “unscrupulous marketing” (210) brought about by the mass production of the industrial revolution, caused this cultural shift.

“theory that every woman ought to know how to earn her own living” (79) as well as manifest her conviction that she do “something of lasting service for the race” she has found herself a part of (262) – a far cry from the pampered plantation daughter who argues for the continuation of slavery at the start of the novel. The mulatto body of Iola, then, far from being an internalization of the beauty standards of dominating American culture or an attempt to placate a white audience, is meant to redefine what it means to “be” part of a race. That Iola’s entire family, not to mention the man with whom she falls in love by the end, are all white and privileged enough to pass into white society – and, even more crucially, that two of these characters have been raised to *believe* they are white for their formative years – disrupt the meaning of race and redefine it not as blood but as choice. Even more specifically, it becomes a choice based upon *use value*. When asked by a white officer, “what is the use of your saying you’re a colored man, when you are as white as I am?” Robert Johnson, Iola’s uncle, replies “Captain, I think my place is where I am most needed” (Harper 43). And when a white doctor, proposing to Iola, argues that there is “no use” in her “persisting that [she is] colored when [her] eyes are as blue and complexion as white as” his own (Harper 232), Iola replies “I must serve the race which needs me the most,” arguing that because she was educated through the “unrequited toil” of slaves as a white child, she is “indebted to them for the power [she has] to serve them” (235). The subtext to her argument, of course, is that it is not simply about *servicing* but about *being*: clearly, she could serve the race as a white woman, but her indebtedness to the black community dictates not only that she serve them, but identify *with* them. This proposition implicates the entire nation: if a white woman must identify as black because her childhood is “indebted” to that race, who in this nation, built, as it were, by that race, is *not* black?

I work through this extended discussion of Harper’s understanding of racial identity not merely to reiterate the idea that nineteenth-century authors were resisting understandings of race dictated by the “American school” of ethnology and its belief that not only was race based in the

blood but that certain blood was inherently inferior. Rather, Harper's suggestion of race-as-service undergirds an understanding of nation that reveals the way in which African Americans in the nineteenth century engaged with the Orient as a means to make sense of their own domestic identities. In this particular case Harper does not deploy dominating Orientalist discourse, as Anna Julia Cooper did, but claims it as part of her own heritage: she imagines *Iola Leroy* as fitting within a body of African American literature that "glow[s] with the fervor of the tropics" and is "enriched with luxuriance of the Orient" (282). That Harper attributes black art in part to "the fervor of the tropics" is a common attribution – the argument that African Americans brought to America a peculiarly African sort of "tropical warmth and spontaneous emotionalism," in Cooper's words (132), was one reclaimed by black authors as often as it was exploited by racist ones. Yet the mention of "Oriental luxuriance" is a bit more idiosyncratic, not because such diasporic connections had not been broached but because that sense of artistic "luxuriance" was more generally ascribed to strictly African, rather than *Afro-Oriental* roots.

This returns me to the point with which I began – the figuring of Iola's mother Marie has a "hour." Early on in the novel Iola's father, the plantation owner Eugene, depicts himself as literally being poisoned by his consumption of privilege as a young man:

I grew up to be wayward, self-indulgent, proud, and imperious...I was well supplied with money and, never having been forced to earn it, was ignorant of its value and careless of its use...Years of my life were passed in foreign lands; years in which my soul slumbered and seemed pervaded with a moral paralysis...I went to the capitals of the old world to see life, but in seeing life I became acquainted with death, the death of true manliness and self-respect. (68)

Eugene, in other words, is a rich, white, young Southerner performing rich, white young Southernness exactly as one might expect. That Harper echoes Eugene's "death of true manliness and self-respect" when she later describes another man's opportunity to pass for white as "the loss of honor, true manliness, and self respect" (266) alerts us to this; Harper challenges her reader to assume to a new definition of race, one based on service rather than "biology." For if acting like a

white man causes Eugene to return to the States “prematurely old” and “a perfect wreck,” he finds redemption in the most unlikely of places, a black slave woman who is as beautiful as a “hourí” yet whose “presence” is not hypersexed but one that causes “every base and unholy passion” to die, “subdued by the presence of her virtue” (Harper 69-70). Further, it is not simply her beauty which enchants and nurses Eugene back to health, but “the native vigor of her intellect” (69) which is also Orientalized inasmuch as she is figured as “Esther pleading for the lives of her people in the Oriental courts of a despotic king” (Harper 75) in the graduation speech she gives after Eugene decides to educate her. In this latter moment, Harper employs the common nineteenth century tactic of Orientalizing the South itself and condemning the South for its harem, but reinvigorates that Southern Orientalized patriarch via the body of an Orientalized black woman. In all of these moments, Harper turns her readers’ expectations and assumptions on their heads: one should identify the race one is most “indebted” to; a black woman is described as a hourí, yet even with those two signifiers – black and Oriental – of unrestrained sensuality and excess in dominating American discourse, she is more pure and respectable than “beautiful women in the halls of wealth fashion, both at home and abroad” (69); one is poisoned by behaving like a white man but is nursed back to health by an interracial romance. If America was imagined as a more virile and just antithesis to both the rapidly decaying, corrupt Old World of Europe and the debased Orient, what Harper proposes here is a new world not only defined in opposition to the effete Old World but based on the *feminine*. This is supported by Iola’s bold assertion that the United States should prove itself a superpower “not simply” through “building up a great material prosperity, founding magnificent cities, grasping the commerce of the world, or excelling in literature, art, and science,” but instead as “a nation wearing sobriety as a crown and righteousness as the girdle of her loins” (219). The nation is a women’s body here, in much the same way colonialist literatures consistently feminized the lands they colonized. Yet if (male) nation-building and imperialism had for centuries

been represented as “erotics of ravishment,” in Anne McClintock’s apt words, Harper presents a decidedly different image: that of a woman *unravishable*. In her attempts to construct a new America that is a strong, “sober” woman, impenetrable yet “righteous,” many of the old assumptions about the United States being a hypermasculine other to the Orient break down, as when one of the speakers at a salon in which Iola and Dr. Latimer participate argues, “I do not think that our moral life keeps pace with our mental development and material progress. I know of no civilized country on the globe, Catholic, Protestant, or Mohammedan, where life is less secure than it is in the South” (Harper 250). Harper takes the Orientalization of the South she begins earlier one step further here: now the South becomes less civilized than the Orient itself. This is emphasized again when Reverend Carmicle, a friend of Iola and Latimer’s, argues against a common racist conception that slavery “lifted [the African] out of barbarism and fetich worship, [gave] him a language of civilization, and introduced him to the world’s best religion” (Harper 225) by claiming

If...Mohammedanism, with its imperfect creed, is successful in gathering large numbers of negroes beneath the Crescent, could not a legitimate commerce and the teachings of a pure Christianity have done as much to plant the standard of the Cross over the ramparts of sin and idolatry in Africa? Surely we cannot concede that the light of the Crescent is greater than the glory of the Cross, that there is less constraining power in the Christ of Cavalry than in the Prophet of Arabia? (Harper 226)

While Islam is presented as the “imperfect” alternative to the true gospel of Christianity, Carmicle expresses no alarm – as we might expect – over heathens converting heathens to another version of heathenism. Rather the implication is that Islam is “planting the standard” of “the Crescent” and, because they are doing so without “the intervention of ages of slavery,” American Christians would do well to take a lesson from them.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Of course Harper’s characters do not point to the Orient as such and instead to an unspecified group “Mohammedans” but as I have shown before, most nineteenth century authors conflated Islam with the Orient and defined the Orient in far broader strokes than we do today. Specifically Carmicle is most likely referring to the Muslims in North Africa, who would have been firmly considered “Oriental” at this time.

Harper may be read as less overtly pejorative toward the Orient than Cooper. Yet both “articulate[s] the joints,” in Brent Hayes Edwards’ words, the place at which these African American women rubbed up with the notion of the Orient and attempted to see what it told them about themselves – and in the process implicated its role *in* the very idea of their “selves.” But if “the joint is a curious place” – both “the point of separation” and the “point of linkage” (15) – then Pauline Hopkins is perhaps the nineteenth century African American woman who best illustrated the struggle to connect an Oriental joint with the larger skeleton of the African American identity.

**“Taking the Right” to Rewrite: Pauline Hopkins’ *Of One Blood* and the Deorientation of the American Self**

A novelist, journalist, editor, playwright, actress and singer at the turn of the twentieth century, Pauline Hopkins has enjoyed something of a revival in the last two decades after almost a century of obscurity. “Rediscovered” by Ann Allen Shockley in 1972, Hopkins’ revival began in large part thanks to the seminal black feminist criticism of Hazel Carby, Claudia Tate and Mary Helen Washington, among others, and to the 1988 reissue of her four novels under the Schomburg Library’s series Nineteenth-Century Black Woman Writers. The last four years alone have seen two critical biographies, an anthology of Hopkins’ non-fiction works and the institution of the Pauline Hopkins Society, to say nothing of the critical articles that continue to be published about her. Yet there continues to be some ambivalence surrounding Hopkins, and in particular the notion that Hopkins’ novels succumb to “assimilationist urges,” in Gwendolyn Brooks’ oft-cited 1978 words, seems to persist despite a clear push among many critics to recover her as a revolutionary author and activist. These contending forces, as it were – to either dismiss Hopkins for her “assimilationist urges” or read her solely within the framework of her radical politics, often implying in the process that the sentimentality of her novels “were but the private language in which writers like Hopkins encoded the more important public and political concerns that inspired them” (McCann 790) – tell us, in Jill Bergman’s astute words, “less about Hopkins than it does about literary scholarship” (182).

The criticism surrounding Hopkins' oeuvre, much like the criticism surrounding W.E.B. Du Bois' romance novel *Dark Princess*, as we will see in Chapter Four, "invites us to consider the ways in which scholarly desire informs scholarly practice" (Bergman 182). I would accept this invitation to argue that attempts to resolve the complexities and contradictions of Hopkins' texts – to either read away her form in order to decode the revolutionary politics within or to dismiss her on account of her appropriation of a conventional form – miss the boat: in Hopkins' case, the complexity is the point. More simply put, I would suggest that the ambiguities and deorientations, as I have been terming them, in Hopkins' writings are meaningful in their own right.

This deorientation is in fact not merely textual; Hopkins – like David Dorr, though to decidedly different ends – was deliberately tricky in both narrative voice *and* public persona. Her biography is one of constant reinvention: as Lois Brown has thoroughly documented, Hopkins several times "made calculated revisions of her genealogy and disseminated in a public forum a new biography" (15), whether to emphasize her connection to New England abolitionists and revolutionaries, to "authorize her full participation in the elite world of African American letters" after retiring as a performer (17), or even to rewrite her paternal origins after her mother remarried. Hopkins also wrote under several aliases, each with significantly different voices. It is my argument that in all of her writing, Hopkins does not simply "encode" the arguably "more important" work of her political concerns within more traditional (and some might say "assimilationist") language and plotlines. Rather, she deorients the very notion of the traditional and accepted from within, encouraging in the process a sort of performative self-invention and reinvention of our histories. In her last novel, *Of One Blood; Or, the Hidden Self*, Hopkins weaves the Orient into this reinvention.

Published in *Colored American Magazine* (not related to the periodical edited by Samuel Cornish in the antebellum period) in monthly installments between of November 1902 and November 1903, Hopkins' novel is a curious mix of domestic melodrama and adventure tale clearly

inflected by the imperial “romances” of Rider Haggard, an influence I will return to in a moment. *Of One Blood* follows the life of Reuel Briggs, a racially ambiguous medical student who is an “authority” in “brain diseases” (Hopkins *Blood* 27) as well as a “close student of what might be called ‘absurdities’ of supernatural phenomena or *mysticism*” (Hopkins *Blood* 2). After Reuel revives the questionably dead but unquestionably beautiful Dianthe Lusk – whom only he and his friend and colleague Aubrey Livingston recognize as a member of the Fiske Jubilee Singers and thus as “black” – the two marry. But despite his newfound celebrity, Reuel is still penniless. When he is offered a place as a doctor aboard an expedition to Africa whose goal is to “unearth the buried cities and treasure which the shifting sands of Sahara have buried for centuries” (Hopkins *Blood* 58) – a deal negotiated by Aubrey – he leaves the still amnesiac Dianthe in the latter’s care and sails off. While on his expedition, Reuel discovers the ancient Ethiopian city of Telassar, a civilization that has literally gone covert in order to survive. Despite the fact that he has for many years passed as white, it is revealed – and proven by a scar on his chest in the shape of a lotus lily – that Reuel is not only an ex-slave, but Ergamenes, king of Telassar. Meanwhile, across the waters, Aubrey has been scheming to kill his own fiancé, kill Reuel (via his ex-slave Jim, who has accompanied Reuel on the expedition), and marry Dianthe. Ultimately, through the ghost of Reuel’s mother Mira, the Telessarian version of a crystal ball, and an ex-slave named Aunt Hannah, all is revealed: Reuel, Dianthe, and Aubrey are actually all “of one blood,” the long-separated children of the black slave Mira and her white master, Aubrey Livingston the first. While Reuel knows he is black but passes and Dianthe is robbed of the knowledge that she is black, Aubrey has presumably never known: he was switched with the stillborn heir to the plantation by Aunt Hannah, their grandmother.

Recently there has been an increase in critical attempts to make this unwieldy text – whose plot, it must be said, is remarkably labyrinthine even by turn-of-the-century standards – intelligible. While *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* has historically been the

Hopkins novel with which most scholars are concerned, *Of One Blood* has been receiving more attention in recent years: according to the MLA Bibliography, of the twenty-seven articles published about *Of One Blood*, seven have appeared in the last two years alone while only one of the thirty-three published pieces on *Contending Forces* has been published in the same time frame. Interestingly, however, one of the elements of the text that has been overlooked even within this current explosion of attention is the many intriguing intersections between Oriental peoples and black Americans within the text. While it has been critically accepted that Hopkins was, first, attempting to educate her Afro-American readers of the more illustrious aspects of their past (that is, ancient Egypt and Ethiopia) and, second, reimagining American genealogy through the trope of shared blood, these two goals have rarely been combined into an exploration of the distinctly Orientalized character of the Ethiopian heritage she portrays. In fact authors have only just begun to contextualize Hopkins “within the history of a global economic power struggle” (O’Brien 246) and thus approach *Of One Blood* as an early negotiation of diasporic relationships, though this relationship has yet to be posited as being specifically between Arabs and African Americans.

It is my contention, however, that the blurring of boundaries between Orient and Africa does more than extend Hopkins’ metaphor of mixed blood across the ocean. Rather, Hopkins deliberately uses the Orient as part of a larger project to deorient our hold on a text we assume should be intelligible according to our received literary tropes and our empirical “knowledge” of the world and our origins. If the construction of subjectivities (both racial and otherwise) is “a process which operates through the reiteration of norms,” a reiteration that that by its very definition allows “gaps and fissures to open up” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 10) Hopkins presses up within these gaps and fissures to deorient us from *within* the norms; she destabilizes “the stable concepts of history, self and race” (Rohrbach 483). Specifically, she orientalizes African roots not simply to suggest an alternative reading of the originary routes of black America – to destabilize our ability to “read” or

“see” Africa according to preexisting assumptions and prejudices – but also to make the domestic foreign, to defamiliarize *ourselves*. Throughout *Of One Blood*, Hopkins slyly both enacts and advocates for a shift in perspective as a means of agency over one’s own history, a project she called attention to when, during a speech in 1905, she announced herself as a “daughter of the Revolution” and added “you do not acknowledge black daughters of the Revolution but we are going to take this right” (*Daughter* 355). Her orientalizing of black origins plays into this enterprise in two ways: first, by allowing her to illustrate the ways in which the production of knowledge is inherently subjective and contextual, and second, by imbuing the legacy of African greatness with non-Western achievement.

### **Orienting Africa**

Considering *Of One Blood* is the earliest known African American novel to feature an African setting, it is curious that few critics have considered the actual African landscape of the novel and how its portrayal might figure into its underlying themes. Rather, most attention has revolved around Africa’s place in the text ideologically. That is, the question has become whether or not Hopkins was promoting a set of “Back-to-Africa” or Pan-Africanist beliefs, or whether in her attempts to instill pride in the glorious past of Africa, Hopkins falls into what Martin Japtok calls “the Darwinist trap:” “Making the ‘worth’ of a people dependent on technological and cultural accomplishments” that adhere to “the same quasi-Darwinist logic that served nineteenth- and twentieth-century imperialists to ‘justify’ their ventures” (403). Putting this issue aside for the time being, I would like for the moment to focus strictly on the physical space of Africa as it is portrayed in *Of One Blood*. Hopkins writes a particular Africa into existence, one that necessarily must have been drawn from the literature of the time (since Hopkins had never physically visited the continent herself) but one that not only is, but explicitly proclaims itself as, a departure from the way the continent has traditionally been seen. That Hopkins presents a somewhat fantastical, orientalizing Africa is intentionally

deorienting: by allowing the physical space of Africa to shift contextually and according to the character doing the seeing, she destabilizes our lens on more than a continent.

Hopkins' initial portrayal of North Africa is characteristically Orientalist. The expedition enters Africa vis-à-vis the shores of Tripoli, described initially through Reuel's eyes as being "a landscape strange in form" whose "nudity is only covered by the fallow mantle of the desert" (Hopkins *Blood* 76). Hopkins' use of the word "fallow" here implies the landscape has not been properly cultivated – like Cooper, Hopkins uses this lack of cultivation as a marker for the savagery of the Orient, a point doubly emphasized by the fact that the landscape is *naked*. Hopkins evokes conventions of imperial writing here by depicting the landscape of Africa as a body open to the penetration of the colonist, but like Harper destabilizes it. In Hopkins' case the meaning of this nudity is interrupted through the way in which two different characters "see" it. The exposed desert initially gives "a most sad impression to the gazer" – the gazer in this case being Reuel, who unimpressed by the scene because of his separation from his fiancée, is inclined to see its nudity as testimony to the country's nickname: "the Country of Thirst" (Hopkins *Blood* 76). Yet when Charlie Vance, Aubrey's soon-to-be brother-in-law and something of a rake, arrives on the scene, the landscape's nudity become more overtly sexualized. Nicknamed "Adonis," Charlie is handsome, privileged, and amorous – in other words, the more likeable Northern foil to Aubrey's sinister, Southern predator, and the kind of "cultured" Euro-American traveler who Dorr deoriented in his travel narrative– so it is not surprising what he sees in the landscape is a different kind of thirst: the contours of a mosque are traced out in the skyline, which "smiles" at the voyagers seductively "with penetrating charm" (Hopkins *Blood* 77). The exoticism of the mosque, and ambiguity of Tripoli's sexual position here – both coy and virile –holds "all the fascination of a modern Cleopatra" (76) for Charlie. Like the civilization from which she sprung, Cleopatra was a figure of endless curiosity who appeared regularly in popular media in nineteenth-century America. Yet neither white nor

black, neither whites nor blacks fully knew whether they wanted to reclaim her. In Scott Trafton's apt words,

in her whiteness, she would tend to be associated with purity and taintlessness, yet in her famous role as sexual predator and oversexed seductress she would tend to invoke racist images of the wantonness and licentiousness of nonwhite women and especially all the sexualized stereotypes of African American women under slavery" (179).

