

Niobe Repeating: Black New Women Rewrite Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

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ABSTRACT

For Black New Women authors, H. Cordelia Ray, Pauline A. Hopkins, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provided a literary palette from which their stories could be redrawn as a part of the American intellectual and artistic landscape. From 1880 until 1910, Black New Women wrote explicitly gendered stories of belonging—stories that explored what it meant to be women, to be newly “free” as a class of people, and to intervene in traditions as longstanding as Roman literature. In *Niobe Repeating*, I argue that Black New Women classicists utilized classical forms and plots to reconsider the process of black feminine identity formation as intellectual and creative production. At its core, *Niobe Repeating* examines the difference between classicists, scholars and writers deliberately engaged in the elaboration of the classical tradition, and those who had been educated in select classical texts as a part of their liberal educations. Furthermore, the project extends Tracey L. Walters's inaugural and solitary study of black women classicists and her claim that for nineteenth century black women writers, the classics created “a liberating space to engage readers in a feminist critique of the misrepresentation, silencing, and subjugation of Black women both in literature and society” (51).

I trace a black feminine classicist tradition that begins with Phillis Wheatley, challenges the confines of gendered creative production, and recasts Ovid's stories of feminine rebellion and transformation as “women's” genres including fairy tale, romance, and American gothic, often combined into single works. These new methods of literary production gave rise to speculative poetry, short stories, and novels that presented a reimagined American society, redefined black origins, and redirected expectations of black women's intellectual and creative production. By writing directly into the classical tradition, these writers intentionally met the standards of

citizenship and simultaneously exposed the inevitable failures of any dehumanization projects pitted against them. They wrote stories that claimed Black persons' American heritage, reclaimed their humanity, and proved their worth within the mainstream American value system that expressed core values of class, education, piety, and patriotism.

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INTRODUCTION

Black New Women and Their Ovid

I. Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, black women were busy. Amidst the loud resonances of recent slavery and imposed identities based in biological value, they contemplated their own senses of belonging in a new and changing country. Thanks to the work done by the self-titled Black Feminist Movement of the 1970s, we know that late nineteenth-century black women, deeply embedded themselves in the major political and intellectual movements in America. A complicated history of the intersections of race and gender politically positioned them like no other socio-racial class in the country. Black women were the only ones examining the unique concerns of black women—the painful legacy of slave motherhood, double-minority status, and under representation. With the help of white ex-abolitionists, black men had received the vote. White women included only other white women in suffrage rhetoric and action. Black women argued and fought for the right to vote on their own. More, the race Movement relied upon and thrived as a result of their largely unrecognized labor, much like the slave industry from which they had escaped, only recently.

Rather than sitting idly by, black women created their own spaces where they could engage intellectually, creatively, and politically. They organized clubs as a means of sharing political criticism and organizing in support of the Movement.¹ They wrote hard-hitting essays and toured the country making speeches. They left the cities and went into disenfranchised rural

¹ For greater discussion of black readers during the Women's Club Movement, see Elizabeth McHenry's *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (2002).

areas, educating their Southern counterparts and their children as extensions of their Christian duties and ideals for racial strength and solidarity. They supported their publically well-known husbands, friends, and sons, providing administrative, management, accounting, and editing services. Feminist “Race Women” writers, dedicated to movements of black empowerment, furthered their political causes promoting race and gender equality by demonstrating mastery of the literary history into which they wrote. Like their white and male counterparts and predecessors, “Black New Women” rewrote the forms and storylines of the literature they studied. These Black New Women wrote across a variety of genres and forms, engaging the history of literary production beginning with the classical tradition and combined Greek and Roman mythology, fairy tales, gothic romances, and other literary genres in single works. These new methods of literary production gave rise to speculative poetry, short stories, and novels that presented a reimagined American society and history where “womanhood” and “blackness” held different meanings than the limited categories of “wife and lady” and “ex-slave and male.”

