“Reparative Purity” in *Incidents in the Life*, *Iola Leroy*, and *Contending Forces*

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"But O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely!" - Harriet Jacobs

Sexual purity is a central theme in nineteenth century black women's writing due to the pervasiveness of both sexual violence and popular and pseudo-scientific narratives about black women's lasciviousness. Slavery is cornerstone to any theorizing of purity in the nineteenth century. Sexual violence is inextricable from the institution of slavery as it is the very reason for the perpetuation of the slave population. As the Cult of True Womanhood and other popularized feminine ideals gained traction in the nineteenth century, it cannot be ignored that an entire subset of the population was largely precluded from fulfilling its values on the basis of being wholly unprotected by the law—remanded to human property. White women were considered "pure, innocent, and vulnerable" and in need of male protection (Brooten 254). Black women, however, were viewed very dissimilarly. Fay Botham argues that, "The flip side of the white male fixation about white female sexuality was the almost complete disregard for the safety and protection of black girls and women" (Brooten 254). This resulted in white women being "protected," but more accurately, controlled through laws that prescribed their behavior and prohibited interracial sexual liaisons while black women were curiously left out of the law and merited no protection. Purity, then, is far from a vacuous signifier. It is a means of categorizing women as worthy or unworthy and thereby strengthening white dominance. I argue that this is why "purity"—particularly, deconstructing it and reformulating it— is of principal interest to black women writers during the nineteenth century. "Purity" is a fundamental aspect of how nineteenth century women were categorized and black women writers were aware of this and felt the need to respond accordingly.

In the nineteenth century, "purity" is nearly exclusively consequential for women—it is not a category of analysis for men who are openly allowed sexual freedom within heterosexual bounds. Sexual purity is inseparable from notions of racial purity. Anxieties about sexual purity derive from fears about miscegenation. Botham argues that, "White male beliefs about race and gender, as well as their belief in their own right to rule, thus formed the central assumptions behind, as well as the goals of, laws regulating interracial sex and marriage" (Brooten 253). Conceptions of enslaved black women's sexuality is then less about fact than it is about the political utility these notions served ruling class white men. Notions about black women's inherent lasciviousness served as a justification for violence against black women—and even for slavery itself as black women were unsuited for the domestic sphere and, following from this, freedom. Nineteenth century black women writers attempted to combat this pervasive ideology through literary fiction. Although nineteenth century black women's fiction is often personal in the sense that it would focus on an individual protagonist, these texts use a systemic analysis to make dynamic claims about the general condition of black women under slavery and reconstruction and in the United States, more broadly. These are political texts that utilize the popular genre of nineteenth century sentimental women's fiction to advocate for abolition but also increased political rights for black women. Black women writers had to engage with completely fallacious and degrading images of black female sexuality in order to combat and deconstruct them.

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy,* and *Contending Forces* by Pauline E. Hopkins use the concept of what I term "reparative purity" to demand self-respect and political value for nineteenth century black women. In these texts, black women are no longer the lascivious, hypersexual "whore"—even when she lacks "sexual

purity" in a physical, tangible sense. Rather, the white male patriarch is held responsible for using his power to rape, coerce, and control. They are morally held accountable for both destroying the integrity of the white family and forcing enslaved people into debauchery. In nineteenth century black women's writings, black women become victims. Instating victimhood is a specific strategy that works to justify abolition and political rights for black people. According to bell hooks, "white women liberationists" often "bond[ed] as victims" and this categorization was denied to black women (hooks 46). Victimhood is a signal of registered personhood and nineteenth century black women writers used this to signal the humanity of their protagonists. Through religious symbolism—both verbal and embodied—black women are made anew and "reborn" into a respectable character firmly reserved for bourgeoise white women.

I argue that the theory of "reparative purity" is employed by nineteenth century black women writers to reinstate black women's respectability in spite of the real conditions of sexual violence under slavery and Reconstruction Era politics. Nineteenth century black women faced the pervasive threat of sexual violence. Due to this, despite their best intentions, physical sexual purity was not always a possibility—but black women writers did not want this fact to condemn black women to being "fallen whores." Sexual purity, from birth to marriage, is oftentimes an impossibility for an enslaved black woman so the *intention* and *desire* to remain pure becomes the important indicator of her value. Her intentions are measured through her religious dedication, fervor for purity, and her moral closeness to the True Woman model. Furthermore, her actions needed to align with purity as soon as she was able to escape the grasps of slavery and its inflicted sexual violence.