Hopkins, as an early reclaimer of Egypt for African Americans, could not have missed such implications. As someone who vociferously defended the chastity of African American women as well as argued for their shared racial origins with ancient Egyptians, to assert the licentiousness of Cleopatra (and by extension, the Orient) would have been antithetical to her larger project. The key then, it must be noted, is the phrasing of Hopkins' comparison: the city is not Cleopatra, but "holds" her "fascination." Hopkins emphasizes not a seductress but calls attention to the way in which body (or landscape) becomes text that must be perceived and interpreted. More plainly put, the shore itself does not speak but through those who see it, and what it is thirsty for, or whether it is thirsty at all, is defined similarly – in this case, by a group of Western men who enter Africa with the explicit intent of pillaging it for its riches and ostensibly its information.

Hopkins thus confounds our ability to read the landscape within our received tropes. When, for example, she argues that within "the eternal enchantment of the Orient seen at a distance" lurks the "worm of decay and death" (Hopkins *Blood* 77) – an approach that echoes Anna Julia Cooper's language in *A Voice From the South* so clearly as to make us comprehend the way in which such a metaphor was both commonplace and accepted – she deorients us by simultaneously suggesting that it is a comfortable enough home for a Southerner. That is, if Tripoli is the "capital of a truly barbaric state," this barbarism is hardly foreign to the Southern Americans of the expedition:

All the little world about them was in an uproar, everyone signaling, gesticulating, speaking at once. Such a fray bewilders a civilized man, but those familiar with Southern exuberance regard it tranquilly, well knowing the disorder is more apparent than real" (Hopkins *Blood* 78).

Hopkins deorients us doubly here. First, in a move evocative of the tactics we saw of the antebellum press as well as in *Iola Leroy*, Hopkins juxtaposes the “civilized” world with the U.S. South, which becomes uncivilized, then, by implication – a point which the audience may need very little convincing of, considering the previous chapter’s depiction of a Southern, engaged man attempting to seduce a fiancée that is not his own. Secondly, Hopkins argues that the “disorder” of the Orient is more “apparent than real.” If the “noisy scene” (Hopkins *Blood* 78) by which entry to the Orient has been marked in almost all Western travel writing is more cultural convention than truth, what is true becomes topsy-turvy; is the apple the real part, or the worm at its core?

Similarly, we might read Hopkins’ statement that “Tripoli is the natural road by which Africa has been attacked by many illustrious explorers because of the facility of communication with the country of the Blacks” (*Blood* 79) as presenting Oriental Tripoli as an entry point distinct from Black Africa. If read this way, we might also assume that Hopkins is making the same move that many of the prior black Americans writing about the Orient did in separating the Orientalized and Islamicized North Africa from the Africa from which African Americans sprang. Yet this separation is more nebulous than it originally seems, for nowhere does Hopkins go into description of the people who live in “black” Africa proper, nor does she discuss the landscape as they travel to Meroe with any level of detail akin to what she gives here. In other words, this Orientalist imagining of Tripoli is not only our entry point to Africa, but more or less all we see of Africa. In fact, even once the expedition reaches the originary African city of Meroe (under which lies the advanced civilization of Telassar), its “outposts” are comprised of a “dirty Arab town” (Hopkins *Blood* 93), thus implying that the line between Arab Africa and Black Africa is less distinct than one might assume. Along the way and particularly once Reuel discovers the ancient city of his ancestors, the lines are blurred even more.

For as the map to the ancient treasures of Meroe – written, as it were, in Arabic – spells it out: to get to the paragon of Ancient black African glory, you must travel “four days’ journey... *toward Arabia*” (Hopkins *Blood* 95; italics mine), a direction repeated more than once. In reviewing the linguistic, historical, and biblical proof of the “prehistoric...magnificence” of the Ethiopians, the Professor is led to conclude that “An *Eastern* Ethiopia instead of being the invention of bewildered ignorance, is rather a reality which it will require a good deal of scepticism [sic] to doubt” (Hopkins *Blood* 100-101; italics mine). And if in scratching the surface away from the “charm” of the Orient, one finds “decay and death,” ultimately what one finds when one scratches the surface of decay and death (the ruins of Meroe), one finds the Orient.

For just below the surface of Meroe lies Telassar, the heavily Orientalized pinnacle of ancient Ethiopian greatness and a space that forces Reuel to acknowledge that “used as he was to the improvements and luxuries of life in the modern Athens” they cannot compare to the “combination of Oriental and ancient luxury that he now enjoyed” (Hopkins *Blood* 115-116). Hopkins explicitly refers to Telassar as Orientalized again when the ceremony through which Reuel is crowned Ergamenes, “king of Ethiopia,” is compared to “a scene from the Arabian Nights” (*Blood* 122). Less explicitly, but no less clearly, are markers of the Orient at every turn: the city abounds with silk and marble, “precious incense, the flash of azure and gold,” palm, date, and orange trees (Hopkins *Blood* 116), “dome shaped” palaces and ceilings, and “fluted columns” (Hopkins *Blood* 112, 117), all of which give it “a touch of fairyland” (Hopkins *Blood* 113). Perhaps most suggestive of the Orient to a nineteenth-century reader are the “virgins” of Telassar, who live in the “inner city,” a harem-like space that is “adorned with beautiful gardens, baths, schools and hospitals” and which the women leave only upon marrying (Hopkins *Blood* 130). Though there is no obvious sexual significance to the space (in other words, it functions more as the “female quarters” of the city and not as a brothel for a powerful man, as many Westerners perceived it), it is also significant to note

that since Queen Candace lives within the virgin city and “chooses her successor at intervals of fifteen years,” (Hopkins *Blood* 130) every girl in the court is in fact a potential sexual mate for the king. The girls are naturally of unparalleled beauty, and their “melting eyes of midnight hue” (Hopkins *Blood* 136) clearly evoke the veiled Arab women Reuel encounters in Tripoli, whose “melting eyes” are all that is seen (Hopkins *Blood* 79). Meanwhile, like the paradoxical shore of Tripoli, Queen Candace, a “Venus worked in bronze” (Hopkins *Blood* 136), seduces Reuel through a “magic influence” (Hopkins *Blood* 139) though she simultaneously appears to be “the embodiment of all chastity” (Hopkins *Blood* 137) and prostrates herself at his feet at every turn. It is this Orientalized ruler, this “bronze” body that is the context through which Reuel, being white himself, can imagine himself engendering to “the world a dynasty of dark-skinned rulers, whose destiny should be to restore the prestige of an ancient people” (Hopkins *Blood* 139).

#### **“The woes of unfortunates, tramps, stray dogs and cats,” and heroes**

It is impossible to ignore this Orientalization of Telassar -- the Orientalization of what Hopkins imagines to be the culmination of all of Ethiopia’s previous glory, not to mention the key to its future – and thus of African American origins. Yet it would be pat to suggest that Hopkins was simply suggesting a common ancestry between African Americans and Arabs vis-à-vis North Africa. Though Hopkins clearly reveals Pan-African, diasporic impulses both here and in her nonfiction works, the bigger picture involves more than these impulses: the other part of Hopkins’ story is a riddle of self-invention and reinterpretation. In much the same way that she reveals the unintelligibility of race by teasing out the strands of miscegenation at the foundational level of American culture (by revealing that Reuel, Aubrey, and Dianthe are “of one blood”), Hopkins deorients “truth” in order to lay claim to an agential, resistant self-articulation. In the absence of authenticated origins, in other words, Hopkins invents her own story, based on the evidence she

compiles “from the Works of the Best Known Ethnologists and Historians” (Hopkins *Daughter* 335); the “pastlessness” of African Americans becomes possibility.

Part and parcel of this deorientation is the use of multiple perspectives to which I alluded to earlier. The “fascination” of Tripoli’s shore is later paralleled by the way in which the body of Telassar’s Prime Minister, Ai, becomes hyper- visible and –significant for the members of the expedition; it becomes an object on which people attach meaning heavily colored by their own experiences. If the Professor who leads the expedition represents a champion of an ethnological narrative which rescripts Afro-Americans as the descendents of prehistoric Afro-Oriental greatness, it is not at all surprising he would characterize Ai as an “Arab” of “almost perfect” physical form (Hopkins *Blood* 101); he is invested in that perfection as evidence of “primal existence of the Negro as the most ancient of all” we “value in modern life” (Hopkins *Blood* 81). Meanwhile for Reuel, an African American man passing as white who only joins the expedition because it offers him a chance to return to America “a wealthy man no longer fearing poverty” (Hopkins *Blood* 60), what stands out about Ai is the “infinitely becoming” quality of his “patriarchal bearing” (Hopkins *Blood* 113). For someone who has long imagined his white friend Livingston as an “idol of a beautiful world” (Hopkins *Blood* 44), what enralls Reuel about Ai is his ability to embody both beauty and authority despite the color of his skin. But for Charlie Vance, the handsome member of, in his own words, “a race bold and venturesome, who know not fear if we can get a few more dollars” (Hopkins *Blood* 153), Ai evokes “a chill of apprehension” because of the inscrutability of “his strange garb, his dark complexion, his deep eyes and mystic smile” (Hopkins *Blood* 153). The authority so seductive to Reuel becomes threatening for Charlie, who senses this man “might make it hot” for him. That Ai derides the injustice of the American color line despite the fact that Charlie insists it would not affect him, since he would be classified as “ Arab, Turk, Malay, or Filipino,’ and in that costume” would

“slide along all right,” further confirm Charlie’s sense of him as a “lunatic” and a “fossilized piece of antiquity” (Hopkins *Blood* 154): what modern man would not support something which profits him?

Charlie’s perspective of Ai is emblematic of the way in which he, as stand-in for the archetypal American golden boy, reads the Orient altogether. The “Arabs” and “explorers” of Africa are interpellated into a profitable simulacrum Charlie imagines he can bring home: “a sort of combination of Barnum and Kiralfy<sup>60</sup>” with dancing “houris” (Hopkins *Blood* 81). Meanwhile, because his only understanding of the world and its history is one in which white Europeans have always reigned supreme, Charlie simply cannot see the reality of the potentials of Africa or – since the two are clearly conflated here – the Orient, even in the face of the incontrovertible proof of Telassar. The more he learns about the true goals of the expedition the less involved he wants to be. And why should he? The Professor’s theories of ancient African greatness threaten to “shatter” the idea of white supremacy (Hopkins *Blood* 101), a status quo which profits Charlie greatly. Thus even in the face of incontrovertible proof of African greatness – first the ruins of Meroe, to which Charlie responds “Great Scott...you don’t mean to tell me that all this was done by *niggers*?” (Hopkins *Blood* 99), and then the grandeur of Telassar – Charlie can only see desolation because his lens is overdetermined by pre-established American prejudices. Of Meroe, he glumly reflects:

It was a desolation that doubled desolateness, because his healthy American organization missed the march of progress attested by the sound of hammers on unfinished buildings that told of a busy future and cosy modern homeliness. Here there was no future. No railroads, no churches, no saloons, no schoolhouses to echo the voices of merry children, no promise of the life that produces within the range of his vision. Nothing but the monotony of past centuries dead and forgotten save by a few learned savants. (Hopkins *Blood* 93)

Charlie cannot interpret these ruins in any way beyond their (apparent) lack of “progress” and life; he cannot see them as testimony to previous greatness, let alone the civilization that lies just beyond the surface of the ruins and has in fact progressed well beyond Western civilization. It is telling, too,

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<sup>60</sup> Imre Kiralfy was a Hungarian of Jewish descent who made his stage debut at age four as a folk dancer. He went on to direct extravagant dance-based stage performances across Europe and America.

that though Charlie intellectually measures progress by hammers, railroads, churches, saloons and schoolhouses, ideals which he rhetorically understands are the customary embodiments of American progress but in which he has never been forced to participate, given his aristocratic status. In fact, as he admits, what he actually misses are “twelve inches of whiskey and soda” and “the jollities of the past few months that he had shared with Cora Scott” (94); in other words, his life of leisured affluence. Thus his curious incuriosity toward the underground kingdom and its “lunatic” ruler that has taken him captive is telling; he does not feel the need to understand the scene he has found himself in because he already believes he understands it. He is too invested in the reality that locates him as the “fastidious and refined” opposition to the “untutored savages” of Afro-Oriental Telassar (Hopkins *Blood* 155) to see what is “really” there.

The tragedy of the novel stems from this same internalization of American values on Reuel’s part – his inability to see, in Dianthe’s words, that “there are worse things in life than poverty” (Hopkins *Blood* 148). To refer to Reuel’s downfall in a work where he ends up the king of an ancient, glorious empire may seem peculiar, and indeed many critics have read the novel firmly with Reuel firmly in the hero’s position – complete with happy ending to his heroic quest – even as they decry that he gets rewarded for his inauthenticity as a black character. What such a reading presupposes is that giving Reuel certain values represented Hopkins’ de facto acceptance of them. Yet the novel does not, in fact, end on an optimistic note; rather, the “shadows of great sins” perpetually “darken” Reuel’s “life” despite his great wealth and power (Hopkins *Blood* 193). Reuel’s realization, after he discovers his true heritage, that his choice to pass for white in the United States had been “cowardly” has been interpreted as a call on Hopkins’ part for her readers to similarly embrace their inherited legacy of greatness, but relatively few scholars have remarked on the possibility that Hopkins may have meant us to be critical of Reuel rather than aligned with him. This is despite the fact that the portrait Hopkins paints of Reuel is less than favorable. In fact, he is

characterized as peevish, pathetic in his devotion to Livingston, and greedy by turns; we are made explicitly aware that his motivation to join the expedition lie in his “fancies” of “unearthing gems and gold from the mines of ancient Meroe and Ethiopia” (Hopkins *Blood* 60) rather than any thought of the advancement of his race, despite the fact that this latter possibility is pointed out to him. Indeed, I would argue that in much the same way that Hopkins blurs the distinctions between Africa and Orient and irrevocably calls into question the notion of “pure” blood, she deorients the way in which traditional Haggardian adventure stories were imagined for “the ‘schoolboy’ imperialist’ fantasizing about his initiation into manhood out in the African bush” and “the British man, fantasizing about his freedom to act without cultural restraint out in the African bush” (Stott 70). In other words, through Reuel, Hopkins challenges the complacency of her readers and the way in which they are “seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power” (Lorde 118), the way in which they buy into a system specifically designed to exclude them and disconnect them from an empowering understanding of their own history.

Hopkins’ nonfiction works in *Colored American Magazine* asserted that if “The past of the Negro has proved him a warrior, strong and intrepid” and the “the present...a scholar capable of the closest application to this books and of accomplishing all that any student can hope to accomplish,” the future “is a fair unwritten page which we can make what we choose” (*Daughter* 76). Despite this rosy prediction, Hopkins’ anxiety over what will be written on this page given what she perceived as a “present want” of “strong incorruptible defenders” for her race persistently seeped through her writings (*Daughter* 68). In fact, when deliberating on how many of her contemporaries might be able to “fill” the places of the “Race” men and women of the past, she could not help but conclude “Alas! How few, when we considered our advantages” (Hopkins *Daughter* 39). Throughout her sketches, she appears to have imagined an audience of comparatively privileged yet apathetic young blacks who are more interested in “industrial development” (Hopkins *Daughter* 48)

than justice or political power. This worry, it cannot be doubted, must have been engendered by the paper's constant battles with Booker T. Washington, who eventually bought out *Colored American Magazine*. And yet her tone also hints at the context through which she imagined Reuel, a man who certainly sought after economic and social power without a thought to the justice of his race. Significantly, it is only after Reuel discovers his ownership over the African landscape that he can recognize it is "at variance with the European idea respecting Central Africa." Until he realizes his power, his reading of the landscape, as we saw earlier, was dictated by Euro-American assumptions; with the lens of a king, suddenly he perceives a "gorgeous scene, decorated with Nature's most cheering garniture" and rivers that are of "sufficient magnitude for navigation and commerce" (Hopkins *Blood* 134). His new investment generates a new mode of seeing.

His eyes, as it were, have been opened too late however, and it is his lack of initial investment in black heritage that leaves the love story in the novel a tragic one. Reuel's relationship with Dianthe is necessarily complicated, not only because they are revealed to be brother and sister at the end, not only because he willfully keeps her in the dark about her history – a point to which I will return in a moment – and not only because he sees and dreams of her before he meets her, but also because they are doctor and patient. Early on in the text, Reuel informs Aubrey, in an attempt to discourage a conversation about the "Negro problem," that he has "a horror of discussing the woes of unfortunates, tramps, stray dogs and cats and Negroes," an impulse he attributes to being an "unfortunate" himself (Hopkins *Blood* 9). Significantly, when disclosing his experiments in reanimation to his colleagues, he mentions that he has "numberless times...restored consciousness to dogs and cats after rigor mortis had set in" (Hopkins *Blood* 31-32). It is intriguing then, that Dianthe – a disempowered "Negro" woman whose racial background is known only to him and Aubrey – becomes the vehicle through which Reuel proves his prowess in the medical community. That Aubrey "significantly" quotes back to Reuel his own comments about "Tramps, stray dogs and

Negroes” (Hopkins *Blood* 43) just as Reuel admits his love for Dianthe seems a clear reminder as to the skepticism with which we should read Reuel’s motives.