From 1880 until 1910, Black New Women wrote explicitly gendered stories of belonging—stories exploring what it means to be specifically women, what it means to be newly “free” as a class of people, and what it means to intervene in ancient literary traditions. As they contemplated the new century, they considered how their circumstances and subject positions had and hadn’t changed. Black women writers negotiated the recent history of American chattel enslavement literally and legally defined through their (mothers’) bodies. They did so through a systematized and deliberate reconstitution of definitions and conditions of motherhood and family along racial lines. Slavery exploded definitions of personhood and family for black people labeled “chattel.” The idea of “family” for enslaved American people fell well outside of boundaries outlined for free whites. The Antebellum black person in America followed the

condition of her mother. The enslaved black American mother, who was forced to nurture the children of her enslavers, may or may not have known the fate of her own, biological children. The black American child in bondage may or may not have known the identity of her father or the circumstances under which she was conceived. The conditions after Emancipation and during Reconstruction raised, again, issues concerning the legality of the black family. After slavery, black persons revised and reconfigured their families—taking into their own hands the structures of their relations, no longer heavily monitored and controlled by white people. To this end, and perhaps as an answer to the hurtful rearrangements of families during slavery—children sold away from their parents, couples unable to stay together, families torn apart and then reconstructed through non-blood relations—black Americans constructed their families along more traditional lines (read: heteronormative, Western models).

Black New Women rewrote their identities, providing developed and complex characters that contradicted the popular Antebellum and American Victorian stereotypes: mammy, Jezebel, “mulatta,” and Sapphire. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues that:

...identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation.... They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the ‘suturing into the story’ through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within the fantasmatic field. (Hall 4)

As emancipated African Americans reconstituted their definitions of family in freedom, Hall

defines identity as future-oriented. Identity relies on the potential for a person, as they define that potential. This moving, process-centered vision of identity mirrors the tensions faced by the newly emancipated as subject positions shifted from slavery to “free,” from property to person, and from breeders and bread to parents and children.

Black New Women committed to the project of recasting black feminine identity as it was developing along lines of citizenship. They self-consciously deployed their own positions as writers and formally educated women. In *Confessions of a Lazy Woman*, a diary-novel that she could not get published, Alice Dunbar-Nelson pushes back against upper middle class gendered expectations, particularly women’s domestic and political labor. The narrator, categorized by critic Gloria T. Hull as “an uninvolved female,”² has no taste for activities made popular by her women peers, such as managing the home, social engagements, and reading clubs. Like the passive turned active aggression of Melville’s *Bartelby*,³ Dunbar-Nelson’s narrator simply refuses to engage “normatively” with society; and, instead of offering a neat version of criticism, she “confesses” her own complicated relationship with her resistance narrative, calling herself “lazy.” She takes on the Virginia Woolf model of artistic production – isolation enabled by class privilege – and rejects all gendered labor, even the overt political efforts of contemporary New Women. Still, she craves publication and works diligently on her diary-novel through which she depicts herself as a revision of the New Woman intellectual and writer—self-critical, non-conforming, and emerging and evolving through her writing project. In *Confessions*, Dunbar-Nelson models the self-conscious writing projects she and her contemporaries, poets, essayists, editors, and fiction writers, created as they documented their own “process of becoming.”

These black women at the turn of the twentieth century also rewrote recent histories,

² Hull, “Introduction,” *The Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Volume 2*, xlv.

³ Of course, here, I reference *Bartleby*’s simple, “I prefer not to,” which seems passive, at the beginning of the story, but grows to be an aggressive form of inaction.