"Reparative purity," then, reifies her position within "respectable" womanhood although originally excluded due to the sexual circumstances of slavery and general racial discrimination.

"Antebellum black gender constructions," to use Claudia Tate's term, are antagonistic to upper middle class white gender constructions and notions about nineteenth century gentility. Under slavery, there is no clear delineation between the public and private spheres, between the roles of women and that of men. Although this was forced upon enslaved black people by masters who viewed the "de-gendering" process as quintessential to slavery's economic efficiency, this was used as a justification for denying enslaved black women (and men) their personhood and bodily integrity. They were unfit for freedom because they did not mimic idealized patriarchal familial constructions. Many nineteenth century writers, then, sought to place themselves within ideas of respectability while still revising the routine assumptions about what it means to be "pure": mainly white and freed. Surely, black women writers cannot be said to merely appropriate upper middle class white gender norms—but rather they understood them, deconstructed them, and rebuilt and repaired them for their own use thus widening their application. The "pure" black woman is not a parody of the "pure" white woman—rather she is a new figure altogether which weds female subjectivity and liberation. This new figure pushes the boundaries for nineteenth century women and embodies economic and political self-determination.

Nineteenth century black women writers had to remain cognizant of the popular attitudes of their time. Frances Smith Foster argues this when she states, "What integration was available was based upon the degree to which an individual could divest himself of so-called Negro cultural attributes and demonstrate his acquisition of the values and skills held most dear by whites" (Foster 65). While it is certainly true that black women writers did adhere to certain aspects of respectability and popular, moral culture—they also subverted these standards. In both Jacobs' and Harper's respective texts, they politicize women's purity and use it as a vehicle by which to argue against the institution of slavery. They also use their characters' displacement

from the domestic sphere as a means to critique slavery but also as a way to create a medium by which black women can "respectably" exist outside of the protection of marriage. Jacobs' Linda Brent exists beyond the domestic sphere—and for most of the text she is tangential to it. She is a mother without being a wife and this disjointed identity—at least from a patriarchal, nineteenth-century perspective, does not render her unrespectable in the author's eyes. Harper's Iola Leroy finds purpose in her work of advocating for racial justice until she finds a suitable marriage partner. She never prioritizes entering into marriage although she attempts to preserve her sexual purity while unmarried. Pauline Hopkins' Sappho Clark is dutifully pure and honorable before and during her courtship with protagonist Will Smith. In this way, she exemplifies "reparative purity" because, through her current piety, she is able to repair and resolve her prior sexual victimhood as a child.

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* speaks to the onerous sexual conditions black women faced under slavery and their limited ability to resist them. Jacobs takes a systemic approach to relating the sexual conditions of slavery even while using her personal narrative—through the pseudonymous Linda Brent—to tell her individual story of rape and sexual coercion. Jacobs represents slavery as being wholly hostile to the domestic ideal—not only for enslaved black women but for white women as well who understand that their husbands have children with enslaved women. Jacobs writes, "Southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of many little slaves. They do not trouble themselves about it. They regard such children as property, as marketable as the pigs on the plantation" (Jacobs 37). In this way, Jacobs implicates the entire patriarchal white family in the systematic rape and violence done against enslaved black women—everyone is complicit. In her essay, "Changing the Letter," Hortense Spillers argues that "we could say that slavery was, at once, the most public private

institution *and* the ground of the institution's most terrifying intimacies, because fathers *could* and *did* sell their sons and daughters, under the allowances of the *law* and the flag of a new nation" (Spillers 179). Jacobs undermines the very idea that domesticity and purity are even a possibility under slavery. She writes, "Tell [American slaveholders] it was wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it was sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters" (Jacobs 81). The idea of "children" takes on a double-meaning here as Jacobs means this in the sense of a shared humanity, but she also means this in the literal sense of white slaveholders parenting children and remanding them to human property.