Whether Hopkins meant Reuel’s behavior as an allusion to the widespread use of slaves in medical experimentation throughout the nineteenth century is difficult to ascertain with any certainty. Yet the parallels between Reuel and the elder, slaveholding Aubrey Livingston (who, of course, turns out to be both Reuel and Aubrey’s father) would support such a reading. Consider Aubrey’s recounting of his father’s research in mysticism, a research interest shared by Reuel:

My father was deeply interested in the science of medicine, and I believe made some valuable discoveries along the line of mesmeric phenomena, for some two or three of his books are referred to even at this advanced stage of discovery, as marvellous [sic] in their data. (Hopkins *Blood* 50)

Much of this “data,” it is clear, is the result of the experimentation Livingston performs on his slave and mistress Mira, who he often placed “into a trance-state” to “perform tricks of mind-reading for the amusement of visitors” (Hopkins *Blood* 50). Meanwhile, Reuel’s “celebrated case” of reanimating Mira’s daughter, Dianthe, inspires similar “fame and fortune,” “awe and reverence” and further research (Hopkins *Blood* 37). The parallels here are almost so obvious as to further remark upon them would only serve to belabor the point, though I must hasten to add that I do not believe that Hopkins was arguing for a genetic lineage of exploitation of women; indeed, she explicitly attributes Reuel’s mysticism to his black mother rather than Livingston. Rather, Reuel exploits Dianthe because of his internalization of white male power structures, not because of his white “blood.” Hopkins drives this point home when she tells us that Reuel has long cultivated an “affection and worship” for Aubrey “dog-like in its devotion” (Hopkins *Blood* 6) and more than once does Hopkins figure the two brothers as co-conspirators who commodify and objectify Dianthe equally. For example, when Dianthe grieves her lack of memory and sighs, “I sometimes dream or have waking visions of a past time in my life...Can’t you help me, Reuel?” Reuel’s response is not one of guilt, but of anxiety: “he was dismayed to know that at most any time full

memory might return. *He must speak to Aubrey*” (Hopkins *Blood* 65; italics mine). Though Reuel ultimately swears his dishonesty serves to ultimately protect Dianthe and is for her own good – “There is no sin,” he claims, “in taking her out of the sphere where she was born” (Hopkins *Blood* 43) – ultimately Reuel controls and manipulates her access to the information she rightly owns and in this way is not unlike Aubrey, who uses the same information to effectively rape and imprison her.

Of course there is the none-too-minor difference that Aubrey’s plots involved the murders of multiple people – namely Reuel (which of course does not succeed) and his fiancée Molly (which does). Aubrey’s duplicity explodes into something altogether sinister: perhaps in the same manner by which the narrator tells us Charlie “could” have been a “learned philosopher” had his “philosophical nature” not been suppressed by a life of leisure (Hopkins *Blood* 152), Reuel’s duplicity could have become more sinister if it had been borne of a life of hedonism rather than poverty. For though the brothers are “of one blood” it is clear that race is not something of the blood; rather all of the characters are performing what they believe their backgrounds to be. Aubrey is consistently slippery – he performs a different self with each of the characters – but suffice it to say that he in all roles performs white privilege though by the end we know he does not actually belong to this “race.” Early on in the narrative Reuel is “unsocial and shabby to the point of seediness” (Hopkins *Blood* 4), a sadsap who is contemplating suicide because he cannot succeed in the world of medicine; with the awareness of his royal origins, his strength and power is so apparent a mere stare will disarm a hungry lion. His abilities have never changed, but the conditions to perform them have. Race becomes, then, not race but the ability to perform race, and there is no one more constrained in her abilities to perform than Dianthe.

## Reorientation Songs

Many critics have read Dianthe as a completely disempowered character who, “unable to exert any agency of her own...falls into complete submission to masculine mandates” (Ammons 310). Such a reading is not without merit, for throughout the narrative Dianthe is infantilized: she has “baby lips” (Hopkins *Blood* 5), eyes “soft as those of childhood” (Hopkins *Blood* 14), and is repeatedly referred to as a “tired child” (Hopkins *Blood* 35, 56). More than once she is portrayed as losing “her own will in another’s” (Hopkins *Blood* 174, 40). But as with so many of her choices in *Of One Blood*, the way in which Hopkins characterizes Dianthe challenges us to read her beyond face value. For despite the most calculating, systematic attempts to keep Dianthe’s past shrouded in mystery, despite the fact that ownership of her own story is, for much of the novel, wrenched from her, Dianthe ultimately does prove herself an author. This authority is actually one Hopkins grants only the most dispossessed characters of the novel; the essential “keys” to the riddles of the story (the shared origins of Reuel, Aubrey and Dianthe) are held only by ex-slaves: Jim, Mira, and Aunt Hannah. Even the powerful Telassarians, with their ability to “see” reality across time and space, cannot perceive the stories these ex-slaves can. Jim and Aunt Hannah’s testimony, and Dianthe’s songs, serve as an illustration of the agency Hopkins argues even the most disempowered have: that of refusing to forget, of giving voice to and reclaiming one’s own story.

One of the most fascinating choices Hopkins makes for Dianthe begins with her choice of name. The name – Dianthe Lusk – is one shared with the abolitionist and insurrectionist John Brown’s first wife, a fact that not often noted (or, in fact, noted at all) in criticism of *Of One Blood*, perhaps because the original Dianthe Lusk’s history was as ambivalent as her namesake’s, and as seemingly inconsequential in the “official” story. That Hopkins was probably well acquainted with Brown’s biographical narrative is evidenced by the fact that he is a major character in another of her magazine novels, *Winona*; it has been noted by Hannah Wallinger that in this novel Hopkins

“appropriated nearly verbatim” certain descriptions from *The Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas, and Martyr of Virginia*, edited by FB Sanborn in 1885 (328-329).

Dianthe Lusk-Brown’s familial ties to the spiritualism with which Reuel engages, paired with her “angelic” and “golden” voice – which purportedly inspired Brown’s abolitionism (De Caro 67) – establish the choice of name as purposeful rather than coincidental. As Daphne Brooks deftly suggests, the fictional Dianthe’s performance of “Go Down, Moses” at the start of *Of One Blood* “sows the seeds of insurgency” that Reuel must “learn to decode and put into practice” (304); likewise, Dianthe Lusk-Brown’s voice “guided” John Brown “again and again” even after her death, according to W.E.B Du Bois’s biography of Brown (46), another indication that her legacy circulated amongst the African American community at the turn of the century.

Yet Dianthe Lusk was not the wife who helped to set John Brown’s abolitionist ideals in practice. Nor did she reach any spectacular public heights herself. Rather she became locked in obscurity, a footnote in history books, and if remembered, only remembered for her voice, her piousness, her mental fragility, and the fact that she passed away just twelve years after marrying John Brown, many years before his raid at Harper’s Ferry, as a result of her seventh pregnancy. Thus if Hopkins’ choice to name her character Dianthe Lusk is tricky: if it speaks to the emancipatory potential of song, it likewise speaks to the way in which women have not always been the beneficiaries of such emancipation, valued such as they are for their sexual and reproductive roles, which both Dianthes lose their lives over. Hopkins’ naming serves as a subtle means of retrieving such women from obscurity as well as slyly putting into action the shared blood which is the theme of Hopkins’ novel – at once blackening the original Dianthe Lusk and whitening the fictional – by signaling a shared, and sometimes parallel, past. Such a choice confounds, in any event, the reading that these issues are the peculiar province of black women.

Of course, the pasts of the original Dianthe Lusk and her namesake are also significantly different: the latter is the daughter of a slave, the result of sexual violence enacted upon that slave, and is ultimately enslaved sexually. Indeed, when we first meet Dianthe she is a virtual stand-in for slavery: the power of her performance allows her to translate for her white, New England audience “All the horror, the degradation from which a race had been delivered” in a way that “nothing else ever had” (Hopkins *Blood* 15). She has the power to make real the “hell” of slavery, to combat its erasure from the memory of the nation; meanwhile, the men of the novel simply aspire toward the erasure of this past. Yet if Dianthe is marked by her ability to keep slavery alive despite cultural amnesia, why then is she saddled with an amnesia of her own?

I would argue that Hopkins intends for Dianthe to serve as a sort of embodiment for one of the viruses slavery has spread, and one which is her goal to combat in the very writing of *Of One Blood* and her articles for *Colored American Magazine*. For if both Reuel and Aubrey have “hidden selves” – one is black and doesn’t know it, while the other black and hides it, but is also king of Telassar and doesn’t know it – then Dianthe *is* the hidden self, insofar as she knows nothing of either her lived experience, her racial history, *or* her royal origins. As “dear adopted daughter of the medical profession” (Hopkins *Blood* 53) she – at least at first – is only allowed access to memory as dictated by the medical professionals who have assumed control of her care (Reuel and Aubrey). And because they deem her past story unruly, inconvenient and “unpleasant” (Hopkins *Blood* 55) they attempt to keep it locked in obscurity. In this way, then, she is not unlike her ancestors, ripped away from their homeland, often prevented from performing or practicing rites that might enliven their memories of this homeland, and disciplined from remembering in any tangible way. This is not to say that African American slaves did not have a rich communal memory – quite the opposite – but it is clear that this was discouraged, often violently. Further, as those who had a living memory of Africa died, those who grew up in the United States and sought to achieve success according to a

dominating framework often learned to disregard these memories or histories. As Marla Harris argues of *Of One Blood*, “it is the American experience of slavery that has disposed” Reuel and his fellow “characters, robbing them of their homeland and family history, bestowing upon them aliases that effectively prevent them from recognizing each other or fully knowing themselves” (377). And indeed Hopkins writes of Reuel:

He had carefully hidden his Ethiopian extraction from the knowledge of the world. It was a tradition among those who had known him in childhood that he was descended from a race of African kings. He remembered his mother well. From her he had inherited his mysticism and occult power. The nature of the mystic within him was, then, but...the lotus upon his breast he knew to be a birthmark. (Hopkins *Blood* 125-126)

Reuel only “knows” the lotus on his breast as a birthmark, not as a sign of royal greatness: he literally does not know how to read his own skin. Here Hopkins transforms the way in which black bodies have historically been marked – the scars and brands of slavery – and refigures such markings as a sign of power (in much the same way that Dianthe’s slave songs ultimately reinscribe power out of sorrow, as I will show in a moment). Because he interprets his skin through a system of dominating American values he can only see the potential of its whiteness, not the potential of its blackness. He has never been motivated to seek out answers or to pursue this legend of his greatness; the realm of possibility has been constrained by his desire to attain a particular version of success that is predicated on whiteness. And he forces this same choice upon Dianthe, insisting it will result in “life and love and wifehood and maternity and perfect health” despite the clear toll it takes on her psychological health (Hopkins *Blood* 44), because, for him, perfection can only be achieved according to white notions of feminine domesticity. Thus it seems easy to conclude that, as Elizabeth Ammons does, that this is a tale of an African American female artist who “*has a past*” that is “ancient, potent, brilliant” and “full of voice” but who does not have “ownership of that past or a future” (Ammons 310).

And yet, in powerful move that has too often been overlooked by critics, Dianthe's story, one that has been given voice by what Hopkins' herself called "the only original music of America" (*Daughter* 114), cannot be erased. The power of "Go Down, Moses" does not simply signal the necessity of Reuel's emancipatory travel to Africa; singing it for a second time in the text, Dianthe restores her own memory (although she must enlist help in making sense of it). In so doing Dianthe not only "cuts through lapsed personal memory, cultural amnesia, and social dislocation" (Brooks 318) but re-makes herself, despite the best efforts of Reuel and Aubrey. She refuses to stay behind the veil that Reuel himself does not have the "courage" to "rend" (Hopkins *Blood* 2). And even prior to this restoration, Dianthe's "very consciousness of disconnectedness acts as mode of testimony and memory" (Hartman 74); her anxiety over the loss of her memory is still authorship insofar as she can testify to the loss. That she actually recognizes she is *missing* an important element of her self despite the fact that she lives in a supposedly idyllic, white life is more than we see from either Reuel or Aubrey. Ultimately, both in her cognizance of loss and her reclamation of herself via song, she disrupts the narrative in ways Reuel and Aubrey cannot anticipate by refusing to accept the privilege that is handed to her. Like her mother's ghost, who signs her name on the family bible under a passage that reads "there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed" (Hopkins *Blood* 73), Dianthe has agency and authority over her story. She owns the legacy of slavery in much the same way Hopkins owns – and is thus able to reinvent as Orientalized – the legacy of African greatness: Dianthe, literally, makes herself through the telling of her story (via song). That she is ultimately killed at the end does not reveal a failure on her part – for she does effectively push up against the "regulatory discourse of society" (Knadler "Traumatized" 75) to find a new mode of self-speaking – but Reuel's. It is his internalization of this discourse in the first place that sets into motion the story that leaves him traumatized – and Dianthe dead – at its end.

Hopkins connects Dianthe's self-invention via song and her own self-invention via text by orientalizing Dianthe's song the way she orientalizes African origins. Specifically, the Arab camel drivers who lead Reuel to Meroe also sing their way across the desert in a form which more than resembles the call-and-response pattern of the slave song:

There was generally a leading voice answered by a full chorus. Reuel thought he had never heard anything more fascinating. Ababdis would assume the leading part. "Ah, when shall I see my family again; the rain has fallen and made a canal between me and my home. Oh shall I ever see it more?" Then would follow the chorus of drivers: "Oh, what pleasure, what delight, to see my family again; when I see my father, mother, brother, sisters, I will hoist a flag on the head of my camel for joy!" (Hopkins *Blood* 82)

Both format and content of these Arab songs and Dianthe's own slave songs are related, thus forging a connection between the two populations. And the threads of song do not stop there; if we begin our story with Dianthe's call to Egypt via her rendition of "Go down, Moses," respond to that directive with the soundtrack of the Arab drivers' call-and-response melodies, and finally hear the truth about Reuel's heritage also through song when Telassarian musicians sing the history of their kingdom, in ancient Arabic, Hopkins weaves a lineage from American shores, through the Orient, and into Africa. The threads of song – songs which began, according to Hopkins, along the Nile (Hopkins *Daughter* 113) and thus are figured as the legitimate cultural legacy of the Afro-Oriental world – interweave the histories of the novel, revealing the hidden selves and the families that will be reunited vis-à-vis the stories told in the Arabian desert.

It is clear that many have found Hopkins' Pan-Africanist impulses in the text, her seeming argument that Reuel must literally return to Africa to achieve greatness, troubling. Yet Hopkins' goal is less about immigration to Africa – something she never advocated -- and more a kind of decolonization of *perspective*, an acceptance of a self that is not dictated by American ideals and that interlaces all the threads of African American history. It is important to bear in mind that at every turn this novel is fantastic – it involves, after all, a cure for death, the ability to see the future, and the hidden "fairyland" that is Telassar, just for starters. If the goal was simply to inspire pride in a

real heritage, why write something so unreal? Had Hopkins been simply attempting to inspire pride in African history, there are many plotlines that would have accomplished this, perhaps the most obvious being a historical novel. Instead, Hopkins' choice to lend a science fiction feel to her novel is a deorientation act: to make fantastic, as it were, the accepted, the assumed contrivances and categories of Western ways of seeing. She reveals the mythic quality of race itself by linking African Americans with the Orient, by her use of shifting perspectives to call into question the "truth" of what we see, and by providing us with characters who do not fit neatly into our expectations. Her playfulness with her racial past is a form of authority over and ownership of it.

Further, by imagining a past that is Orientalized, she does precisely the opposite of what she has been accused of: she takes an "advanced" society – again, one that has advanced further than the West – and has made the foundations of that advancement distinctly non-Western. In other words, though Japtok claims that Hopkins values the types of progress that justifies imperialism, the interception of what Hopkins presents as an inherently non-Western mysticism into that progress trips up this claim. Though she argues that "In the heart of Africa was a knowledge of science that all the wealth and learning of modern times could not emulate" (Hopkins *Blood* 145), this "science" is framed, understood, and utilized in a different way than science as it is portrayed in the United States (think of the corrupted medical system that will not give Reuel – who has discovered the cure for death, the most hyperbolic example of scientific achievement -- a job because of his origins, or the exploitation of Mira by Livingston). In her attempts to infuse spirituality into the entire foundation of Telassar, Hopkins distinguishes this advanced civilization from Western understandings of science and progress, an intention that becomes clear early on in the novel when Hopkins portrays a conversation between Reuel and a medical colleague who is cynical about his theories of suspended animation:

“Your theory smacks of the supernatural, Dr. Briggs, charlatanism, or lunacy,” said the surgeon. “We leave such assertions to quacks, generally, for the time of miracles is past.”

“The supernatural presides over man’s formation always,” returned Reuel quietly. “Life is that evidence of supernatural endowment which originally entered nature during the formation of the units for the evolution of man. Perhaps the superstitious masses came nearer to solving the mysteries of creation than the favored elect will ever come.” (Hopkins *Blood* 33)

To claim that Hopkins falls within a “Darwinist trap,” then, is to read her inside one; to assume, in other words, that any kind of achievement must by definition be an emulation of Western achievement, a reading that tells us much about our own biases and assumptions. As Deborah McDowell writes, *Of One Blood*’s Telassar is “both a state of geography and state of mind” (xvii), one that Hopkins pits against Western ways of seeing. That she imagines this place in decidedly Orientalized terms only furthers her agenda; ultimately *Of One Blood* is a testament to Hopkins’ search for new ways in which – via the diasporic and fantastic – to speak American identities altogether.

## Chapter Four

### An Orient of One's Own: Decolonized Subjectivities in the Harlem Renaissance

*"Yet in this sweeping mechanistic interpretation, there is no room for the real plot of the story... Can all this be omitted or half suppressed in a treatise that calls itself scientific?"*  
W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935)

In the third section of sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois' 1928 "romance" *Dark Princess*, the protagonist, an African American man named Matthew, begins to assemble an apartment in a "thickly populated" neighborhood of "laborers, lodgers, idlers, and semi-criminals" after his release from prison. Into the apartment's "four dilapidated rooms" Matthew imports, simply, an "old iron bed, a chair, and a bureau" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 126). Over time, however, the ascetic apartment begins to take shape, to literally gain some character, ultimately serving as a sensual lovenest for the illicit, extra-marital affair he has with the Indian princess of the novel's title. It is my contention that through the lens of Matthew's attic apartment one can work through the fundamental concerns – sexuality, diaspora, racial identity, and of the veins that link all three – of not only Du Bois' *Dark Princess* but his contemporaneous "intellectual" work. The attic, furthermore, finds its structural mirror in several sections of the novel that break with the larger narrative logic, moments that subvert the conventional narratives USAmerica offers its citizens, illustrate the way in which these narratives cannot accurately contain the identity of its black population, and propose alternative subjectivities that are not only deoriented but decolonized. In this chapter I will investigate the way *Dark Princess* disrupts the form of the traditional heroic romance, with its central "polarization of ideal and abhorrent worlds" (Frye *Secular Scripture* 80), by reorienting it toward a different sort of romantic plot – that of "women's" sentimental novels of the nineteenth century. In so doing *Dark Princess* undercuts a system of oppositional, Cartesian thinking and "opens up a form of global thirdness" (Bhabha 139) *not* through the character of the Dark Princess herself, as is commonly understood, but in Matthew. I propose that the way in which *Dark*

*Princess* deorients a domestic black subjectivity is best understood by reading this romance through the sphere conventionally associated with sentimental women's writing: the domestic itself.