“where we came from,” through the slave narrative form, and gave voice to women characters previously rendered mute and symbolic in much the same way that Ovid rewrote Vergil’s silent women. Black women’s literary projects converted the popular nineteenth-century slave narratives, plantation novels, and “mulatto” stories into their own genre-bending short stories and novels, particularly employing and intervening in the romance genre that often governed the historical narrative genre. The quintessential American romance, the novel whose plotline centers on the romantic entanglement of a heterosexual couple, moved away from the British version of Victorian romance and towards the tragic. The American gothic, stories of the supernatural by authors such as Washington Irving and Charles Brockton Brown, combined with the central romance plot and resolved tragically in works by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, giving rise to America’s gothic romance. Southern landscapes and plantation homes, rightly considered haunted by the suffering of those enslaved persons forced to work on them, provided a popular backdrop for the romantic stories of nineteenth-century tragi-heroines who were the daughters of slave mothers and their own slave masters. Black women recovered themselves from the hands that had historically dismissed and marginalized them: the silencing and maiming of Poe’s passing women,⁴ Ligeia and Morella, and the “raving lunatic,” Xarifa, known as Lydia Maria Child’s “Octoroon.” Black women rejected depictions of themselves as voiceless and broken. Instead, they represented themselves by rewriting the “mulatta” character as self-sufficient and, therefore recovered from her “tragic” literary past. They also introduced darker skinned, self-conscious, free and enslaved women as more than marginal and in positions of relief, against whom male characters defined masculinity. These Black New Women characters emerged as whole gendered people, political critics, and intellectual interlocutors. The

⁴ See Colin (Joan) Dayan’s *Fables of Mind: An Inquiry Into Poe’s Fiction*, where Dayan calls her readers to reconsider the identities of “Poe’s women” as “sustained in betweenness,” the very premise of all Poe text.

Black New Women authors (re)wrote their literary equivalents as middle-class, educated, professional women, and represented their mothers and grandmothers as complex, thoughtful characters with various and often violent slave histories.

Different than other turn-of-the-century feminists or “New Women,” Black New Women raised issues particularly of gender *as* raced and doubly marginal. More, their writing challenged American literary and cultural narratives that gave rise to racial and gender violence: violence that began during the era of the chattel slave system, reinforced through Reconstruction, and then reached an all time high as the twentieth century loomed. They encouraged whites to see racial threat as white aggression against black families, rather than the prevalent stereotyping of black men as sexual predators whom whites should fear and destroy. Creating characters that butted against mainstream expectations of blackness and femininity, black women authors promoted racial solidarity and activism amongst their black readership. They wrote stories that claimed black persons’ American heritage, reclaimed their humanity, and proved their worth along the mainstream American value system that expressed core values of class, education, piety, and patriotism. In particular, fiction written by black American women suggests the cultural identity crisis felt throughout the country, as the country’s new black citizens disrupted previous answers to the questions: Who is American? What does an American look like? And still, their labor was largely unrecognized by their fellow Race Men.⁵

The Oberlin-trained Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964) lived as a professional Latin and Greek teacher and literary critic, most famous for *A Voice From the South* (1892) through which she wields her critical eye like an attacking Cyclops against those who would oppress black

⁵ Hazel V. Carby’s seminal study *Race Men* examines, at length, the relationship between black movements and black masculinity. Carby begins her project by arguing that not only did W.E.B. Du Bois suffer a “complete failure to imagine black women as intellectuals and race leaders,” but that in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois deploys a “conceptual framework that is gender-specific; not only does it apply exclusively to men, but it encompasses only those men who enact narrowly and rigidly determined codes of masculinity” (10).

people and women. While I concentrate on the poetry and fiction of Black New Women in *Niobe Repeating*, I consider Cooper the quintessential Black New Woman classicist. Cooper earned her living through her scholarship, as an educator, by publishing essays, and through delivering speeches that melded her race and gender criticism with her literary scholarship and creative production. As an example of her scholarship and in one of the most anthologized chapters from *A Voice*, Cooper quotes Tennyson's long poem and appeal for women's education, "The Princess." Along with Tennyson's poetic argument⁶ Cooper maintains "that the feminine factor can have its proper effect only through woman's development and education so that she may fitly and intelligently stamp her force on the forces of her day, and add her modicum to the riches of the world's thought" (61). Cooper embodies the very argument she makes through her use of Tennyson's work, through which she buttresses her sharp criticism of the lagging institutional support of women's education in America.