The value of the "domesticity" concept, then, is part of a broader project of delineating gender roles and differentiating between the public and private spheres and it is also related to the careful curtailing the sexuality of (white) women. But, also domesticity is inherent within the slave system even as it strips black women and men of the "private" sphere. Jacobs uses the idea of lost domesticity to argue for the dissolution of the slave system. She challenges those who argue that slavery is a "beautiful 'patriarchal' institution" where slaves are protected and cared for and instead urges them to think of "the half-starved wretches toiling from dawn till dark on the plantations" and "mothers shrieking for their children, torn from their arms by slave traders" and "of young girls dragged down into moral filth" (Jacobs 82). Jacobs argues that exceptions cannot be made representative—rather it is important to look at the masses of slaves who are mistreated and thwarted by the system of slavery. Spillers argues that mothering, under slavery, "carries few of the benefits of a *patriarchalized* female gender, which, from one point of view, is the only female gender there is" (Spillers 216). Effectively, the children of black mothers are fatherless, even when the father can be readily identified. The child is fatherless in the sense that they will not be protected by their father—the white master (whether biological father or not) has

the power to remand that child to slavery and treat them as human property. Ideologically, then, enslaved black women and nineteenth century black women more broadly may not even be women in the social sense of the term as they are not "patriarchalized," albeit under the control of the white male patriarch. Jacobs exemplifies this as she was torn away from her own children.

At her children's births, Jacobs showed an awareness that she would have little control over their destiny as "slaveholders have been cunning enough to enact that 'the child shall follow the condition of the *mother,'* not of the *father*, thus taking care that licentiousness should not interfere with avarice" (Jacobs 84). In this way, the slave system is circuitous—binding all involved into a certain sexual deviance. Botham argues that children following the condition of their (enslaved) mother "absolved the slave-holder from responsibility for all sexual relations—even rape—with African women, it also made unions with African girls and women all the more attractive to white men, in that any resulting offspring became the man's property" (Brooten 252). In this way, the rape of enslaved black women is economically rewarded and socially accepted.

Jacobs describes slavery as a panopticon of sorts where the master is constantly performing surveillance on his human property—including within the sexual realm. Jacobs writes, "He (the slave master) entered every cabin, to see that men and their wives had gone to bed together, lest the men, from over-fatigue, should fall asleep in the chimney corner, and remain there till the morning horn called them to their daily task" (Jacobs 52). This is an egregious example of the way in which enslaved people's sexuality was carefully regulated and controlled towards the (economic) benefit of the master. However, economics is not the only motivation. Jacobs states that: "When [the slave girl] is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to

accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will" (Jacobs 55). In this way, she euphemistically relates the circumstances of pervasive sexual assault. The slave girl, Jacobs says, "is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear" (Jacobs 55).

This speaks to the omnipotent nature of sexual violence during slavery. Enslaved black girls were regularly primed for sexual assault—first through "positive" reinforcement and then through more explicitly violent means. Jacobs discusses this in an effort to orient the reader to the inevitable nature of sexual impurity and presents enslaved black women as victims. Jacobs states, "Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals" (Jacobs 52). It is significant that black women writers, such as Jacobs, orient enslaved black women as victims because they were regularly perceived as aggressors, irresistible temptation for innocent white men, and inherently sexually "indecent" and uninterested in the marriage bond and domesticity. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham notes that "well-respected historians [of the nineteenth century] … portrayed slave women not as victims but as lazy, promiscuous, and brutish figures" (Brooks Higginbotham 191). Higginbotham states that, "…in the white mind, black girls and women were promiscuous and sexually aggressive and thus sexually available. Sexual domination, debasement, and exploitation of black girls and women was expected and assumed" (Brooten 255). Victimhood, then, serves the important function of *redeeming* enslaved black women and supporting abolition. Victimhood, usually denied to black women, is used as an important plot device and lens by which black women writers tell their stories and relate to readers the position of black women under slavery. Establishing black women's victimhood allows for Jacobs to employ "reparative purity" throughout the text.

Jacobs shows that enslaved black women are entirely precluded from purity. From girlhood, they are primed for sexual violence. How, then, do black women navigate slavery and attempt to preserve their sexual purity and integrity? Jacobs uses the notion of "reparative purity" to argue for her purity in spite of enduring the conditions of slavery. "Reparative purity" means that because enslaved black women could not escape sexual violence, they needed to be made pure through supplication and self-denial. Jacobs makes it clear in her narrative that she not only does not want to lose her purity, but that she is taking every possible step to preserve it—even if those steps prove hopeless in the end. In reference to becoming her master's mistress, Jacobs writes: "I had rather toil on the plantation from dawn till dark; I had rather live and die in jail, than drag on, from day to day, through such a *living death"* (Jacobs 57, my emphasis). Here sexual impurity—and sexual assault—is likened to death in order for the reader to fully appreciate her full antagonism towards it. I argue that this is a move done in the tradition of women's sentimental fictional writing where "pure" women characters literally die before they are sexually sullied. Jacobs writes: "If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home *shielded* by the laws…but all my prospects have been blighted by slavery" (Jacobs 58, my emphasis). For Jacobs, marriage is a shield from rape and other sexual coercion and her "owner" forbids her from marrying which denies her such protections. Jacobs desires to be sexually chaste and puts forth her best effort to do so and this fact itself makes her pure.