### **The Romance of the Orient in 1920s USAmerica**

Du Bois composed *Dark Princess* in a time during which the United States' relationship to the Orient was paradoxical at best. The post- World War I period of the 1920s was one marked by anticolonial struggle in the region, with anti-British revolts breaking out in Egypt and Iraq as well as Syrian rebellion again French rule. Gandhi's project of civil disobedience was well under way, a movement that inspired numerous African Americans, including Du Bois himself, who published correspondence from Gandhi on the pages of *The Crisis*.<sup>1</sup> In the face of those movements official response from the United States generally rested upon a kind of anti-imperialist, anticolonial stance and, though the League of Nations was fervently promoted by then-President Woodrow Wilson, opposition from Senate Republicans in particular obstructed the United States from joining. Despite this anticolonial rhetoric, however, USAmericans seemed ideologically oriented toward the belief that "mankind could be sorted out into so many 'nations' which if not yet ready to govern themselves, need only be given a period of benevolent tutelage under some 'advanced' power til they could enter into the Western international system as equal members without further ado" (Hodgson 279). Further, an acute anxiety over "territorial and economic limits" (McAlister 21) that emerged around the perceived closing of the USAmerican West and overproduction of industrialization made space for an implicit economic interest in the Middle East. As in the eighteenth century with the Barbary Wars, the U.S. continued to hold fast to the idea of itself as distinct from the imperialist powers of the Old World, but a thoroughly modern version of conquest began to emerge: a promotion of corporate interests abroad that generated inherent investment in the "stability" of the Orient. Over time, of course, this would compel active interference in order to "avoid upsetting" a

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<sup>1</sup> See Kapur for a fascinating account of the way in which African Americans engaged with the Indian anticolonial struggle.

“status quo” that served those interests (Hodgson 369). This period ushered in both a major increase in USAmerican exports to the region as well as the importation of Middle Eastern oil, the latter being an outgrowth of the United States’ mass industrialization, amplified automobile production, and increase in electricity. The United States’ strategic negotiating – first with the European monopolistic Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC) in 1921 and later independently with the Saudis – managed (for the moment) to “satisf[y] the escalating energy needs of the United States without saddling it with [the] political responsibilities” (Oren 410) antithetical to the dominating ideology of “Anti-imperial Americanism” (Michaels 3). Yet even in the 1920s oil “company officials persistently reminded USAmerican policymakers of the immense economic potential of Arabia and the Gulf and stressed the many affinities, cultural as well as political, between the people of the region and those of the United States” (Oren 416). This process no doubt inflected the simultaneous profusion of books, film, and other media that appeared contemporaneously, all of which blurred the lines between Arabs and non-Arabs. In Rudolf Valentino’s films *The Sheik* (1921) and *Son of the Sheik* (1926), for instance, the title character is revealed to in fact be an Englishman who can now marry the New Woman heroine of the films without drastically overturning USAmericans’ sense of the racial (reproductive) order of things. Meanwhile, the turbaned Lawrence of Arabia became a cultural icon in the United States, and USAmericans consumed all manner of media surrounding him with gusto, from books to stage shows. Meanwhile, the “discovery” of Egyptian Pharaoh Tutankhamun’s tomb by British archaeologists in 1922 re-invigorated the USAmerican fascination with ancient Egypt which, as we have seen, began over a century earlier. This renewed enthusiasm was likewise bolstered by the developing film industry, which as Antonia Lant has argued, was inspired by the spectacularity of “Egyptiante” material from its outset (71). The artifacts in Tutankhamun’s tomb likewise affected styles of furniture, architecture, and even

fashion. This Orientalization of consumer goods was a process which had actually begun in the late nineteenth century, when consumption itself had become

linked to the pleasures of the Orient, which allowed the new discourse of commodity culture to simultaneously praise the practice of indulgence and disavow it by linking it to foreignness. In this moral geography, the East speaks of something missing in the world of the American work ethic; it is what one longs for; it is the iconography of sexual desire and the possibility of purchasing the feelings that go with that desire – reverie, release, sensual pleasure – through the good associated with it. (McAlister 22)

This explanation of the mass consumption of Oriental goods in this period – that such goods fulfilled the lacks opened up by the “overcivilization” of an industrialized United States – has become generally accepted by critics. Yet Thomas W. Kim argues that

The Oriental object in the living room does not merely cite the other, the far away, the distant; it does not always or merely represent an “escape” or alternative to modernity....The very interplay of “inside” and “outside,” self and posited other, subject and object, modern present and venerated past, that the Orient represents in consumer culture, actually *characterizes* what we might identify as a modernist dialectic of distance and proximity— or a dialectic foregrounded by modern conditions of urbanization, increased technology, and international cultural exchanges” (387-388)

Kim’s insight is peculiarly apt in describing the relationship between Oriental goods and African Americans, who often found the associations attached to these Oriental objects a point of identification rather than disassociation, a shared genealogy of “luxuriance” as Frances E.W. Harper had put it thirty years earlier (*Iola Leroy* 282). Indeed, in writings of the Harlem Renaissance, Oriental *things* often served to metonymically stand in for the peculiar position of African Americans, whose spiritual and aesthetic presence was objectified and valued by USAmerican culture though their roles as foundationally constructive of the “home” of the nation went unacknowledged.

These objects were also often appropriated by African Americans as a means toward signaling their paradoxical position. As historian Susan Nance narrates

Sometime in 1926 or 1927, rumors began spreading around Chicago’s South Side that a group of exotically-dressed men had begun initiating altercations with strangers in public. Critics claimed these men called themselves Moorish Americans and strode round the city

daring startled whites to trample black rights by announcing, “I am a citizen of the USA!” (“Respectability” 623)

Though this group, led by Noble Drew Ali (née Timothy Drew) and founded as what he called the Moorish Science Temple in Chicago in 1925, claimed Islam as its roots, its religious practice was more inflected with a black Spiritualism than Muslim theology. In fact Ali’s *Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America* only references the Islamic Qu’ran once and the prophet Mohammad twice, who is cited as Ali’s predecessor along with Confucius (Berg 23). Yet Ali’s appropriation of Islam into Moorish Science allowed him to situate black Americans within an international community of Muslims as well as a historical narrative that preexisted the United States, thus laying claim to a sort of “magical potential,” in Nance’s words. That Moorish Science Temple members physically othered themselves with “fezzes, colorful gowns, and turbans” (Nance “Respectability” 624) while simultaneously insisting upon their inclusion within the body politic speaks to the potentials they saw in the Orient through which to deorient understandings of national and racial belonging.

George Ivanovich Gurdjieff offered another Orientalized avenue through which some African Americans traversed the fluidities of racial belonging. Like Noble Drew Ali, Gurdjieff, a Greek and Armenian mystic, lay claim to an ancient Eastern (and specifically Middle Eastern) wisdom that he believed was lacking from an increasingly technologized West (though Gurdjieff did not link his spiritual teachings to Islam). Jean Toomer, whose modernist, multigenre *Cane* (1923) is often pointed to as a harbinger of the Harlem Renaissance, yet who also became notorious for refusing to be categorized as African American after 1924 (Braithwaite 83), was in particular a follower of Gurdjieff and studied with him in Paris for years. Gurdjieff’s “Method,” which promoted “non-identification” as a means toward higher consciousness, appealed to Toomer’s own desire to articulate an understanding of identity that mirrored the experiences of his own “racially indeterminate” (Gates *Figures* 208) body. In other words, Gurdjieff’s quasi-Oriental mysticism was one of the means through which some African Americans attempted to grapple with their peculiar

status both inside and outside USAmerican identity.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I will briefly consider the way in which the works of two other Harlem Renaissance authors, Nella Larsen and Claude McKay, strategically deployed a sensualized Orient and gave voice to the curious strictures which effectively limited African American self-actualization. Ultimately, I will use their novels *Quicksand* and *Home to Harlem*, both published in 1928, to holistically orient the Harlem Renaissance-era text which most overtly speaks to the potentialities of Afro-Oriental intercourse (quite literally), Du Bois' *Dark Princess*, published in the same year.

### **Is romance dead?: Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem***

Nella Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, gains its momentum from the same problem with which much of Jean Toomer's writings and spiritual musings struggled: is it possible to "belon[g]" to one's "self" (Larsen 70) when so much is overdetermined by racial scripts? The novel was well received by critics upon its publication in 1928, and Du Bois, reviewing it along with *Home to Harlem* in his journal *The Crisis*, praised it as "fine, thoughtful, and courageous....in its subtle comprehension of the curious cross-currents that swirl around the black American" ("Two Novels" 202). The "cross-currents" Larsen, who herself came from West Indian and Scandinavian parents, narrates is the double bind of race and sexuality and, specifically, the way it constricts the formation of integrated black female subjectivities. As we will see in a moment, Larsen calls attention to these binds not only by somewhat Orientalizing her protagonist at the outset, but also by allowing Orientalized tales to dialogically speak within her own. *Quicksand* takes its half African American, half-Danish protagonist, Helga Crane, quite literally on a tour of the USAmerican North and South as well as abroad to Copenhagen in search of a sense of belonging. Yet Helga is always "in-between:" not quite American, not quite Danish; not quite black, not quite white; not quite sensuous, not quite chaste. At every turn, the structures and strictures of race and sex effectively

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<sup>2</sup> Jon Woodson argues, less convincingly, that other notable Harlem Renaissance authors like Nella Larsen, George Schuyler, and Wallace Thurman, were also disciples of Gurdjieff.

discipline Helga's attempts at self-awareness, circumscribing any articulation of self beyond an overwhelming and unyielding sense of alienation.

Structurally, Larsen takes inspiration from both a tradition of sentimental "women's writing" and the bildungsroman. Yet if the natural end of the former has historically been marriage, Larsen distorts the form by presenting its expected end as perverse and *unnatural*; meanwhile, she questions the value of the bildungsroman, a genre predicated on self-development, in a world where true self-development, limited by racial and sexual convention, is impossible. Naxos, the school at which the novel begins and where Helga is employed as a teacher, perceives any hint of nonconformity as a threat to the school's status as "a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity," and "refutation of the black man's inefficiency" (Larsen 4). There, she must suppress her sense of blackness, a motif Larsen works through in the conflict over clothing: Helga is drawn to color, an instinct she attributes as one of the "most delightful manifestations" of her race (Larsen 18), while the rest of the school deems brightness "vulgar" (Larsen 17). This "vulgarity" is both racially and sexually coded: the sensuousness of Helga's taste in clothing affronts a world where other female teachers avoid marriage because aspects of "the matrimonial state" are "entirely too repulsive for a lady of delicate and sensitive nature to submit to" (Larsen 12). Harlem, where Helga moves after quitting at Naxos and a brief stint in Chicago, originally gives her the sensation of "having come home" (Larsen 43) but when her white roots are stigmatized by the Harlem socialites with whom she associates, just as her love of color and sensuousness were stigmatized by Naxos, Helga's difference begins to consume her until she convinces herself that "She didn't, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people" (Larsen 55). She consequently flees to Copenhagen to live with her white aunt and uncle. Copenhagen initially provides a sense of belonging in that Helga becomes a social sensation. Yet, again, this landscape becomes oppressive when this world exoticizes and sexualized her from without, clothing her in colorful, risqué pieces

that exaggerate her status as “a curiosity, a stunt, at which people came and gazed” (Larsen 71).

Though she is allowed an expression of her sexuality here, this role too becomes constrictive, and Helga returns to Harlem, where she finds herself participating in an ecstatic worship service – during which she experiences a none-too-veiled orgasmic release – and has sex with the preacher.

Mistakenly assuming her resulting sense of peace stems from the religious, and not sexual, expression, she marries the preacher and moves to Georgia. The novel ends here, where characteristically Helga first finds a sense of satisfaction, this time as a result of “relief to be able to put the entire responsibility on” god (Larsen 126). Yet ultimately she is portrayed as physically destroyed and emotionally trapped by the five children produced in quick succession by her husband’s relentless state of arousal, caused by the “constant ogling and flattering” that is “the almost religious duty of the female portion” of his parishioners (Larsen 120).

Throughout Helga’s search for belonging, Larsen points to the impossibility of true kinship and connection when identification rests on notions of biological difference. Conceptions of self that rest on skin seem to end there – at the level of the skin, at the level of the superficial. Larsen’s attention to clothing throughout the narrative emphasizes this: race is something we wear, put on, something that strangles the complexities of what’s beneath. As Thadious M. Davis argues, “the conventional construction of social, racial, sexual, or political identities can be made only in singular terms” in the landscape of *Quicksand*, leaving “no place, spatially or culturally, for a multiplicity of identities” (xiii). And true connection – be it familial, professional, or sexual – becomes inconceivable when people interact with each others according to these singular scripts, unwilling to see the messier narratives beneath.

In the 1920s world in which Larsen was writing, for example, black women’s sexuality was still often disciplined by the racist logic that had justified the systematic rape of slave women – that black women were inherently licentious beings who magically impelled white men to rape them. As

a result, the pressure to behave “like a lady” could be overwhelming. In *Quicksand*, Helga is impeded from authentic sexual connection because she is stuck between scripts – either interpellated into a system that capitalizes on what it believes is her innate tendency toward a primitive, unrestrained sexuality or forced into insisting on her status as a lady at the expense of healthy sexual expression and pleasure. That the “respectable” sexual fulfillment Helga ultimately finds is also portrayed as deadly speaks for itself: as her husband attends to her after a difficult birth that has landed her on the precipice of death, he cannot help but be aroused by the “nightgown of filmy crepe, a relic of prematrimonial days, which had slipped from one carved shoulder” (Larsen 129) and later impregnates her with her fifth child. Helga, ill as she is, meanwhile herself cannot help but revel in the sexual power she wields even on her deathbed. “Respectable” as this marriage might be, it is distorted and perverted by the sexual repression inherent in the culture at large: true connection, love, and care for each other becomes an impossibility. Thus though Larsen uses the “familiar narrative zone” of the romance to explore black female sexuality, where it may be “enacted and legitimated within the boundaries of marriage” (McDowell “Introduction” xxi), this is not Harper’s *Iola Leroy* or Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*, both of which end happily: romance, Larsen seems to be saying, is dead.

Interestingly, Larsen frames the novel with two Orientalist texts. When first we meet Helga, she is in her room at Naxos, her feet on stool covered in “oriental silk” as she curls up on a chair in “a small oasis” of light “in a desert of darkness” (Larsen 1) and reads Marmaduke Pickthall’s *Said the Fisherman* (Larsen 2). The sensuous detail of the room – from the stool to the bright colors of her nightgown to a Chinese rug – immediately serves to mark Helga’s difference from the rest of Naxos. And the popular British novel, a typically Orientalist tale of a roguish fisherman, is a marker as well. It signals, first, Helga’s simultaneous belonging to a particular, fashionable social strata as well as her alienation from the actual social landscape in which she finds herself (which is decidedly

unfashionable and unworldly, and would not approve of such a book). Helga turns to this book, in fact, because she “wanted forgetfulness, complete mental relaxation” from the propriety of her setting: the novel transports her beyond the suffocating pressures of the world of which she is a part. Yet *Said the Fisherman* also serves as something of an analogy for the themes of *Quicksand* itself. If, as one contemporaneous *New York Times* reviewer wrote, the novel is at root an account of the way in which “Said lies fearsomely after the skyclimbing Oriental fashion, and...is on that account but the more admired, such being that attitude of orientals towards a romancing genius” (“An Oriental Liar” 1904) it introduces us to the concept of the lies society tells about itself. Helga, it must be said, “succeeds” – in much the way Said does when he in his “upward” climb through society “living by his wits” – whenever she convincingly performs a version of herself at the expense of the other components of her identity. She herself becomes a lie, a surface on which to project, and the supposedly corrupted Orient here becomes mirror rather than a foil.

Driving this point home is the fact that, while convalescing at the end of the novel, Helga requests another Orientalist tale, this time the French story “The Procurator of Judea” by Anatole France. Again, Helga turns to this tale in the spirit of escape, not only from her debilitated physical condition but also from the “sound of joyous religious abandon” (Larsen 131) of her husband’s parishioners. The story follows a Roman named Lamia, who has been exiled because of an extra-marital affair with the wife of a “man of consular rank,” as he travels through “Syria, Palestine,” and modern-day Turkey. The bulk of the story finds him in long conversation about theology with Pontius Pilate, who chastises him for his affair. “Marriage from the patrician point of view is a sacred tie,” the fictional Pilate rebukes. He continues, “what, above all, I blame in you is that you have not married in compliance with the law and given children to the Republic, as every good citizen is bound to do.” Yet the story ends when Lamia inquires about Jesus and Pilate responds, “Jesus -- of Nazareth? I cannot call him to mind” (France). The significance of the “superbly ironic

ending” is emphasized when Helga’s nurse – who does not understand it – reads it aloud. The other choice quotes Larsen allows to speak for themselves include one referring to a pagan rite in which women sacrifice doves to Jupiter and the phrase “Africa and Asia have already enriched us with a considerable number of gods...” (Larsen 132). Through these three lines, Larsen indicts a quasi-religious world that upholds the sanctity of marriage while literally forgetting true spirituality and goodness; a world where Afro-Oriental or woman-centric religious practice is condemned as sacrilege while the perversions inherent in sexual repression is upheld as sacred. Further, Larsen indicts black Americans who buy into not only the “joke” the “white man’s God had played on them” by degrading them on earth with “sweet promises of mansions in the sky by and by” (134) but also the white power structures that literally reproduce the logic of racial and sexual oppression. If Pilate, Prefect of Judea (and, thus, official representative of the “system”) can explain to Lamia that marriage “is one of the institutions which are the support of Rome” (France), the question of just what kind of support this is finds its answer in Helga’s own awareness of the ways in which marriage reproduces “more black folk to suffer indignities. More dark bodies for mobs to lynch” (Larsen 75). Yet if “The Procurator of Judea” can incite in Helga a renewed desire to escape her shackles, it cannot provide the physical means to do so, for she is already trapped within the reproductive realities: “hardly she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain...when she began to have her fifth child” (Larsen 135).