Cooper opens her section "The Higher Education of Women" by critiquing the final work of Sylvain Maréchal, the eighteenth-century French political theorist and essayist, entitled *Projet d'une loi portant défense d'apprendre à lire aux femmes* and published in 1801:

The author declares that woman can use the alphabet only as Moliere predicted they would, in spelling out the verb *amo*; that they have no occasion to peruse Ovid's *Ars Amoris*, since that is already the ground and limit of their intuitive furnishing; that Madame Guion would have been far more adorable had she remained a beautiful ignoramus as nature made her; that Ruth, Naomi, the Spartan woman, the Amazons,

⁶ From Cooper's text: "For woman's cause is man's: they rise or sink / Together, dwarfed or godlike, bond or free: / For she that out of Lethe scales with man / The shining steps of nature, shares with man / His nights, his days, moves with him to one goal. / If she be small, slight-natured, miserable, / How shall men grow? / * * * Let, her make herself her own / To give or keep, to live and learn and be / All that not harms distinctive womanhood. / For woman is not undeveloped man / But diverse: could we make her as the man / Sweet love were slain; his dearest bond is this, / Not like to like, but like in difference. / Yet in the long years liker must they grow; / The man be more of woman, she of man; / He gain in sweetness and in moral height, / Nor lose the wrestling thews that throw the world; / She mental breadth, nor fail in childward care, / Nor lose the childlike in the larger mind; / Till at the last she set herself to man, / Like perfect music unto noble words" (61-62)

Penelope, Andromache, Lucretia, Joan of Arc, Petrarch's Laura, the daughters of Charlemagne, could not spell their names; while Sappho, Aspasia, Madame de Maintenon, and Madame de Stael could read altogether too well for their good; finally, that if women were once permitted to read Sophocles and work with logarithms, or to nibble at any side of the apple of knowledge, there would be an end forever to their sewing on buttons and embroidering slippers. (48-49)

She utilizes the very names and history that Maréchal uses in his series of short statements, reminiscent of sutras or Bible verses, “evidence” for his argument against the formal education of women and his attempt to build a new gospel of feminine oppression. Cooper suggests that that Maréchal’s notions are antiquated, because they come from the previous turn of the century and also because her contemporary moment marks progress that, along with the abolition of slavery and the lessons learned through Reconstruction, makes room for racial equality. But she also contradicts her claims of an error-filled past, calling the names of the ancient women with whom she feels literary and intellectual kinship. Cooper begins women’s literature, her literature, with Sappho (62), and thereby refutes any notion that intellectual development existed outside of feminine creative and scholastic production. She addresses her predominantly black female audience, the same women with whom she reads and communes through the literary club movement, and urges them to honor and find nurturing in their inherent classical roots.

The black male intellectual world only somewhat acknowledged Cooper, along with many of her intellectual feminine peers. As example, the two major leaders of black political movements at the close of the nineteenth century, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, not only rejected black women intellectuals, but also betrayed the work and careers of women who should have been considered “on their side.” Washington, for instance, systematically ruined Pauline A. Hopkins’s career at *Colored American Magazine*, perhaps because she fell into

the Du Boisian political camp and published and wrote essays far more radical than Washington could stomach.⁷ Du Bois, meanwhile, seemed to have been influenced by, quoted, and published the works of Cooper without giving her due credit or including her amongst other recognized black scholars who were members of the all-male American Negro Academy (Bailey 60; Lemert 232).⁸ Through Washington and Du Bois's actions, Hopkins and Cooper became illegible to and within the spaces that they created through their labor. These examples also lend clues into the systems and situations that drove black women writers and scholars into the margins, during their contemporary moments as well as in the longer history of their absencing from black letters. More, this is the context into which black women entered into the literary tradition—ignored, sabotaged, and yet still writing.