As Jacobs is writing in the slave narrative genre, she must relate the "truth" for fear of being ostracized from antislavery circles who sought to use her narrative to drum up support for abolition. Jacobs must explain why she has two children out of wedlock. But, she must do this while also reminding her reader that she is *still* pure, *still* domestic, and *still* Christian. She does

this through making her self-will plain to readers while also highlighting her victimhood and inability to protect herself. Jacobs writes, "I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the most proved too strong for me" (Jacobs 58). Slavery is a literal "demon" whose strength prevents Jacobs from protecting herself and her bodily integrity. Importantly, Jacobs does not demean herself or suggest that she is permanently impure or sullied due to this. Rather, she is the victim of terrible circumstances that no one apart from other enslaved women can fully understand and reconcile with. Rather, it is her master who is impure. When her master attempts to malign her on the basis of her having children out of wedlock, her grandmother responds by saying, "…you'd better be saying your prayers. It will take 'em all…to wash the dirt off your soul" (Jacobs 91). While Jacobs' master wishes to attack her for sexual impurity, her grandmother critiques him on the basis of his *moral* impurity. Moral impurity is made the greater evil. Respectability and worthiness is valued before all else. This is an important distinction that can be seen throughout Jacobs' text, but I argue is also utilized in other nineteenth century black women-authored texts.

In Jacobs' text, her confinement in a three-foot tall attic provided her with refuge from her master's ire and violence. This shed is, in a way, a bastardized form of the domestic sphere—where she is stymied, but protected from the public indignities of slavery. Jacobs hides in plain sight from her master. She remarks, "The laws allowed [my master] to be out in the free air, while I, guiltless of crime, was pent up here, as the only means of avoiding the cruelties the laws allowed him to inflict upon me!" (Jacobs 135). However, although miserable, this furtive attic space allows her to retain her purity and to, from a distance, care for her children. She is then

able to become reunited with her children and family after she successfully escapes to the North. This reveals the suffocating nature of slavery—its nearly infinite grasp on women.

Interestingly, Claudia Tate argues that Jacobs and other black women writers during this time "subscrib[ed] to the rigid standards of Victorian ladyhood" but they "enlarged its criteria" (Tate 63). This "granted their heroines access to Victorian ladyhood that served to counter the racist stereotype of black female wanton sexuality" (Tate 63). Many scholars—such as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Darlene Clark Hine— have discussed the "politics of respectability" and the "culture of dissemblance," respectively. This refers to the way in which black women avoided any discussion of sexuality in order to evade claims of sexual lasciviousness and wantonness. However, enslaved black women, along with post-slavery black women, had to speak about sexuality, even if it was not directly and many black women authored texts during this time speak on the topic of sexuality. In order to wash themselves of the "taint" of sexuality, they sought to redeem themselves through their character. According to Tate, "post-Reconstruction black women writers still explicitly maintained that genteel class membership as a lady or gentleman was based more on individual virtue, dignity, and decorum than on constrictions of noble black heritage arising from a racially mixed ancestry" (Tate 63). Black women writers realized that character needed to be most emphasized in order to locate black women within ideas of respectability and worthiness.

Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* speaks to the precarity facing enslaved black women under slavery. She uses the Octoroon figure to dramatize the threat of sexual assault by highlighting the perceived injustice of a woman with a white appearance being remanded to slavery. However, Harper appropriates the traditional usage of the Octoroon figure—as representative of the murky boundaries of race, and instead uses Iola as a means to argue for

abolition and increased civil rights for black women. The Civil War serves as the backdrop for radical personal and political change. Iola's awareness of her blackness mirrors the country's seeming awareness of the ills of slavery. Once Iola discovers her blackness, she proudly claims her racial heritage through not only her work within the domestic sphere, but her intellectualism in traditionally male and public spheres. Iola is a dutiful member of the family and cares for them within the home but simultaneously she is politically aware enough to join male dominated discussions about the future of the black race. She embodies a nineteenth century middle class ethos that works to redeem both her racial impurity and sexual taint from slavery.