The two Oriental tales in *Quicksand* serve as a sort of metanarrative to call attention to the ways in which we are coerced into performing false, univocal versions of self in order to maintain a system that, quite literally, kills us. But if Larsen struggles with a way to articulate sexuality in a world inclined to see any such expression as proof of the black women’s unrestrained, primitive depravity, then Claude McKay presses up against those anxieties from a decidedly different angle. His novel *Home to Harlem*, a frank look at the hedonistic nightlife of Harlem during the 1920s, seems

entirely unconcerned with disputing the dominating USAmerican image of black Americans as “bucks” and “Jezebels” and instead traces the sexual exploits of his main characters with abandon, thus leaving W.E.B. Du Bois famously in need of “a bath” after reading “the dirtier parts of its filth.” In that review, the same one during which Du Bois reviewed *Quicksand*, Du Bois accused McKay of gratifying “that prurient demand on the part of white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of that utter licentiousness which conventional civilization holds white folk back from enjoying” (“Two Novels” 202). Since Du Bois’ review, many critics, contemporary and otherwise, have continued to characterize it as a black-authored version of Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, which many felt exploited stereotypes of black sexuality. Yet as Michael Maiwald argues, “*Home to Harlem* evolved from one of [McKay’s] own short stories, and McKay didn’t see Van Vechten’s notorious novel until the spring of 1927, by which time his own book was almost complete,” thus precluding the possibility that McKay “mimic[ked] or “replicate[d]” *Nigger Heaven* in a cynical bid for commercial success (826). Like *Quicksand* and, as we will see, *Dark Princess*, *Home to Harlem* instead fundamentally disrupts the kind of oppositional or “either/or” (either black or white; either male or female; either sexual or chaste; either thought or feeling; either politics or sentiment; either subject or object) thinking that undergirds systems of domination in Western society. Part of the disruption of such systems in *Home to Harlem* is not only laying claim to an Afro-Oriental heritage, to which I will return in a moment, but also the construction of new subjectivities that rest easily *between* those either/ors of West and East, USAmerican and African, male and female.

The novel was the first by Jamaican-born McKay, who arrived in the United States to attend Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee academy and who later also traveled to Russia, as well as throughout Europe and North Africa, as a result of his dealings with various black radical, proletarian groups. *Home to Harlem* follows the travels of Jake, a WWI deserter who has returned to the United States, and the momentum of the novel, if it can be said that there is any, comes from his

search for Felice, the prostitute with whom Jake spends his first night back in Harlem and with whom he immediately falls in love. Yet the plot is much more meandering than that motive would suggest and the majority of the novel is spent simply exploring the cabarets, bars, gambling dens, and brothels of Harlem. Though it tends to celebrate an urban black masculinity, *Home to Harlem* equally complicates that narrative with interruptions of homoeroticism<sup>3</sup> and disruptions of the expectations of gender normativity for both males and females alike<sup>4</sup>. In the midst of his exploits, Jake encounters Ray, a Haitian-born college student, pessimistic and educated foil to Jake's happy-go-lucky candor, and – as critics have read him – a thinly veiled version of McKay himself. By the end of the novel Ray has found work on a ship, and he reappears in McKay's 1930 novel *Banjo*, about a group of Pan-African vagrants in Marseille. Jake, meanwhile, has been happily reunited with Felice and the two leave Harlem for Chicago.

Curiously, the novel begins with the question over which much of the nineteenth-century African American press nearly neurotically worked, as we saw in Chapter One: where the Arab fell on the binary between black and white, or, conversely, where the Afro-American felt on the binary between Orient and USAmerica. Specifically, the first two lines of the novel read, “All that Jake knew about the freighter on which he stoked was that it stank between sea and sky. He was working with a dirty Arab crew.” McKay continues to explain that “The white sailors who washed the ship would not wash the stokers' water-closet, because they despised the Arabs” and “The cooks hated the Arabs because they did not eat pork” (McKay *Home to Harlem* 1). Despite his awareness the white sailors and cooks treat the Arabs unfairly, Jake is not interested in aligning with them. In fact, he begins to “despise” them, disgusted by their propensity to treat their “sleeping quarters” like a “garbage can,” so appalled by their “way of eating,” he even pays the cooks to serve him separately (McKay *Home to Harlem* 2). Yet when a white sailor remarks “You're the same like us chaps. You

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<sup>3</sup> See Holcomb, Knadler, and Maiwald.

<sup>4</sup> See Maiwald and K. Roberts.

ain't like them dirty jabbering coolies" (McKay *Home to Harlem* 2-3) Jake neither aligns himself with the white sailors. Rather he is well aware that, despite his repugnance of the Arabs' habits, he is bound to them through the racist logic which dictates they, as non-whites, must be stokers instead of deckhands. Despite his acknowledgment of these dynamics, however, carefree Jake refuses to engage in too much thought over the problem, choosing instead to focus on returning home to Harlem and sex appeal of the women with whom he conflates it. Though this opening could hardly be called a moment at which Afro-Arab solidarity is articulated, the ambivalence of this world "between sky and sea" and the fluidity of the identities contained within it – i.e. Jake is neither "like" the white deckhands nor the Arab stokers and yet overlaps with both – announces the novel as carving out for itself a space that resists easy categorization of black identity.

Much of the action when Jake returns to Harlem centers on, in Felice's words late in the narrative, the way in which "white folks can't padlock niggers out of joys forever" (McKay *Home to Harlem* 336). *Home to Harlem* reappropriates the kind of primitivism with which African Americans were associated – unrestrained joy, lust for life, sexuality, artistry – in a world that regularly denigrated those traits. The kind of candid passion of McKay's characters – their "Simple, raw" and "real" emotions that "frighten and repel refined souls" – is imagined as both innate and agential alternative to the "nice" but fundamentally "false" "emotions" of white middle class culture (McKay *Home to Harlem* 338). Harlem thus becomes a vibrant space that is by turns described as apart from standards of white imperialism (and the violence it engenders), capitalism (and the violence *it* engenders) and the hypocrisy of both the white and black classes who profit off both. Though it is imagined as a fundamentally *black* space, however, what constitutes "blackness" is, both visually and nationally, diverse: throughout, the transnational origins of "blackness" are emphasized, as are the endless hues and colors (both skin and otherwise) that compose Harlem. It is in that intercultural zone that McKay finds the promise of black culture not as another term in the opposition between

White and Other but as the *between* in the opposition. In other words, like the Oriental object in a turn-of-the-century USAmerican home, the primitivism McKay discussed here was not simply an alternative to the industrialized or overcivilized West but a condition *of* the modern, and the diasporic encounters made easier by industrialization; as McKay wrote in his essay “A Negro Writer to His Critics:”

The time when a writer will stick only to the safe old ground of his own class of people is undoubtedly passing. Especially in America, where all the peoples of the world are scrambling side by side and modern machines and the ramifications of international commerce are steadily breaking down the ethnological barriers that separate the peoples of the world (139).

Thus it is in Harlem that Jake can attempt to integrate his sense of belonging to the *world* – as depicted through his restless need for travel – with *USAmerican* identity.

That the novel finds something akin to resolution – that is, the reuniting of Jake and Felice – in a space called the “Sheba Palace” testifies to this fluidity. Sheba Palace is obviously Orientalized simply by its name, which connotes the ancient land located on the western Arabian Peninsula bordering Egypt. Sheba, of course, was most famous for its Queen, who has already within the novel been attributed as the foremother, thanks to a “liason” with King Solomon (McKay *Home to Harlem* 136), of the rulers of Abyssinia, the “oldest unconquered nation, ancient-strange as Egypt, persistent as Palestine, legendary as Greece, magical as Persia.” The Queen of Sheba, described in *Home to Harlem* as having had a “beautiful black body” (McKay *Home to Harlem* 135), certainly represented to 1920s USAmericans an Orientalized sensuousness, and indeed a spectacular film about the queen’s romance with King Solomon, offering viewers a scantily-clad protagonist and female chariot races, was released in 1921. With walls of “garish gold, and tables of screaming green” (McKay *Home to Harlem* 296) the Sheba Palace is appropriately, then, amorous: “couples loung[e]” and “spraw[l]” on “green benches” “apparently oblivious to everything outside of themselves” (McKay *Home to Harlem* 295). The sensuality is only intensified by the “yellow in the

music,” which we are told, “stood out in [the patrons’] imaginations like a challenge, conveying a sense of that primitive, ancient, eternal, inexplicable antagonism in the color taboo of sex and society” (McKay *Home to Harlem* 296). That the music is described as “yellow” testifies to the in-betweenness of the space; that it is portrayed as antagonistic to the fetishization of race as sex in dominating US American culture and is the space in which Jake is reunited with his love, speaks to its liberatory potential.

Allan G. Borst has argued that in *Home to Harlem* McKay rewrites the Orientalist opium narratives of De Quincey, Coleridge, and Baudelaire “with a black difference” by appropriating this mode for “jazz-addict subculture” (697). Borst continues, “jazz and intoxication offer a spiritual portal” in *Home to Harlem* for making the “mythological journey” (Borst 698) to a past of Afro-Oriental greatness (via Egypt and Ethiopia). In this reading, McKay’s so-called “primitivism” becomes in actuality a recuperation of diasporic past that pushes up against the “respectable” narratives the “New Negro” movement presented, and with which Larsen’s *Quicksand* was also engaged. Borst’s argument is astute, but I would advance it to take into account the ways in which McKay moves forward as well as back in order to begin to articulate new understandings of black subjectivity. That Jake and Felice meet again in the “Sheba Palace” and dine in restaurants such as the “Nile Queen” is more than a simple Orientalization of an African past. Though Jake feels like “a boy who stands with the map of the world in colors before him, and feels the wonder of the world” (McKay *Home to Harlem* 134) when Ray enlightens him about his Afro-Oriental past, Ray himself is portrayed as a “misfit” (McKay *Home to Harlem* 274). His education is conversely related to his ability for joy and has robbed him of the “strange child-like capacity for wistfulness and laughter” that Jake embodies so naturally and that “is the key” to his “race” (McKay *Home to Harlem* 266). *Knowing* about one’s past is not enough. That Jake and Felice ultimately eschew these spaces and begin traveling together – that *Home to Harlem* ends with *leaving* this Orientalized Harlem –

suggests that one must build something new on the foundations of this recuperation. The reason Jake feels such communion with Felice so instantly, in fact is because she shares with him

that strange elusive something...sometimes here, sometimes there, roaming away from him, going back to London, to Brest, Le Havre, wandering to some unknown new port, caught a moment by some romantic rhythm, color face, passing through cabarets, saloons, speakeasies... (McKay *Home to Harlem* 41)

Though their departure is ostensibly motivated by the fear that Jake's desertion from the Army will become public knowledge, McKay is careful to point out several times that this is unlikely. In fact, Jake admits he had "been thinking a getting away from the stinking mess and go on off to sea again" even before that point (McKay 332). McKay suggests that Jake and Felice must return to the space Jake began – the space of movement and travel where they can construct subjectivities of the "between." Yet they cannot leave their country to do it. As Felice articulates "What you wanta go knocking around them foreign countries again for like swallow come and swallow go from year to year and nevah settling down no place? This heah is you' country, daddy... This heah country is good and big enough" (McKay *Home to Harlem* 332). They must, in other words, bring that space of fluidity into USAmerica, must bring Harlem to the rest of the country. If Ray claims of education, "We ought to get something new, we Negroes. But we get our education like—like our houses. When the whites move out, we move in and take possession of the old dead stuff. Dead stuff that this age has no use for" (McKay *Home to Harlem* 243), the "new" is to occupy the space between black and white, East and West. And despite the fact that this is a rather untraditional love story, predicated as it is on Jake's many sexual pursuits before he reunites with Felice, the novel ends with the two of them traveling *together*, disrupting the kind of hypermasculinity of which McKay has often been accused. Hazel Carby, for example, famously asserted that the novel is essentially one of a "journey of black masculinity in formation" predicated on conquest over "threatening embodiments of the female" (*Cultures* 31). Yet what does it mean that this journey of subjectivity in formation ends with the happy reuniting of a male *and* a female? McKay's ending, in fact, paradoxically

recuperates a sense of romantic promise from the ways in which, for the entirety of the novel, “sexual relations become another medium to contest, subvert, or ratify one's economic position” (Maiwald 834). That Jake's picaresque story ends with the necessity of the feminine in this search for a reoriented black subjectivity links, despite Du Bois' distaste for the novel, *Home to Harlem* and Du Bois' own *Dark Princess*.

### **Genre in Du Bois' *Dark Princess: A Romance***

Du Bois' intellectual narrative has been generally accepted as an evolution from “civil liberties maverick” to “full-blown” Pan-African “Marxist,” in David Levering Lewis' pithy words (2) and, indeed, if by the time he wrote *Dark Princess* in 1928 he could “count himself” as “the public ‘voice’ of the Negro American intellectual” (Gates “Intro” x), increasingly he was using that voice to frame black Americans within a global framework. By 1928, in fact, he had already helped to organize three Pan-African, Pan-Asian conferences. Yet *Dark Princess* departs from the three essay collections which preceded it, 1903's seminal *The Souls of Black Folk* and its follow-ups, 1919's *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* and 1924's *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America*, not solely in its representation of civil rights as a fundamental part of a larger anticolonial struggle. That Du Bois' works posited worldliness as a particularly *fertile* avenue for liberatory African American identities is revealed quite literally in another major way in which *Dark Princess* departs from two of three (namely, *Souls* and *Darkwater*): the novel ends with a live, rather than dead, child. The question Du Bois implicitly ponders in *Souls*' essay “Of the Passing of the First Born” – where his mourning over the loss of his son is tempered by the knowledge that the infant will never know the pain of one's sense of USAmericanness “warring” with one's sense of blackness (Du Bois *Souls* 3) – is asked quite blankly in *Darkwater*. In that later text, Du Bois asks “Ought children be born to us? Have we any right to make human souls face what we face today?” (119). This question, which we might recall is also asked by Helga in *Quicksand*, is answered in *Darkwater* as bleakly as it is in *Quicksand*: the

collection's concluding image is that of a dead black infant being cradled by its mother in Du Bois' fictional apocalyptic vision, "The Comet." *Dark Princess*, on the other hand, concludes with a spectacular, multi-ethnic and -religious consecration of the "Messenger and Messiah to all the Darker Worlds!" (Du Bois 311): the infant son of black American Matthew and Indian princess Kautilya.

The path Du Bois traverses in order to reach Madhu, this tiny messiah, is at once straightforward and yet nuanced in such a way to subtly deorient our expectations, as I will show. From the outset, Du Bois' title marks the novel, first announcing it explicitly as a romance and secondly implying that though its name might call to mind fairy tales, this tale is no standard fairy story but one of a *Dark Princess*. And the plot of that story is thus. Matthew, a promising black medical student, is expelled from medical school when he cannot complete his obstetric requirement because, as the Dean of his college so delicately puts it, "Do you think white women patients are going to have a nigger doctor delivering their babies?" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 4). Demoralized, Matthew sails to Germany, where he dramatically takes to signing his name with "Exile" instead of his intended suffix of MD (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 17). While in Germany he encounters Kautilya, the Indian princess of Bwodpur, "a native, half-independent state" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 229) the British covet. He is immediately smitten by the beautiful Princess, who equally immediately befriends him in the hopes he will represent black Americans in her council of the peoples of the Darker World, an anticolonial group striving to wrest power from "the inferior" white races and return it to the "natural aristocracy" of "darker peoples" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 24-25). At Kautilya's request, Matthew returns to the United States, working as a Pullman Porter, to investigate certain revolutionary pockets in African American life. Yet his communications with her are thwarted by the rest of the council, whose bourgeois leanings preclude an alignment with American blacks, who they believe "will neither rebel nor fight unless put up to it or led like dumb cattle by

whites” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 29). When a close friend and fellow porter is lynched as the result of sexual assault accusations a white woman alleges against Matthew, and a union strike Matthew organizes in response fails, Matthew throws in his lot with Perigua, the leader he had been sent to investigate by the Princess, who believes terrorism is the only answer.

Naturally, while riding the “Klan special” – which Perigua has targeted for his terrorist plot – to his death, Matthew encounters the Princess for a second time, who explains she has not received any of his communications. Unable to condemn his love to death, Matthew quickly alerts the authorities to the plan, saving the train from hurtling down a ravine whose bridge Perigua has, essentially, suicide-bombed. Yet because Matthew will not betray Perigua even in death, he is sent to prison. A year later, thanks to the machinations of the corrupt Chicago politician Sammy Scott, and the brain behind his operations, the secretary Sara Andrews, Matthew is released early and taken under their wing. He is seduced into marriage by Sara, who plans to double-cross his way into Congress, but the Princess returns, quite distinctively during an interracial soiree Sara throws for Matthew, and the two run from the party in each others’ arms. Yet their idyllic affair cannot last long; Kautilya claims she must return to India to save her kingdom from British imperialists while Matthew works on the ground, quite literally, as a tunnel digger for Chicago’s subway system. Unbeknownst to Matthew, however, Kautilya has actually gone to Virginia, to Matthew’s mother – with whom she has lived before – to lie-in while anticipating the birth of their child. After Matthew’s divorce from Sara is made final, he is summoned to his own wedding, where the guest of honor is the newly birthed “Maharajah of Bwodpur,” his son and his and Kautilya’s “Love Incarnate” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 308).

*Dark Princess*’ designation as “A Romance” situates it within two traditions. The first, the conventions of which have been most famously delineated by structuralist Northrop Frye, might be described in its simplest form as a literary “mode” primarily animated by the quest of a hero who

“moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended” (Frye *Anatomy* 33). Following Frederic Jameson, Barbara Fuchs has usefully suggested that the Romantic tradition be thought of less as a monolithic form and more as a “series of literary strategies” (xv) that can be located in a variety of genres ranging from classical texts like *The Odyssey* to the Gothic novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But these “strategies” are most closely associated with the verse and prose narratives of the medieval and early modern periods. USAmerican authors as early as Charles Brockden Brown in 1800 questioned how to bring conventions of this form to bear on what they perceived as a uniquely USAmerican narrative and history; Brown himself distinguished between the historian and “romancer” when he wrote that

The observer or experimentalist...who carefully watches and carefully enumerates the appearances which occur, may claim the appellation of historian. He who adorns these appearances with cause and effect, and traces resemblances between the past, distant, and future, with the present, performs a different part. He is a dealer, not in certainties, but probabilities, and is therefore a romancer. (196)

USAmerican romance in the nineteenth century was often marked by this sort of dialectical tension between history and fantasy, “probable” and “possible” in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s words (1), “the intoxication of the Heart” and the “Truth which is the satisfaction of the Reason,” in Edgar Allan Poe’s (254). *Dark Princess* certainly finds itself grappling with this kind of tension and utilizes several of the conventions traditionally associated with the romance, most notably the focus on a hero’s quest to find good amidst evil, the use of seasons as allegory, and a slight “unreality” to the plot – or what I might call a sort of extra-reality in which the material world is subjugated to a “higher truth, the truth of nature and of principle,” (Fenimore Cooper 99). Indeed, at the novel’s closing, Du Bois characterizes it as “the rich and colored gossamer of dream which the Queen of Faerie lent to me for a season,” and questions, “Which is really Truth – Fact or Fancy? the Dream of the Spirit or the Pain of the Bone?” (*Dark Princess* 312).