While these are only individual incidents, each of these particular examples betrays the context into which black women wrote, theorized, organized, and fought for racial empowerment—their own empowerment. That Cooper held high the writings of Sappho as demonstrative of the long history of women's writing into which her own writing and scholarship entered, serves now as both revolutionary and ironic. Cooper's claim of Sappho

⁷ Hopkins documents Washington's actions in a letter she wrote to William Monroe Trotter, dated April 16, 1905 and held in Fisk University's Special Collections. In the 10-page letter, Hopkins unfolds for Trotter the actions of John C. Freund, a man who begins as a patron of *Colored American Magazine* on behalf of Washington, enabling Washington to take over the magazine and fire Hopkins. Fisk also holds several of Freund's letters, through which he attempts to assert his influence upon Hopkins by chastising her for her radical political choices as editor of the magazine. Freund argues that he'd rather *Colored American Magazine* publish articles that would encourage and increase white readership through featuring black Americans' achievements, rather than criticizing white and white-influenced American politics. He cites Washington as the example that Hopkins should follow. (Hopkins 1905)

⁸ The American Negro Academy (ANA), while founded by Alexander Cromwell, had Du Bois at its helm and as president for sixteen years. Cooper was never granted membership into the ANA, although was invited to speak at one of the ANA meetings. According to Mary Helen Washington, who wrote the introduction to the Schomburg edition *A Voice from the South*: "in 1897, when leading black intellectuals such as Francis Grimke, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Alexander Crummel formed the prestigious American Negro Academy 'for the promotion of Literature, Science, and Art,' they limited their membership to 'men of African descent.' Deeply committed to the intellectual and moral goals of the ANA, Cooper reviewed the opening meeting for the February 1898 issue of *Southern Workman*, in which she noted the exclusion of women with the simple comment, 'Its membership is confined to men.' She did not comment further, even though she knew that outstanding black women intellectuals were being denied membership. Nor did she comment on the obvious exclusion of women from the masculine imagery of the Ana, which was determined to rescue and elevate 'black manhood'" (xl).

situates not only Cooper in a gendered line of classical inquiry, but argues for a reconsideration of the classical canon and the motivations that would largely absent Sappho from the canonical discourses at the end of the nineteenth century. Sappho, whose writing is preserved only in fragment form, becomes the perfect historical figure against which black American women's authors can be compared, as the archives of Cooper and Hopkins also remain largely fragmented.

Niobe Repeating follows in the footsteps of not only the authors on which it concentrates but upon the work of black feminists who formally re-introduced these authors to the intellectual sphere. In the words of Hortense J. Spillers from her essay “‘The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight’: In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers”: “the ‘romance’ of African-American fiction is a tale of origins that brings together once again children lost, stolen, or strayed from their mothers. We pursue these thematics in works by Frances E.W. Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and Charles W. Chesnutt, among others, who wrote in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century” (249). The works of the authors in this study, Hopkins among them, remind readers of the ancient roots of lost children stories—they pulled together fractured histories and fused them into literary forms that, combined, reminded their readers of their elevated, human projects. They embedded themselves in a long set of literary traditions used, already, to define human intelligence and creativity. Education in the classical texts of Greece and Rome marked an American student with economic and racial privilege, and accompanied many other qualifications for American citizenship. In writing directly into the classical tradition, these writers intentionally met the standards of citizenship and simultaneously exposed the inevitable failures of any dehumanization projects pitted against them. They could not be dehumanized because they were undeniably human. Spillers and her feminist peers gathered together the lost literary children of Black New Woman (and, surely, women writers

throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries).