Harper's *Iola Leroy* begins with a familiar plot-line that has been used in earlier works such as *The Octoroon* by Dion Boucicault and Hannah Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative*—a wealthy white-appearing woman finds out that she has black heritage and is remanded to slavery. However, while Harper borrows from other authors who used the "tragic mulatto" or Octoroon trope in their works, she significantly revises it, and Iola becomes a surviving—and even triumphant—heroine rather than a character who hopelessly dies in an effort to avoid sexual taint. In this novel, her discovery of her blackness drives Iola to transform her thinking about slavery. At the novel's start, she supports slavery on the basis that her "father is a slave-holder and [her] mother is as good to our servants as she can be" (Harper 83). After her racial heritage is revealed, Iola's own circumstances provide her with evidence of the horrors of slavery even when slaves are seemingly well cared for—at the crux of it they are denied their freedom and ability to control their own personhood.

Iola accepts and embraces her blackness and works to improve the living conditions of black people. Her Octoroon heritage is used to dramatize her descent into slavery. Harper writes, "And when you come to look at it, isn't it a shame to attempt to reduce that girl to slavery? She

is just as white as we are, as good as any girl in the land, and better educated than thousands of white girls" (Harper 85). This is meant to highlight the hypocrisy of Iola being remanded to slavery when she is intellectually and morally superior to women who have the privilege of freedom. Despite Iola's white appearance, she chooses to openly join the black race along with the rest of her family ensuring that she will be treated as a black person despite her physical appearance. Similar to Jacobs' text, Iola's purity is a cornerstone to the progress of the storyline. Sexual violence is thinly veiled throughout the text and serves as a means to reveal the extent to which enslaved women are unprotected.

Harper's *Iola Leroy* is jarring because of the differentiation between Iola's life prior to knowing her racial heritage and her life after being remanded to the institution of slavery. Upon becoming enslaved, Iola is immediately unprotected. Harper writes, "Could it be possible that this young and beautiful girl had been chattel, with no power to protect herself from the highest insults that lawless brutality could inflict upon innocent and defenseless womanhood?" (Harper 39). Iola is made to endure indecencies that she would not have needed to worry about if she had the protection of her white father. Without her consent, a slave catcher awakens her "by a burning kiss pressed on her lips, and a strong arm encircling her" (Harper 87). She is mortified and enraged and responds by saying, "Don't you know that if my father were here he would crush you to the earth?" (Harper 88). Iola, lacking the protection of her father, is left to the bad intentions of those who surround her. Similar to Jacobs' text, Iola is not portrayed to be at fault for this or capable of changing her destiny. Rather, she is an inevitable victim of the circumstances of slavery.

Although Iola endures sexual violation under slavery, Harper still uses the concept of purity to uphold Iola's worth. She does this through redirecting the reader to focus not on Iola's

circumstances, but on her character and how she approaches the situations she is placed in. Iola always responds with humility, honesty, and demureness which makes her—at least in character—a "True Woman." According to Dorothy Roberts, the hypersexual, degraded images of enslaved black women was the perfect opposite of the Victorian 'True' woman "who was virtuous, pure, and white" (Brooten 45). Hazel V. Carby states that "true womanhood" was inextricably connected to external, physical qualities. In *Reconstructing Womanhood,* Carby states, "the parameters of the ideological discourse of true womanhood were bound by a shared social understanding that external physical appearance reflected internal qualities of character" (Carby 25). Harper aligns herself with this in the sense that Iola has a white appearance; however, she plays with the boundaries of sexual purity and—like Jacobs—uses a concept of reparative purity.

Iola's determination to openly claim her blackness, in spite of great discrimination, speaks to her character and her desire to live a truthful life. Iola rejects the advances of a white suitor because she does not wish to deny who she truly is. Iola states, "Should the story of my life be revealed to your family, would they be willing to ignore all the traditions of my blood, forget all the terrible humiliations through which I have passed? I have too much *self-respect* to enter your home under a veil of concealment" (Harper 97, my emphasis). Iola practices self-respect when she refuses to mislead others about her race. Harper writes, "But she bound her heart to the mast of duty, closed her ears to the syren [sic] song, and could not be lured from her purpose" (Harper 204). I argue that Iola does not prioritize the patriarchal protection of marriage. Rather, she prioritizes truth, honor, and a middle-class work ethic.