But *Dark Princess* likewise conforms quite closely – one could, in fact, argue *more* closely – to the eight narrative elements by which critic Pamela Regis argues all “romance novels,” from the ascendance of the English novel in the eighteenth century (*Pamela* and *Pride and Prejudice* being exemplars of that time) through to contemporary popular romance, are characterized. These elements are an “always corrupt” society, a first “meeting” between hero and heroine, descriptions of their mutual “attraction,” a “barrier” to their love, a point at which no “happy resolution of the narrative seems possible,” a moment of “recognition that fells the barrier,” a “declaration” of love, and, finally a “betrothal” (14). And yet in the critical tradition surrounding the text, few have read the novel on these terms and many seem to agree with Du Bois’ contemporaries that the novel is simply “a dirty old man’s fantasy that should never have been published” (Tate “Introduction” xxiv). Even the novel’s most sympathetic critics tend to read it as a bildungsroman, whether “old fashioned” (Suggs 204; see also Ahmad 775) or “Bollywood-style” (Bhabha “Black Savant 137), “propaganda” according to Du Bois’ own famous criteria of all good art *as* propaganda<sup>5</sup> (Fisher 95), an articulation of Du Bois’ “private feelings, beliefs, and longings” (Tate ix), or an “allegory” (Mullen *Afro-Asian International* 221) that functions as the “symbolic configuration of Du Bois’ political engagement” with Pan-African, Pan-Asian, and Bolshevik movements (Mullen *Afro-Asian International* 218). Meanwhile, less sympathetic critics dismiss it as, in Arnold Rampersad’s famous words, a “combination of outright propaganda and Arabian tale, of social realism and quaint romance” (204). Both camps – with a few notable exceptions – seem fundamentally concerned with teasing out the political value of the text while simultaneously sheepishly apologizing for, ignoring outright, or occluding (by proposing it may be categorized as another) its genre.

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<sup>5</sup> “Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (Du Bois “Criteria for Negro Art”).

It is curious, given the weight and attention paid to recuperating the political value of sentimental fiction by African American women writers – much of which contains elements of romance or could be characterized as romances outright according to the formula presented above – that the same genre deployed by a male intellectual becomes a problem critics must solve. Landmark works like Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood* and Ann duCille’s *The Coupling Convention* have made a case for the “subversive ways” (du Cille 3) in which African American woman writers deployed sentimental and domestic plotlines. Yet few have characterized the sentimentality of *Dark Princess* as subversive. It is as though, as Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler point out, there is a “critical unwillingness to imagine the USAmerican man of sentiment, as if this subject position is too paradoxical, too unstable, too threatening to discuss” (7). Instead, one must explain away why Du Bois, one of the most important USAmerican intellectuals of the twentieth century, dabbled in a form traditionally understood as intellectually unrigorous or escapist, no matter how “frank and sincere” (Aptheker “Introduction” 19) he himself characterized it.<sup>6</sup> Yet as Alys Eve Weinbaum argues, “it is *because Dark Princess* is a romance that it can advance the unfinished political arguments” of his earlier work. (*Wayward* 202; emphasis mine). I would like to here depart from the way in which “discussions of genre,” as Yogita Goyal rightfully points out, “often turn on the issue of aesthetic pleasure” rather than “epistemology” itself (11) to argue that the use of genre in *Dark Princess* is *itself* a way of making meaning. That is, I contend that it is precisely the supposedly melodramatic, escapist form of *Dark Princess* that provides significant theoretical interventions into Du Bois’ non-fiction works (rather than simply encoding those theoretical interventions).

Dora Ahmad is one of the critics who reads the novel within the form of the sentimental novel, pointing out, quite aptly, that “Geography quite simply dictates genre” within it (777). Ahmad’s work goes a long way toward elucidating a key problem with which many critics have

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<sup>6</sup> And, indeed, Du Bois claimed it has his favorite piece of writing.

grappled: that of *Dark Princess*' messy insertion of genres such as a socially critical realism into its romantic arc. Ahmad argues that Du Bois' seemingly schizophrenic choices in the novel correspond to what appears to be, based on Du Bois' own documented research while writing the book, a conscious polyvocality. In Ahmad's words

the realistic and romantic sections of *Dark Princess* each correspond to a specific locale, already historically associated with that type of writing. Du Bois writes Chicago in a hard realist mode reminiscent of Theodore Dreiser and Upton Sinclair; he renders India, its history, and its people in the language much like the decadent, otherworldly Orientalism of Baudelaire and other figures of the romanticist Oriental Renaissance; and he dreams of the American South as a hazy agrarian motherland... (775-776)

Ultimately, Ahmad argues that Du Bois' project "privileges the liberatory possibility of the imagination against the constructed modern world" and allows him to "write himself out of a dry, pessimistic, white realism" (799). I follow Ahmad in arguing that, like *Of One Blood*, *Dark Princess*' genre is a deorientation act that destabilizes our expectations of Du Bois as a writer. While Hopkins wrote in a form that was (and is) assumed a natural extension of her status as a turn-of-the-century woman writer (i.e. a sentimental, melodramatic romance) and distorted the form from within, Du Bois subverted entirely the expectations of his celebrated status as a political theorist and intellectual by appropriating a form traditionally associated with women.

I would take Ahmad's analysis a step further, however, to argue that Du Bois does not simply complicate the "dry pessimistic, white realism" in which he writes by infusing it with romantic Orientalism or a dreamy agrarianism. In the rest of this chapter, I will push Ahmad's masterful argument forward from one that is primarily an analysis of the literal intersections of genre and geography in the novel into one that looks, first, to the smaller spaces of the novel (such as homes and offices) and, second, to the smaller *textual* spaces of the novel, those pieces that are within-yet-without its larger structures, to see how the text constructs its own space of black subjectivity. In other words, it is my argument that *Dark Princess* is romance inflected with just enough disruption to, like Larsen and McKay's novels, reveal the insufficiencies of dominating

USAmerican narratives. But it also integrates the peculiar experience of double consciousness – that “sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois *Souls* 3), that sense of being within, yet without – into a new understanding of subjectivity. Specifically, the attic and Kautilya's story-within-a-story, both of which are characterized by a sensuous Orientalism, represent not simply “the liberatory potential of imagination” (though this is certainly true), not only fantasy, but also the construction of an identity that is built upon authentic (and/or sensuous) experience rather than prescribed narratives – an identity that textually traverses conventional USAmerican literary forms, literally traverses the imposed borders of the globe, and also sexually traverses the expected expressions of gender.

*Dark Princess* does this, I would argue, through a particular attention to domestic space. Our continued critical bias is to associate the domestic with the feminine, thus precluding any recognition of the ways in which men engage with and construct the domestic. And in this case, even those critics who have argued for the importance of *Dark Princess* focus the bulk of their attention on the power of the feminine forces of the novel (specifically, the dark princess herself as well as Matthew's mother). While I do not mean to understate the very real ways in which “power flows through women” (Suggs 210) in this text, I would like to build on that observation to argue that in *Dark Princess* Du Bois intervenes into the binaries of male and female, of world and home, with a thoroughly domestic and sentimental *male* who invites, quite literally, the world into his home.

### **Deorienting Seduction in *Dark Princess***

*Dark Princess* moves between a variety of spaces as a matter of course, winding us through intimate lovenests to the “giant ships” that “carry” the “busy worlds” of transatlantic commerce and transatlantic encounters (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 3), from the behind-the-scenes political negotiations that occur in claustrophobic offices to the grand, sweeping spectacle of high-profile trials and press

conferences. Because the physical landscapes of the four sections – “The Exile,” which occurs during summer, “The Pullman Porter,” which takes place during fall, “The Chicago Politician,” whose action takes place over two years but which is conflated with winter, and “The Maharajah of Bwodpur,” which represents a year-long summer for Matthew as he embarks upon his sexual relationship with Kautilya and conceives a son – are synonymous with Matthew’s emotional landscape, this constant contracting and expanding of space represents the way in which subjectivity is always-already in flux, constructed through collisions both public and private. Textually, the narrative mirrors this sense of motion and within the larger narrative, pockets are opened up for smaller stories that, it is my contention, show the limitations and possibilities inherent in dominating USAmerican discourse. The first of these discourses is that of the law and the political system. Here, I will explore the ways in which a variety of living spaces disrupt those “official” scripts in “The Chicago Politician” section of the novel.

The section begins with Matthew still imprisoned as a result of refusing to reveal Perigua’s terrorist plot (from which he has saved a number of train passengers). It is important to note here that Matthew finds himself in prison – “in the system” – physically because he *feels* imprisoned *by* the system. His efforts to trip up the larger wires of the United States – his involvement in a larger global struggle, his stint at union organizing, even his attempts at terrorism – have all failed, and thus he becomes imprisoned as much by what he perceives as “the narrow and ever-narrowing limit of his strength and chance” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 103) as he is the justice system. Matthew’s statement that prison will leave him a shell of a man – “My spirit will be broken and my hope and aspirations gone” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 104) – belies that he is already in this emotional space *before* entering prison, a transformation we have witnessed through this first half of the book as he moved from promising young medical student to Pullman Porter-cum-undercover operative in the Princess’ mission to hopeless terrorist. It is significant that Matthew is an agent in his own imprisonment:

that is, he is imprisoned because he actively *chooses* between “high reward and criminal punishment” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 96) when he refuses to betray Perigua even in death. Yet in noting this agential move, it is important to distinguish between this kind of agency and the kind to which the Judge who prosecutes him refers during sentencing.

The chapter during which Matthew gets sentenced to prison is a strange one, as Jon-Christian Suggs has aptly noted: it is a moment where “the story” of the first half of the book, which we have just read, “is essentially, retold, in miniature, as legal narrative” (206). Though everything the Judge says is technically true it is “full of discrepancies and omissions” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 98), as he himself admits. These discrepancies and omissions are not simply the result of Matthew’s own denial to reveal the truth; rather the story is colored by the Judge’s inability to see the whole picture. His version of the chain of events, peppered as it is by asides such as “of course we *know* [that] Negroes never conspire” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 97) and refusals to investigate the clear connections between the man he is prosecuting and the KKK wife whose allegations led to Jimmie’s lynching (and, hence, Matthew’s resigned turn to terrorism), reveal his literal blind spot. His assumptions impede his ability to see the full story, rendering even the most obvious answer – to make the connection between Perigua’s unidentifiable dead body and Matthew – unreachable. As Suggs argues, the Judge’s take on these events exposes the inadequacy of the law to accurately represent black experience. His lecturing of Matthew during the sentence hearing emphasizes this point that “the law can only repeat its own platitudes about responsibility” (Suggs 206):

There is for you no shadow of a real excuse. You are a man of education and culture. You have traveled and read. I know that you have suffered injustice and perhaps insult and that your soul is bitter. But you are to blame if you have let this drown the heart of your manhood. (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 101)

The script the Judge, acting as representative of the Law provides – that “Crime is...no more than a failure to rise among circumstances” (Suggs 206) – is one we as readers can recognize as insufficient, given our awareness of the rather complex chain of events that lead Matthew to this moment. It is

in fact just part and parcel of the dominating, fundamentally dishonest narrative USAmerica tells about itself: the one about bootstraps, the one Matthew originally internalizes when he believed that “Character and brains were too much for prejudice” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 13). It is not insignificant that Sara Andrews, who sets out to secure Matthew’s release from prison because she believes it would be “a big political asset” to her boss Sammy Scott (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 115), can finagle the pardon primarily *because* she is “not satisfied” with the official narrative (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 109). Sara can see what the Judge can’t: her experience, as a black woman who can pass as white, allows her not only to recognize the existence of “discrepancies and omissions” but to break them open and fill them in with connections the official narrative won’t make room for. Specifically, Sara can see the possibility of a white woman attempting to seduce a black man – a scene the white world can only name as “rape,” thus leading to Jimmie’s lynching – and manipulate this connection to her advantage (since it is through this woman’s husband and his KKK connections that Matthew ultimately gets pardoned). The Judge’s anything but subtle or nuanced story-within-the-story, then, is a break in narrative flow that justifies the narrative in the first place: it is a hole or gap that creates awareness to that hole or gap and the need to fill it. In other words, the Judge’s story creates the space to imagine alternatives to it. Du Bois, as I will show shortly, answers this call with only one other story-within-a-story – that of Princess Kautilya’s autobiography – as well as one other break in structural flow – the epistolary relationship between Matthew and Kautilya, which literally marries their voices.

Yet if Sara can break open the Judge’s story and, in so doing, secure Matthew’s release from prison she herself represents another form of imprisonment. Sara, “self-made and independent” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 109) has “no particular scruples or conscience.” There is a kind of “artist[ry]” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 192) in her political manipulations but it is an art without beauty: not only does she care not for the foundation of injustice and suffering her wealth and (covert) power is built

upon, but she aspires most strongly to be “respectable” which, Du Bois tells us, means she is “a little below average” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 192). And she seduces Matthew into another form of “slave[ry],” the same one which seduced Reuel in *Of One Blood*: the idea that in “money” and “money alone lay freedom” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 156).

Beginning in the early national period and continuing through the nineteenth century, the sentimental novel “fulfilled” in Cathy Davidson’s words, a “social function of testing some of the possibilities of romance and courtship” for the nation’s women (188-189) by allowing them to “vicariously participate in a range of relationships with diverse suitors.” Almost all of these novels also, however, in some way reveal “the dangers of unsuitable relationships” (Davidson 189) – and often it was precisely these unsuitable relationships that were particularly seductive. This trope is reoriented in *Dark Princess*. Seduction appears in the form of Sara, both literally in that she manipulates Matthew into proposing marriage for her own political ends but also figuratively in that she represents the culmination of the seductions the “American dream” have presented to Matthew for the entirety of the novel. Though Matthew may have learned once that “character” does not ensure the evasion of systematic prejudice and injustice, Sara represents the seduction of a luxury and “respectability” that may be had without character, or perhaps precisely *because* of the lack thereof.

In painting Matthew as the victim of a seduction he misrecognizes as a pragmatic decision on his own part, Du Bois’ novel mobilizes the history of the sentimental and the romance in USAmerican literature. It subverts this genre by placing Matthew, a man, in the position traditionally held by a woman, yet it simultaneously provides enough legible scripts to call attention to the ways in which he subverts them (one might recall here the eight elements of romance that Pamela Regis articulates). Matthew is positioned as a naïve victim who cannot see through the blandishments of a seductress – one need only recall the way in which the narrator tells us Matthew

“*thought*” the idea to propose to Sara “originated in his own head” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 137; emphasis mine) to ascertain this. However, by making the seduction one that is politically rather than sexually motivated, and in making the redemption of this rather chaste seduction true sexual desire, the novel reorients us away from the conventional scripts we have come to expect of a romance and imagines liberatory, diasporic identities alternatives to them.

Matthew’s naïvete extends through the beginning months of his marriage to Sara. While he is aware that he has been “bought and paid for” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 126) and though Sara quite explicitly tells him upon his proposal, “I’ve been fighting the thing men call love all my life, and I don’t see much in it....But I do think enlightened self-interest calls us to be partners” Matthew is still seduced by the conventional picture of marriage. Despite all evidence to the contrary, he has bought into the narrative enough that he believes marriage will “complete” him, that it will make him “safe, settled, quiet.” He imagines himself taking Sara’s “lonely little fighting soul in his arms” and building “a new, calm communion of souls” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 138). Yet he quickly learns – and thinks it odd – that “marriage should seem to – well, to stop love, or arrest its growth instead of stimulating it” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 145). That Sara ultimately denies him his earnings by arguing “You didn’t earn it; I did....Everything we have got stands in my name, and it is going to stand there until you get into Congress” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 191) only furthers this comparison to the tradition of early USAmerican sentimental plots. If those early sentimental novels found their “chief loci” in the slippages between the “limited legal and social standing” that oppressed women and the “ostensibly unquestioned social values and established good order” that supported this oppression (Davidson 215), *Dark Princess* deorients these scripts by applying them to a black man. In so doing, it calls attention to the way in which the veneer of the “American Dream” veils a seedy underbelly of official corruption and personal distortion. Sara’s seduction is not about sexual seduction, unlike those early USAmerican romances, but, like those early USAmerican romances, it

is about perpetuating marriage as an unevenly controlled business alliance. As such the seduction is representative of a culture that has perverted sexual desire and love, which Du Bois – like Larsen – ultimately links to the social perversions of racial prejudice. It is telling, for example, that multiple times during his marriage to Sara Matthew wishes she had the “abandon” and “inner comprehension” of a prostitute with whom he had consorted during his Pullman Porter days (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 192). The parallel is obvious: Sara has prostituted herself to respectability, has gained social power at the expense of a true sense of self:

[Matthew] tried desperately to give and evoke the love. But behind Sara’s calm, cold hardness, he found nothing to evoke. She did not repress passion – she had no passion to repress. She disliked being “mauled” and disarranged, and she did not want any one to be “mushy” about her. Her private life was entirely in public; her clothes, her limbs, her hair and complexion, her well-appointed home, her handsome, well-tailored husband and his career; her reputation for wealth (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 153)

It is important to note here that Sara is not portrayed as unnatural because she is a *woman* who has repressed feeling. The problem is not that she is acting in a way that is a distortion of her sex. In fact, Du Bois often railed against the cult of true womanhood and celebrated the way in which black women, because of “the defective eyesight of the white world” that cannot see them as “beauties,” were instead “asked to be efficient, to be strong, fertile, muscled, and able to work” (*Darkwater* 183). Indeed, it is not only Sara who the political machine makes unnatural: Matthew, a man, is portrayed as becoming distorted so much so as to lose entirely his sense of self when he enters that arena. Meanwhile Kautilya is a socially and politically powerful woman who manages to use her sense of sympathy as the foundation of her work. Rather it is the racial narrative of the United States, predicated as it is on the utter abjection of some of its citizens, that continuously enslaves those citizens with a desire for power that distorts and perverts their essential humanity. We are told that “Sara was in no sense evil” but instead that her “character had been hardened and sharpened by all she had met and fought...It was her answer to the world’s taunts, jibes, and discriminations...All sympathy, all yielding, all softness, filled her with shame” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 201). That

dynamic, the plot of the novel implicitly argues, reproduces the system of inequity in the country by preventing alliance and a resulting ethic of care. In order to halt that reproduction, we must subvert the underlying oppositional terms on which USAmerican experience rests. The deorientation of gender that *Dark Princess* enacts thus extends through to Sara and Matthew's investment in domestic space.