Iola's ideas about gender are antagonistic to many upper middle class white notions of the proper role and place of a woman. Iola believes that both women and men ought to work and

provide for themselves and their families. Iola states, “I have a theory that every woman ought to know how to earn her own living. I believe that a great amount of sin and misery springs from the *weakness* and *inefficiency* of women” (Harper 160, my emphasis). Here, Iola aligns herself with a vision of womanhood which remained realistic to the plight of black women who did not have the privilege of sequestering themselves wholly in the domestic sphere. However, Iola turns this into a virtue rather than merely a fact of (black) middle class life. Iola further states, “I think that every woman should have some skill or art which would ensure her at least a comfortable support. I believe there would be less unhappy marriages if labor were more honored among women” (Harper 164). Iola believes in the importance of labor and believes that women must be economically useful. For Iola, marriage should not be a means for women to escape the world of work and concern themselves only with the domestic sphere, rather, marriage should be a joint effort where both parties economically contribute. Harper theorizes a vision of marriage that allows women to retain their position within the public sphere, as did Harper as a public lecturer and suffragist.

Like many nineteenth century white authors, Harper is interested in using “purity” as an important factor of evaluation for women. However, Harper’s motivation for this lies in her belief that proper gendered behavior will reshape the black family torn apart by slavery and lead to the uplift of the race. Harper writes, “…the strength of the race means purity in women and uprightness in men” (Harper 197). She also states that, “…the greatest need of the race is noble, earnest men, and true women” (Harper 137). For Harper, gender ideology is essential to the moral constitution of the black race and its progress. For Harper, slavery hindered the possibility of purity and marriage. Harper states, “…after the [Civil] war we were thrown upon the nation a homeless race to be gathered into homes, and a legally unmarried race to be taught the

sacredness of the marriage relation" (Harper 197). Iola, then, is meant to be a shining example of proper "True" womanhood—even though she is slighted under slavery, she overcomes and serves as a positive force for those who encounter her. Perhaps inevitably, Iola becomes a wife by the novel's end. She married a freed black man who tells her, "…your presence would make my home one of the brightest spots on earth, and one of the fairest types of heaven" (Harper 210). Harper uses the familiar nineteenth century trope of the "angel in the house" to describe Iola's role as a wife. Although Iola does not squarely locate herself within the private, domestic sphere she still retains qualities that will serve to ameliorate the condition of the home and heal her husband from the mire of racial discrimination that he will face in the public sphere. Harper puts forth a theory of healing for the newly freed black community based on the integrity and purity of women.

Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces* illustrates "reparative purity" through its main female character, Sappho Clark. Her piety and metaphorical "martyrdom," works to redeem her from her prior sexual sins—or rather lay claim to victimhood. Sappho Clark, although a victim of what Hopkins terms, "concubinage," ends the novel as a purified wife and mother. In this novel, Sappho's purity is essential to not only her own escape from sexual degradation and entrance into the domestic sphere, but it also has wider implications for the political standing of turn of the century African Americans. Hopkins connects the predominantly female victims of concubinage and sexual violence with the predominantly male victims of lynchings. In this way, sexual violence against black women is part of a broader issue of racial violence and white supremacy—it is no longer a matter of a moral failing as widely argued in the nineteenth century nor is it solely a woman's issue. Rather than Sappho's sexual history relegating her to non-respectability, it serves as an example of how black women may overcome concubinage and

"purify" themselves through the institution of marriage and the domestic sphere. *Contending Forces* is also a testament to the way in which black women's purity has far reaching implications for the black community.

Hopkins situates black women's purity within the larger nexus of race relations in the United States. Hopkins sees concubinage, sexual assault and rape as part and parcel of broader white supremacist tactics that in addition to lynchings, also include financial exploitation and political neglect. In this way, the question of black women's purity is not isolated to the domestic or women's spheres—rather it is indicative of the racial progress yet to be made. The mulatto serves as a physical embodiment of "immoral" sexual liaisons between white men and black women. Hopkins' novel includes insightful racial debates where a plethora of perspectives are analyzed. In one such instance, Will Smith, referring to his own mixed heritage, states: "How did we get our complexions, soft curls and regular features? Our ancestors were black, flat-featured, and had many other racial marks. Your race does not intermarry with Negroes, does it? That being the case, the answer is self-evident" (Hopkins 299-300). Mulattos are not created within the confines of marriage and so the "mulatto" signals concubinage; it is immoral—and yet not the responsibility of African Americans who are victims. This reverses the narrative of black male hypersexuality and violence by instead placing the spotlight on white male rape which was relentlessly normalized and made invisible. Using Will Smith's voice, Hopkins writes, "[Rape] is a crime that strikes the home ties, and as such is the most deadly weapon that has yet been used against us. We invite investigation in this direction, and you will then find that it is *not* a characteristic of the black man, although *it is* of the white man of the South" (Hopkins 297). If rape is a characteristic of the white man, then sexual *victimhood* becomes a common characteristic of black women. The existence of sexual victimhood creates the platform for