Before exploring the significance of the home they construct together, it is important here to take a look at Matthew's and Sara's pre-marital homes. When Matthew is first released from prison and begins his job with Sammy, he has lost all "illusions as to American democracy" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 126) and thus allows himself to become fully consumed by the corrupt "political machine" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 128) "with his eyes closed" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 126). His emotional landscape is mirrored by his "bare, cold, and dirty" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 128) apartment: both are in basic survival mode. But slowly, we are told, "the aspect of his rooms began to change." The catalyst for this change is a rug. And specifically, it is an oriental rug, one that is presented to him by one of his constituents, a second-hand shop owner who has likely received it illegally. The rug, Du Bois tells us, "was marvelous. It burned [Matthew] with its brilliance. It sang to his eyes and hands. It was yellow and green – it was thick and soft but all this didn't tell the subtle charm of its weaving and shadows in coloring." The rug literally represents a sense of possibility, the part of the Matthew that he had "murdered" in jail when he willfully became "nothing, wanted nothing" and "remembered nothing" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 125). It is a *something*, quite literally, and it transports him to when he *was* something, back to the hopeful self he was when met with the Princess and her colleagues in Berlin. "He had," we are told, "forgotten about ever having seen a rug before then. Of course he had – there in Berlin on the Lützower Ufer here was a rug in the parlor" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 128). Though Matthew refuses to give in to the memory at this moment, the insertion of the rug into the desolate landscape of his apartment represents an opening in Matthew's

consciousness. It does not, it is important to note, simply represent Kautilya: the charm of the beautiful rug is not simply that it stands in for a beautiful woman, or even for sexual desire alone. When Matthew places it “on the floor of the barest of his empty rooms” he is immediately motivated to hire a black laborer to install a parquet floor beneath it: the rug is a beautiful object in and of itself, but it also represents the renewal of hope and desire that can motivate action (represented here by the work of the black laborer not unlike the one Matthew will eventually become). “Months of little things” which allow “the beauty of that room” to “gr[ow]” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 129) follow the installation of the parquet floor. Such Orientalist consumption reminds us of Melani McAlister’s argument about USAmericans attempting to fulfill lack for “rever[ie], release, sensual pleasure” (22) but *Dark Princess* subverts this mode, first, by associating this kind of consumption with a *man* when the usual appeal was to the “New Woman’s” “fantasies and women’s sexual power” (McAlister 23). Secondly, while this consumption represents an important step for Matthew, it is not an end: the objects must be ultimately discarded (after he and Kautilya separate) in order to create something entirely new.

Interestingly, the narrative of this room is misread by Sara in much the same way that the judge misreads Matthew’s life history. Because of her own blind spots, Sara fails to recognize the beauty in the objects in Matthew’s apartment and instead sees, merely, “a silly room” that “was terribly dirty...with odd bits – a beautiful but uneven parquet floor, quite new; a glorious and costly rug that had never been swept; old books and pamphlets” and “a big dilapidated armchair, sadly needing new upholstery” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 132). The very artifacts that represent Matthew’s growing consciousness – enlightening books and the comfortable, well-worn chair in which he reads them; the rug that reminds him of his flirtation with global identities – are written off as part and parcel of an unkempt bachelor pad: “a man’s room, of course,” as she dismissively describes it. Because Sara can only read Matthew’s room according to a gendered script of “respectability,” she

can only conclude that “The room was proof that Matthew needed a home” rather than understanding it *as* a home.

In other words, Matthew subverts Sara’s expectation of him as a man in that he arranges and takes great pride in the domestic space, imbuing each object he brings into his space with care and thoughtfulness. This is in juxtaposition to Sammy, who clearly takes little pride in the arrangement of his office, which is described repeatedly as “dingy” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 111, 112) until Sara takes control of the situation and “transform[s]” the space into “an impressive, comfortable, and singularly official office” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 113). Again, we must keep in mind that Du Bois’ attention to the details of the physical habitations of the characters here is not simply part and parcel of his Edwardian, romantic voice, but the way in which place *speaks* in *Dark Princess*. The polyvocality with which space is narrated – the way in which, for example, Matthew, the narrator, and Sara all share their differing perceptions of Matthew’s room – clues us in to the way in which the process of reading is constructive; like *Of One Blood*, Du Bois’ novel suggests that there is resistance in perspective. Recall, for example, the way in which Matthew’s story cannot be read by the judge and the way it can be, albeit through a distorted lens that exploits it for other purposes, by Sara, who is more aware of the nuances of black American experience. Space becomes part and parcel of illustrating the way in which people misread each other, overdetermined as their perspectives are by dominating US American narratives.

And Sara’s space certainly speaks. As opposed to Matthew’s apartment, which may superficially appear a dismal *mélange* but is actually a sanctuary filled with meaningful objects, Sara’s appears beautiful but is one-dimensional. There is no home in her home: though it is “wax-neat” and “in perfect order” it is also “machine-made” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 137). Her books, as it were, tell the whole story:

He asked Sara if she liked Balzac. Sara had just bought the set and had not read a word. She had bought them to fill the space above the writing desk. It was just twenty-eight inches.

She let him talk on and then she gave him some seed-cakes which a neighbor had made for her. (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 137)

The point is quite belabored, obviously; for Sara books are objects that belong above a suitably professional writing desk, not a transcendent or meaningful art form. The books fit, both literally in that they measure “twenty-eight inches” and in that they belong in that scene. Meanwhile, the only actual “homemade” object in her home are seed cakes which Sara has not made herself but passes as her own in order to better play the part of a domestic partner. It is, in fact, directly after eating and “lik[ing]” several of these cakes that Matthew decides to propose: Sara is a masterful seductress.

It is not surprising, then, that as a married couple Matthew and Sara would have different notions of how to construct their home together. Matthew’s desire is to move out of Chicago to “live somewhere – a little more quietly” so that they can “study and walk and – go to concerts;” Sara, meanwhile, has already bought “that nearly, new, modern, and beautifully equipped apartment on South Parkway which had just been sold at auction” and around which circulates “a rumor that a Negro had bought it” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 139). The juxtaposition is of course obvious: Matthew wants to begin cultivate an intimate relationship, while Sara has bought a home entirely based on its appearance to the rest of the world. There is nothing intimate about her home; it is a message. The interior of the space instigates conflict, as well. Sara hires an upscale designer to “do the decorating” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 139), leaving the objects in their home completely devoid of any personal investment whatsoever. Every “piece” of “new and shining furniture” is placed “exactly where it should.” Needless to say, the decorating scheme leaves no space for the “copy of a master – cleverly and daringly done with a flame of color and a woman’s long and naked body” that Matthew buys specifically for the house (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 142 -143) and Sara promptly exchanges it for a muted landscape that “fits in the space better” and “has a much finer frame” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 143). They particularly clash about a fireplace: Matthew has a “sort of obsession” with “a fireplace with real logs” because “As long as he could remember, burning wood meant home to him;” Sara

cannot abide by something so “dirty and dangerous” and instead has “an electric log put in,” which Matthew loathes with “a perfect hatred” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 142). The conflict speaks for itself: on the one hand we have fire – a vital element which has historically represented warmth, sustenance, and passion – versus a technologized simulacrum of one that may suppress its dirt but in so doing deadens its energy. It is no surprise that in such a home Matthew “could never get to doing” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 148) – or feeling.

This is despite, of course, the fact that superficially Matthew is doing quite a lot: he achieves quick rise to political power under Sara’s masterful direction. But again, this mockery of power is at the expense of his “pride, soul, and body” being “sold” to the highest political bidder (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 192). After Sara announces that she quite literally owns him – that he has no money of his own anymore – he finds himself back in the attic apartment, amongst the “things he had accumulated there” that “Sara would not have...in her new and shining house.” The narrator tells us, explicitly, that as Matthew takes in the “gold” of his now dust-covered rug, and “the flames” of his “genuine Matisse,” he is in fact observing the “little trappings of the spirit within him that had grown so dim” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 192). And, “half-consciously trying to counteract the ugliness of the congressional campaign” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 193), Matthew begins, again, to reconstruct the “spirit” he is in the process of losing. He first purchases a Turkish rug and a copy of a Picasso painting. As time goes on, he begins to spend “long hours” amidst the “things” for which there is no space in “Sara’s” house: the “big, shabby armchair that put its old worn arms so sympathetically about him,” a pipe, “the books that his finger had made dirty and torn and dog-eared by reading,” the “pamphlets that would not stand straight or regular in rows” and, of course, ultimately a fireplace which he has installed (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 193). Matthew’s arranging and cleaning of the space is narrated in great detail, a distinct difference from his home with Sara whose order and neatness is emphasized with no tangible detail. The level of detail surrounding Matthew’s domestic

space and his work within it becomes even more emphasized when he is reunited with the Princess and the apartment becomes not just a refuge for his own “spirit” but a space in which the seeds for alternative understandings of subjectivity can be sown.

### **The Tale of the *Dark Princess***

Matthew and Kautilya are reunited during a party Sara has organized for some of Matthew’s most high-profile supporters just before the primary elections for Congress (for which Matthew, thanks to Sara’s machinations, seems to be a shoo-in). The mixed-race gathering is a historic accomplishment for Sara, and the stage she sets is “attractive:” “She doubted very much if there was another dining room in Chicago that looked as expensive. Bigger, yes, but not more expensive, at least in looks” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 200). Despite that careful planning, the stage is still a stage: there is no substance here and, hence, no anchor for connection. “Everybody was overanxious to please,” we are told, but

There was no common center of small talk to unite black and white, educated and self-made...the obvious common ground was the Negro problem, and this both parties tried desperately to avoid and yet could not...Even Sara was at times out of her depth, in a serious definite conversation...She hurried here and there, making a very complete and pleasing picture in her flesh-covered chiffon evening frock. But she was not quite at ease. (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 202)

It is from this “picture” that Matthew flees to his apartment with Kautilya, who has arrived at the party, uninvited, as the national President of the Box-Makers Union. When she enters his study to present her demands in writing, Matthew does not, initially, recognize her. This is the price of allowing oneself to be subsumed by the USAmerican narrative that prioritizes the pursuit of power above all else: you cannot recognize those you care for, and you become unrecognizable in return. Yet though Matthew literally cannot see Kautilya when he believes she is simply a labor organizer, as he reads her writing, “Some tremendous reminder” washes over him in “the strong beauty” of her handwriting. At this moment “the veil” which has been literally covering Kautilya’s head (and which marks her figurative entry, at least in Matthew’s eyes, into a true “colored” consciousness) is shed

and “she came like a soft mist, unveiled and uncloaked before him” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 208).

Kautilya is as magical and fantastical as ever, yet given her experiences since the last time they have met (the narrative of which she presents once the two retire to their lovenest) she has physically changed:

She was different, yet every difference emphasized something eternally marvelous. Her hair was cut short. All that long cloudlike hair, the length and the breadth of it, was gone; but still it nestled about her head like some halo. Her gown was loose, ill-fitting, straight; her hands, hard, wore no jewels, but were calloused, with broken nails. The small soft beauty of her face had become stronger and set in still lines. Only in the steadfast glory of her eyes showed unchanged the Princess. She watched him gravely as he searched her with his eyes; and then suddenly Matthew awoke. (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 209)

If we need it spelled out for us, Matthew does: “The Princess that I worshipped is become the working-woman whom I love” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 209). Kautilya has shed pretense – compare this to the description of Sara that directly precedes Kautilya and Matthew’s reunion – and she has attained a fuller version of humanity in the process. Or, in Matthew’s equation: “Your body is Beauty, and Beauty is your Soul, and Soul and Body spell Freedom to my tortured groping life” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 210). Kautilya represents not simply the promise of political action and change but also a deeper and more satisfying understanding of “the souls” of colored folk in that she provides a counternarrative to the “American Dream:” she has at her fingertips all the luxury for which United States citizens sell their souls and yet eschews it for an understanding of the lives of the impoverished on whose backs that luxury is built. She has the power to rescript the narratives Matthew has come to accept, and inspires him to announce he no longer desires the Congressional nomination and that he is “through with liars, thieves, and hypocrites” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 210). Here, Du Bois turns a scene we think we know well on its head – the corrupted politician taking advantage of his power to seduce women, the myth of the libidinous nature of African American males – by making space for just those conventional interpretations. The white guests see the scene as proof of the “persistent, ineradicable immortality” of black Americans. The black guests,

meanwhile, bemoan Matthew's "acting that way...before these people," although the emphasis seems to be more on his being so indiscreet than on his actual actions: a black physician hisses to a minister of "the streets full of women" that are "cheaper and prettier" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 212), while Sammy is left completely astonished:

Never before in his long career and wide acquaintanship with human nature had it behaved in so fantastic and unpredictable a manner....That a man should cheat, lie, steal and seduce women, was to Sammy's mind almost normal....But that a man with everything should choose nothing... (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 212-213)

This reuniting of love, of Kautilya coming to "save" Matthew's "soul from" the "hell" this political world represents (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 209), is something we as readers are led to celebrate, given the arc of the story. That it might simultaneously be thought of as indecent or immoral creates some cognitive dissonance or, at the very least, distorts what we have come to expect from a romance: in this novel the marriage is distasteful while the extra-marital affair is redemptive.

The final section of the novel begins with this break. When, in the first few pages of that section, Kautilya and Matthew are imagined as Krishna and Radha, the Hindu deities whose story have come to represent the quest for the human soul to unite with divine, we recognized we have moved into a distinctly *un-US American* romance. That this section more than any other is composed of stories-within-stories: that of Kautilya's autobiography and then of the epistolary narrative they compose *together* – is no coincidence; the section is an alternative to the one other story-within-a-story the Judge presents.<sup>7</sup>

That this section largely unfolds within the attic apartment Matthew has arranged is neither a coincidence. The objects that Matthew has so carefully purchased and installed reach a consummation here (both literally and figuratively): if Matthew set the stage (again, both literally and

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the tradition of Radha and Krishna also exist within a literary form that is composed of stories-within-stories, the sacred Hindu texts the Bhagavada Purana and Gita Govinda. Whether Du Bois consciously conceived of the structure of his narrative in relationship to these texts is unclear but his familiarity with them is apparent.

figuratively) for an awakening, it is with his union with the Princess that catalyzes it. Appropriately, the apartment, which has already been described in physical detail unmatched by any of the other living spaces in the novel, reaches a height of sensuousness in this section. Far from the dirty “man’s room” it once was, the apartment suddenly becomes a cozy lovenest, at once simple and luxurious. It seems to come alive: the “blazing fire” – emphasized throughout the section – throws “shadows” across the apartment that “tur[n] happily and secretly, revealing and hiding the wild hues of a great picture, the reflections of a mirror, the flowers and figures of the wall” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 217). The “golden glory” of oriental rugs wrap around them (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 218); objects we have not been told of before, like a “Turkish taboret,” appear (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 219); music is constantly encircling them (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 219, 235, 256, 258); and they clothe themselves in silken robes (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 219, 220, 258), Matthew in a “tarboosh with faded tassel upon his head” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 219). Both Kautilya and Matthew busy themselves in domestic tasks, Matthew concocting shortcakes and Kautilya “mysterious” curries (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 235, 249).

The space serves as a sanctuary from the hostile and perverted landscape of Chicago that misreads their story according to scripts so clichéd as to be legible to the community in shorthand: “a common bawd – a five-minute infatuation – primitive passion” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 218). Yet it is not simply sanctuary but a place of creation: the heavily Orientalized landscape of Matthew’s attic apartment is a fertile ground where stories that veer from the conventional USAmerican narrative can be conceived. Specifically, it is a place in which they might properly recognize the truth of their diasporic connection kept hidden from them because of those other narratives, and made manifest by the autobiography Kautilya, “Scheherazade”-like, spins over the course of days (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 221, 227). In other words, the story Kautilya weaves is a bildungsroman of

coming into racial awareness in much the same way that the novel we are in the process of reading is: her story mirrors Matthew's in spirit if not particulars.

Kautilya is raised amongst the “royal splendor” of “wealth and jewels and beautiful halls, old and priceless carpets, the music of tinkling fountains, the song and flash of birds” and “strange and mighty playthings: elephants and lions and tigers, great white oxen and flashing automobiles.” Each morning, she tells Matthew, she awoke to

the white glory of the high Himalayas, with the crowning mass of Gaurisankar, kissing heaven. Behind me lay the great and golden flood of Holy Ganga. On my left hand stood the Bo of Buddha and on my right the Sacred City of the Maghmela. (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 228).

Kautilya's description of childhood is grandiose, not to mention somewhat fantastical; it stands in complete distinction to the modest “forty acres” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 11) on which Matthew grows up and, thanks to his mother's tireless farming and efforts to educate him, from which he escapes. That the stories begin from such totally different points and coalesce over time reinforces the diasporic connections between discrete colored populations vis-à-vis imperialism and domestic colonialism. Further, Kautilya's origins – that she grew up amongst the most majestic of surroundings – allow her a standpoint from which to help Matthew reorient the agrarian land of his birth, as we shall see shortly.

Kautilya's story reads, like Matthew's, as a constant coming in and out of color as she is interpellated by, then is disillusioned by, then re-internalizes, and then breaks free from, the values of the “Great White World” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 233). She originally flees India because of the massacre of her betrothed, and it is there she becomes aware of her racial status. Linking one's coming into racial consciousness with the reproduction of racism as ideology, both times Kautilya is awakened to her “inferior” racial status by potential mates. Her first recognition of racial status comes when a young English man tells her, apparently believing himself very romantic: “I am going

to have you. I don't care if you are colored" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 231). Kautilya narrates her reaction:

It seemed that the scales had fallen from my eyes. I understood a hundred veiled allusions and little singular happenings. I suddenly realized that these dull, loud, ugly people actually thought me inferior because my skin was browner than their bleached and roughened hides. They were condescending to me – me, whose fathers were kings a thousand years before theirs were ragpickers. (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 231)

At this stage in the game, in other words, Kautilya can only read racial struggle through her lens of class. Her royal blood makes the color line seem utterly absurd, but her newfound racial awareness does not inspire political awareness beyond contempt. Yet her contempt is mitigated when England – in an attempt, she understands in retrospect, to prevent her from returning to India, where she might “become a rallying center for independence” – engineers her entrance into “society” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 232) and she becomes “a darling of the white gods” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 233). Fast forward a few years later, when she hears her (white, English) fiancé, who has seduced her by appealing to her sense of superiority and aristocracy, proclaim he will only “mat[e] with a nigger” for “a throne and a fortune” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 239). After publicly humiliating him when they return to India to be married, Kautilya becomes overwhelmed by the staggering suffering of her subjects and seeks out “to hear what other dark peoples were doing and thinking beneath the dead, white light of European tyranny” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 244). But Kautilya’s sense of aristocracy must be shattered along with the internalization of white culture, and this can only happen after her collision with African Americans, embodied by Matthew. If her two previous suitors have instilled in her a sense of racial and political awareness by disintegrating something – that is, by introducing the idea that she is seen as inferior – it is her experience with Matthew that allows her to deepen these senses by constructing something – that is, by introducing the “revelation” that “humanity itself [is] royal” and that domination of any kind, including by her own “ancient royal race,” is superfluous (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 248). Her encounter with Matthew brings to awareness the way

in which she has internalized “a color line within a color line” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 6), and inspires years living with Matthew’s mother and working as “servant, tobacco-hand” and “waitress” in order to remedy this gap in her “education” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 224). What begins as a “game and source of experience” became “life, life, real life, even with the squalor and hard toil” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 225).

Du Bois allows Kautilya to tell her story over the course of five chapters, and the external constantly seeps into the intimate and magical space of the apartment – an intrusion by the police, a visit to the box-maker’s union headquarters, a visit by Sammy. At other moments during its telling, Kautilya is struck with a need for the physicality of “rain” on her “face” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 241) and the two set out to explore the forests outside of Chicago or the art museums within, where they also read sacred Sanskrit texts and hum melodies in between reliving the chapters of Kautilya’s life. The telling of the story is also not linear – its originary point is not Kautilya’s birth, but the time she spent in Virginia with Matthew’s mother, and the rest is all presented as contextualization. That Kautilya’s tale unfolds in this circuitous way emphasizes its unfinished nature: they must explore, quite literally, new avenues as they simultaneously discover each other. The interruptions of the outside world make palpable the sense that there is business to attend to, that the two cannot hole up in the “happily ever after” of their quasi-Oriental refuge. In other words, the temporariness of the space, however idyllic it may be, is what emphasizes its fertility. For it is not only the space where they conceive their son (unbeknownst to either of them at this point) but it is also the space in which they can sow the seeds of a revolutionary, diasporic consciousness together: one that merges both class and racial awareness, blends the global and the local, and decolonizes Matthew’s perspective.

## Orienting the Birthplace of the Nation

The couple's time in the Orientalized lovenest culminates in another literary form Du Bois appropriates: the epistolary novel, a genre which has often overlapped with the sentimental. Du Bois merges the letters between Kautilya and Matthew during their separation with Matthew's "real life," which is primarily composed of a variety of manual labor (digging subway tunnels, garbage removal) and attempts to make amends with, and then makes official his divorce from, Sara. Yet the letters represent Matthew's construction of a new subjectivity, one towards which the novel has been moving all along: the fertile reorientation of worth. During this time, Matthew returns to the sort of physical work that he has, for his entire life, despised as "hard, hateful, heavy, endless, uninteresting, dull, stupid" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 38). Up until this point he could not see physical labor, like his mother's on the farm, as being fundamentally creative – he had still internalized the power structures that blind him to the possibilities inherent in "the little" but "indispensable" value of work like farming and construction (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 264). In this section, Matthew must work through – alone, and in another ascetic apartment– how one might be able to balance that kind of work with true beauty. This is not the kind of beauty that drives a USAmerican consumerism and conflates money with "escape" from "being black, from being poor, from being ugly" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 224), which we have already seen as a form of "slavery." Instead, it is the kind of beauty inherent in real engagement with the world. Such forms of beauty are elucidated in a letter Matthew writes to Kautilya:

I read Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. I am sure now I never have read it before...I looked particularly intelligent when *Hamlet* was discussed or alluded to. But if this was the truth, I must have read *Hamlet* with tired mind and weary brain: mechanically....This morning I read...keen and happy with the inner spirit of the thing. *Hamlet* lived, and he and I suffered together...

These kinds of musings palpably evoke the USAmerican tradition of the romantic, which, as I mentioned earlier, strove to confront “the truth of the human heart” (Hawthorne 1). Yet Matthew continues:

What ails the world of work? In itself, it is surely good: it is real; it is better than polo, baseball, or golf. It is the Thing Itself. There is beauty in its movement and in the sunshine, storm, and rain that walk beside it. Here is art. (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 270)

By locating a spiritual truth in the kind of manual labor associated with the proletarian masses, the novel reorients the historically aristocratic origins of the romance. Matthew must learn to disregard, quite literally, the way he has read the world: he must stop seeing literature as an artifice for appearing learned – as a means to an end, like Sara’s books above her writing desk – and must instead engage with art on a spiritual level. He must likewise begin to see the art inherent in that which he has been taught to devalue and abhor. If Matthew served as a catalyst for Kautilya to comprehend that “democracy” is “a method of discovery of real aristocracy” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 225), Kautilya serves as catalyst for Matthew’s journey toward becoming “a unit of” that “real democracy” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 280). It is only once he can rescript his assumptions about what work is worthwhile and what beauty is – that is, as something that must be created rather than bought – in order to truly effect change. “Because it was the physical work of the world that had to be done as prelude to its thought and beauty” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 287), Matthew must participate in this work and internalize its worth and possibility before he can reunite with Kautilya in the reoriented space of Virginia and their son, who becomes “not the fusion of” their “two purified essences but rather a meeting of heterogenous multiplicities that in yielding themselves up to each other create[d] something durable and entirely appropriate to anti-colonial times” (Gilroy *Black Atlantic* 144).

I refer to Virginia as reoriented here because Kautilya has literally Orientalized the state into the seat from which all of the colored world may be connected, his mother’s farm a “foundation”

upon which she constructs “a tower, where Muezzins call to God and His world” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 274). Kautilya can see a potential there that Matthew simply cannot, and Kautilya’s capacity for such recognition is introduced earlier in the novel when she refers to Matthew’s mother’s hands. What Matthew sees in his mother is “tall, gaunt, brown...hard-sinewed and somber-eyed” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 4) with “gnarled and knitted” hands that speak to the work he assumes must have “dulled and hardened” her (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 37-38). Meanwhile, when Kautilya approaches her for the first time, Matthew’s mother stands “in the blue shadows of twilight with flowers, cotton and corn about her,” an image that reframes the products of her work as beautiful. Further, Kautilya immediately recognizes her as one of the manifestations of the “perfect and ineffable” spirit of Brahma (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 221) and specifically, “Kali,” goddess of fertility or in Kautilya’s words, “Mother of the World!” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 220). When Kautilya asks Matthew, “[h]ave you seen her hands? Have you seen the gnarled and knotted glory of her hands?” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 220), she echoes the exact words Matthew uses to describe what he has “seen” to reorient those words towards “glory.”

But Matthew cannot simply revalue his mother and her work. Du Bois wrote *Dark Princess* during a time in which the framework of worldwide interaction was changing rapidly. Immigration waves *into* the United States as well as imperial projects in Hawaii, Cuba, Guam, the Phillipines and Puerto Rico *by* the United States (not to mention World War I and the anticolonial movements I delineated above) changed the relationship USAmericans could imagine with the world. As Matthew Frye Jacobsen writes

What was new in this period was *scale* – the sheer volume of materials needed to feed the industrial engines of production and the volume of production itself; the sheer volume of population movements in response to this stage of maturing capitalism; the scale of government bureaucracies and their advanced ability to survey territories, establish beachheads, wage war, and administer far-flung populations; and the scale of a burgeoning culture industry, which not only narrated those events for mass consumption but served up imaginings of the world and its people that at once naturalized these “large policies” *and* gave voice to the anxieties engendered by these grand designs. (6)

This new global scale, paired with an acute awareness of the very tangible ways in which USAmerican narratives became insufficient for its black population as the failures of Reconstruction mutated into Jim Crow segregation, necessitated a looking *outward*, a construction of a new global black identity. This becomes particularly clear in the reorientation of Virginia. The birthplace of the United States – and birthplace of USAmerican slavery – is imagined anew as a fertile crescent that stands

at the edge of a black world. The black belt of the Congo, the Nile, and the Ganges reaches up by way of Guiana, Haiti, and Jamaica, like a red arrow, up into the heart of white America. Thus I see a mighty synthesis: you can work in Africa and Asia right here in America if you work in the Black Belt. (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 286)

Here, Kautilya reorients the area from which Southern Blacks had spent the last decades fleeing in record numbers to escape racial violence, segregation, and lack of work, urging them to “take back” this historical point of contact: the routes of the slave trade become the roots of a global colored consciousness. She drives this point home when she and Matthew’s mother follow the brook behind the latter’s home to a river which leads to “Jamestown-*of-the-Slaves*” and finally to “the great highway of the Atlantic” which itself connects “a world of colored folk” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 278; emphasis mine). USAmerican blacks in this context become linked to that world vis-à-vis their “quasi-colonial status,” in Du Bois’ own words:

...we must conceive of colonies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as not something far away from the centers of civilization...We must remember also that in organized and dominated states there are groups of people who occupy the quasi-colonial status: laborers who are settled in the slums of large cities, groups like Negroes in the United States who are segregated physically and discriminated against spiritually in law and custom...All these people occupy what is really a colonial status. (Du Bois “Human Rights”)

And the answer, Du Bois suggests, begins with a decolonization of perspective: a taking on of an agential subjectivity not unlike Algerian radical intellectual Franz Fanon’s process “disalienation,” in which formerly colonized black populations release themselves from the sense of being “prisoner[s] of history” (*Black Skin* 229). The Great Migration northward and westward, Kautilya suggests quite

explicitly, as well as the perception of the south as a land “literally accursed with the blood and pain of three hundred years of slavery” is part and parcel of the internalization of white power structures and values. The space of Virginia, where “black folk own most of the land” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 11) has been systematically devalued *because* of that ownership and thus its worth needs to be reoriented:

We have made manufacturers, railroad men, and merchants rich because we ranked them highest, and we have helped them in cities for convenience, and they are white and in white cities. Just suppose we change our ranking. Suppose in our hearts we rate the colored farmers and all discoverers, poets, and dreamers high and even higher and give them space outside of white cities? (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 278-279).

Kautilya carves out a space here not only physically but intellectually and emotionally: she does not only physically reclaim Virginia as a “space outside of white cities” but *decolonizes* Matthew’s perspective on it as the land of “mob and rape and rope and faggot” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 279).

The space becomes not a land of rape but *birth* and what is born is not simply a child but a form of subjectivity that moves away from Du Bois’ understanding of double consciousness. Instead, Kautilya allows Matthew to look at himself through eyes *reoriented*, ones that purposefully disrupt the perspective of “contempt and pity” of the white world. Doubleness thus becomes not the sense of being “an outcast and stranger in [one’s] own house” but of belonging to *both* one’s own house and a larger world beyond it (Du Bois *Souls* 2): through Kautilya’s decolonization of perspective, Matthew can not only articulate a diasporic (but exilic) alignment with the other colored populations of the world but one inflected with an intimate “knowledge” of and belonging *in* USAmerica. This is, of course, a subjectivity mirrored by the orientalized love nest: a home in which what is “foreign” and “native” can be blended.

And, in actuality, this decolonization of perspective has been building through the entire narrative: Kautilya’s reorientation of the south is simply the fulfillment of a promise made by Matthew when, upon their first meeting, he defends African Americans from the bourgeois

contempt of the council of the peoples of the Darker World. In response to their doubts about “the ability, qualifications, and real possibilities of the black race” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 21) Matthew’s impulse is to justify the worth of this race within the value system under which this aristocratic, colored council works. He begins to reply, “I reckon there’s as much high-born blood among American negroes as among any people. We’ve had our kings, presidents, and judges –”. Yet that framework is essentially the same as the same one that justifies colonialism (both domestic and otherwise): although it has turned the terms upon their heads, it nonetheless subscribes to the same antiquated notion of a “natural inborn superiority” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 25) of certain peoples above others. Matthew repudiates those terms when, instead, “some great voice, crying and reverberating within his soul” flips the script altogether:

I reckon you’re right. We American blacks are very common people. My grandfather was a whipped and driven slave; my father was never really free and died in jail. My mother plows and washes for a living. We come out of the depths – the blood and mud of battle. And from just such depths, I take it, came most of the worth-while things in this old world. (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 23)

Kautilya’s reclamation of Virginia is the natural conclusion of this speech, with which the book essentially opens: the goal is not to prove one’s worth according to the “the norm” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 24) of racist culture, but to redefine worth all together. What becomes important about African Americans is not the noble blood from which they have sprang but precisely the opposite; Virginia becomes not simply an ordinary site of “evil” and “horror” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 279), but the womb from which the possibilities inherent in diasporic contact may be borne out.

My use of birth imagery here is not merely rhetorical flourish; as Alys Eve Weinbaum has rightfully pointed out, Du Bois throughout his career articulated the ways in which “reproductive politics are internal to both nationalism and racism” and this novel, like much of the rest of his work, attempts to “rescript the relationship between these terms in producing antiracist thinking” (189). Thus the metaphor I use here is directly taken from Du Bois’ novel itself, a point which may

be obvious given the novel ends with the birth of a child. Yet it bears stating that, if Kautilya's reorientation of Virginia is the natural conclusion of Matthew's reorientation of origins, Madhu's birth is in fact the resolution of the problem with which the novel starts. Recall that reproduction itself is what animates the novel. Matthew exiles himself to Germany, where he meets the princess, because he has been ousted from the reproductive order of things: he is not allowed to complete his obstetrics rotation and become a doctor. "Earth" may be "pregnant" in this introduction (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 14), but it is not Matthew, spiritually inculcated as he is into the conventional narratives of USAmerica, who can deliver its promises. He must, instead, take the power to create something new, to reorient himself. Matthew cannot birth the white world: that avenue is barren. Sacrificing himself to the narrative the Law provides is similarly fruitless; the purchasable "joys" of the cold, political world of Chicago are not "more pleasant and not as permanent as green fields or babes" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 145). Likewise, the Oriental landscape of the lovenest is where liberatory seeds may be planted but not borne forth. It is only within the fecund farmland of reorientalized Virginia that Matthew may embody a whole subjectivity that is not within yet without USAmerica, but one that is within USAmerica *and* within the world. Note, for example, the image with which the novel opens: Matthew stands on the deck of the ship which carries him away from the US, among many other travelers who "spoke about him" but not to him, and he is "acutely conscious" of this. "Each word, heard and unheard," we are told "pierced him and quivered in the quick" (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 3). This description corresponds to Du Bois' delineation of double consciousness: Matthew sees himself through the "silent battle" he has with those on board (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 6). Meanwhile, as he flies east to Virginia from Chicago, during which time he revisits the entire narrative we have already read, Matthew responds differently to all of the "pettiest annoyances" the white world has to offer, and which it offers immediately upon his landing (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 305). Rather than allow himself to be consumed by these subtle acts of racism, he

takes “a deep breath and walked away,” choosing instead to allow “the Spring” to sing “in his ears; flowers and leaves, sunshine and shed, young cotton and corn” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 306).

Matthew finally sees “the glory that may come yet to this Mother of Slavery” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 283), to make a space for himself where he can “be free and able to act” within “the center of power” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 286), to construct a “synthesis” in subjectivity that mirrors Kautilya’s political belief that “you can work in Africa and Asia right here in America if you work in the Black Belt” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 286). In other words, Matthew must reintegrate himself into the world – a United States reoriented as diasporic.

This vision is, of course, troubling: the sexualized, mystical Indian princess who can guide Matthew to spiritual salvation obviously falls under the stereotypes of Orientalism. Most critics, thus, seem to agree with Alys Eve Weinbaum’s damning conclusion that

With its hallucination of Brahim royalty, royal blood, and of the golden child as the incarnation of a new interracial alliance, *Dark Princess* reinscribes the orientalism we might expect it to challenge while...reinsert[ing] the black mother into a logic of internationalism, casting reproduction as the motor of black belonging in the world. (215)

While I cannot deny that Du Bois’ text often seems to cross a line from idealistic into naïve, from internationalist to orientalist, I believe reading the novel within its form helps to take it in the spirit in which it was intended. In other words, the “Orientalism of the novel is difficult to contest, but an early-twentieth century novel which proclaims itself ‘A Romance’ is unlikely to meet the standards of accuracy that we demand of realism” (Lahiri 546) and one needs to read the genre *as* meaning.

Ultimately I disagree with the notion that Du Bois defines “reproduction as the motor of black belonging in the world,” thus reifying the very biological notions of race used to segregate blacks *from* the world. That conclusion may seem easy when one reads the novel outside of the framework of the sentimental romance, but reading it in that genre, Madhu becomes more than solely the biological result of interracial sex. Instead

the banal stuff of heterosexual breeding becomes the fecund and naturalized horizon of radical racial possibility, not because reproduction *naturally* produces reproduction but because the melodramatic modality works to invest it with the meaning it otherwise lacks (Lahiri 547).

And the “meaning it otherwise lacks” comes through not only via the genre but the genre itself is reoriented. At every turn here *Dark Princess* disrupts the kinds of oppositional thinking that collude to create a system of inequity: binaries between male and female are overturned, the difference between black and white and copper are blurred, body and mind are united, work and art become one and the same, and distinctions between the domestic and the foreign are collapsed. The novel’s sentimental romance is just another means through which oppositional thinking is disrupted: here, feeling and thought are one. In other words, *Dark Princess* is, ultimately, a way of making political desire vital and tangible; of disrupting, in Robert Reid-Pharr’s words, “the false assumption that political identity is always the ultimate result of rational decision making” (*Black Gay Man* 10) and emphasizing, instead, “the importance of the ‘counterfactual’ in the realm of political discourse” (Bhabha 140). Sexual desire and political action become synonymous rather than oppositional in this novel as a whole and in Matthew as its protagonist, for whom the “vision of world work” is constantly eroticized as “prickling” and “surging” (Du Bois *Dark Princess* 136) and for whom romantic love becomes “more than romance” but “longing for action, breadth, helpfulness, great constructive deeds” (42). And by reading the novel *as* romance we are initiated into a reorientation that might engender the same.

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