supporting black women's purity and morality and thereby arguing for African American's political and economic suffrage post-slavery. For Hopkins, lynchings are inextricably connected to black women's concubinage and rape. The same racial logic which argues for the intemperance of black men, also states that purity is an impossible state for the black woman who is innately sexually lascivious. Sappho Clark's captor firmly believed that black women are un-rapeable and impossible victims. He stated, "What does a woman of mixed blood, or any Negress, for that matter, know of virtue? It is my belief that they were a *direct creation by God* to be the pleasant companions of men of my race" (Hopkins 261, my emphasis). Sappho's captor uses a theological justification for his actions—seeking to nullify the fact of sexual assault by normalizing it. How does Hopkins' decision to place black women's sexual victimhood front and center to the race question impact how sexual violence is perceived? How does black women's purity become a centralizing factor in determining the worth of the African American race?

Sappho Clark—both her very existence as a mixed-race woman and also in terms of her violent past—is indicative of reparative purity. She is a remade virgin, made newly pure due to her self-sacrifice and even "martyrdom" to use Hopkins' wording. Sappho believes that she is irredeemable and unsuitable for marriage due to her sexual past. However, Ms. Willis—a speaker on the subject of woman's virtue— serves as a voice for the "fallen sister." She says that "we would hang our head in shame at having the temerity to judge a fallen sister, could we but know the circumstances attending many such cases" (148). Hopkins argues that black women "in her natural state" are virtuous. Slavery is then a perversion from this natural state. This directly refutes nineteenth century ideology surrounding the natural lasciviousness of enslaved and free black women. Specifically indicting white men, Hopkins writes that "time and moral training among the white men of the South are the only cures for concubinage" (332). In Hopkins' text,

the quintessential “fallen woman” is not hopelessly remanded to loneliness or death. Rather, she becomes the hero—remade through “pure love” and motherhood.

The “fallen woman” trope does not ensnare Sappho into a formulaic suicide or death—rather the “fallen woman” trope expands to appreciate the sheer brutality of sexual violence against black woman. The “True Woman” is not the virgin, she is the woman who has the “strength to do the right thing under all temptations” (Hopkins 149). She is the pious woman who loves without expectation and who tirelessly uplifts the domestic sphere. Sappho is firmly located within the domestic sphere. Her social life revolves around Dora and Mrs. Smith and she holds employment as a stenographer but never enters the workplace due to her race—instead she works from her room. Consequently, she secures employment as a governess where she is described as the “moving spirit of the home” (Hopkins 353). For Sappho, this role is described as “a happy, restful life; it suited her” (Hopkins 353). Sappho also embraces caring for her own child—previously considered a marker of her sexual past—and transforms her notions of motherhood into an enlightening and meaningful calling. Hopkins writes, “Her feeling of degradation had made her ashamed of the joys of motherhood, of pride of possession in her child.” (Hopkins 345). The nuns advise Sappho to not claim the child as her own, but after Sappho insists they name her a widow to avoid any scandal. However, Sappho’s employer—a wealthy and respectable African American man—recognizes the truth and asks for her hand in marriage in spite of her past. Sappho’s commitment to motherhood serves as another entryway to the domestic sphere and True Womanhood. Hopkins writes, “She [Sappho] would devote her life to him. They would nevermore be separated” (Hopkins 342). The mother/ child bond is a salve for sexual impurity. Although the child is the result of concubinage, Sappho’s mothering speaks to her femininity and respectability as well as her piety. Her devotion to both her own child and

her tutees in her role as a governess reveals her innate gentleness and warmth—both characteristics inherent in True Women.

Sappho's position within the domestic sphere—her ability to care for children and improve the comfort of a home—are redeeming values not often afforded nineteenth century "fallen women" of any race. Sexual sin is thought to erode a woman's ability to perform True Woman duties, but this is not true for Sappho, and this marks her as someone "deserving" of marital bliss and not death. Sappho is figuratively reborn in *Contending Forces*—she returns from death to reinstate her purity. Sappho's family assumed her death because the nuns spread the word that she died in childbirth. Mabelle Beaubean "dies" to her family and community and is transformed into the reticent Sappho Clark. She abandons her child in order to attempt a new beginning free from the burdens of sexual sin, however, her past remains inescapable—not only in terms of her secret being uncovered by the novel's antagonist, but also in terms of her own self-awareness. Sappho adopts a sacrificial self-concept: "she sat dumb and submissive beneath her martyrdom" (Hopkins 354). She is penitent. She suffers silently not ever believing she deserves forgiveness or a new start. While Sappho is the picture of patient humility, Hopkins uses supporting characters to sing Sappho's praises while also setting the basis for the forgiveness—and even nullification— of Sappho's sexual sin. Will Smith, in particular, is enamored with Sappho. His love for her is described as being a "love *sanctified* and *purifie*d by suffering" (Hopkins 398, my emphasis). Hopkins uses religious language to emphasize the rightfulness of their love and its destiny. Other male characters, such as the amoral John Langley, serve the purpose of exemplifying Sappho's moral character and commitment to sexual purity. When Langley proposes concubinage to Sappho, similar to what propertied and wealthy white men were accustomed to doing, she denies him. Langley states, "Ambitious men do not marry

women with stories like yours!" (Hopkins 320). In this textual moment, Sappho asserts herself and her innocence: "I was a victim! An innocent child!" (Hopkins 319). In no other moment does Sappho vehemently defend herself.

Sappho's "innocence" is necessary to reinstate her sexual purity and worthiness for marriage and the domestic sphere. Would Sappho have been a sympathetic character for nineteenth century readers had she not been a child cruelly taken advantage of? I argue that she would not have been. Sappho needed to perfectly embody all aspects of the True Woman in order for the taint of her past to be redeemable. Hopkins summarizes the idea of reparative purity when she writes: "we shall not be held responsible for wrongs which we have *unconsciously* committed, or which we have committed under *compulsion*. We are virtuous or non-virtuous only when we have a *choice* under temptation" (Hopkins 150). Hopkins' texts has its limitations, and perhaps her vision for respectable black womanhood is even more narrow than it "needed" to be or could have been at the time of its publication, however, Sappho's victimhood is an important intervention into didactic nineteenth century thinking about black women. Because she is a victim, she can be made pure again. In a way, for Hopkins, the conditions of being a black woman make way for a more liberal understanding about womanhood and a more expansive definition for who a True Woman can be—she can be black and she can be. The inherent violence under slavery creates the conditions for sexuality mores to be transgressed and renegotiated.

I have sought to illustrate how sexual purity is essential to nineteenth century black women's writings due to the dominance of the True Woman discourse—and the ways in which the lack of purity is used to preclude black women from worthiness. But also, black women writers subverted aspects of the True Woman discourse and made it their own. Part of this is

using *moral* purity as a distinct strategy to locate black women within purity even though purity is aesthetically white. However, I am interested in the limitations of these strategies utilized by nineteenth century black women writers. A contemporary feminist sensibility would argue that any use of "purity" as a means to judge a woman's worth is fallacious and dangerous to her self-determination. However, I argue that to judge these works so harshly would be arrogantly anachronistic. "Purity" as a signifier is useful to black women writers seeking to contradict popular discourses about black women's inferiority.

P. Gabrielle Foreman argues that nineteenth century black writers, particularly authors of slave narratives had to "undertell" in order to be received as authentic to their (white) audience. "Delicacy" and "modesty," Foreman argues, "demanded that narrators systemically come short of the truth" (77). The fiction of "purity," then, is certainly a way of effacing the truth, but also a strategy towards self-legitimization. This paper has left me with several questions: How might nineteenth century black women's writing be analyzed alongside the parallel historical archive of violence under slavery? How might later black women's literature continue in the tradition of these texts—or wholly divest from them? Certainly, it is a rich point of analysis to understand how and why black women authors used purity as a cornerstone theme in their texts—and following from this there are many more implications to be made about the genre of nineteenth century black women's writing, more generally, and also about black women's historical and political position.

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