Barbara Johnson, in *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (1998), defends Phillis Wheatley from the passively dismissive critiques issued by James Weldon Johnson. She argues that J.W. Johnson situates Wheatley as: “the ancestor half acknowledged, half obscured, the abjected mother of African American poetry” (95). Johnson considers the Harlem Renaissance male criticism of Wheatley as halving, or rupturing, the reputation of the “mother of African American poetry.” She accuses them of having rendered black women artists “abject,” or in the words of Julia Kristeva: “the corpse.... the equivalent of death” (26). Kristeva equates the abject with silence and a lack of expression. More importantly, however, Kristeva also likens writing as an antidote to abjectification: “writing, which allows one to recover, is equal to a resurrection” (Ibid.). Johnson’s argument, thus, holds J.W. Johnson’s feet firmly to the fire, as she accuses him of violence against Wheatley (and then offers her own writing and Wheatley’s writing as the antidote to that violence).

The connection between mothering and race movement work (in part, the work that J.W. Johnson denies exists in Wheatley’s poetry) emerges when Patricia Hill Collins situates Anna Julia Cooper at the center of her discussion of black women and the historical intersections of the domestic and the political. Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, sites Cooper as evidence for her argument for community “othermothering,” the building of familial bonds outside of genetic ties, that begins as domestic activism. I read the works of Wheatley, Ray, Hopkins, and Dunbar-Nelson through the tensions of the fractured family, and consider both the literary and political projects emerging from stories of a mother’s grief for her murdered children, incest as a result of unidentified paternity, and the act of giving birth to a “deformed” child. These women, mothers within the tradition of African

American literature and their literary progeny, are the othermothers of black feminist classicism.

II. Birth of the Black American Citizen and the Black New Woman

The transformation from “slave” into “citizen” already marked the legal rhetorical shift from “property” as defined through the black female body and “three-fifths” of a person⁹ to discussion of citizen rights and liberties as outlined in the Thirteenth (1865), Fourteenth (1868), and Fifteenth (1870) Amendments to *The Constitution* (United States 25-27). As a means of bringing the Constitution into compliance with President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, these amendments, known as the Reconstruction Amendments, entered into the legal record the emancipation of the slaves living in rebellious territories, made slavery illegal, assured due process and the potential to hold a public office for all “citizens,” and gave these new citizens the right to vote. While the constitutional changes legally guaranteed equal rights for all citizens, regardless of race or previous states of servitude, white women remained without the power to vote, and governmental office remained in the reach only of “male citizens eighteen years of age.”¹⁰ Section 1 of the Fifteenth Amendment expressly states: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on

⁹ The “Three-Fifths Compromise” was added to *The Constitution of the United States* after a long debate that began during the 1783 Continental Congress concerning the political value of the slave body (Davis and Mintz 241). The debate extended to the 1787 Congressional Convention, which ended in “impasse” concerning the issue; however, a month later, Congress agreed to amend “Article 1, Section 2” of *The Constitution*, as a “compromise” to the debate (Colaiaco 172-76). The amended text, which was eventually reversed through “Article 14,” reads: “Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons. (United States 1)” In his book, *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July*, historian James A. Colaiaco argues that the “three-fifths” language “related not to the humanity or moral worth of slaves, but to their legal status,” as “Northern delegates wanted to exclude blacks from being counted, not because they believed them to be less than human, but because they sought to weaken the power of the slaveholding South in Congress” (175). It bears pointing out that, while perhaps the motivation for this debate existed more in the North-South vie for power, it seems difficult to imagine that the humanity debate concerning enslaved men (whether or not they were “human”) had no effect on the 1783-87 debate.

¹⁰ The age of citizenship was raised from 18 to 21 by the Twenty-sixth Amendment (1971).

account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” In short and in theory: only black men were granted the full rights of citizenship. White women felt betrayed by “Garrisonian men,” the black and white abolitionists under the leadership of Frank Lloyd Garrison who were supported by suffragists throughout their anti-slavery campaigns (Marilley 68-69). While white women felt deliberately left out by the Reconstruction Amendments, the language of “citizenship” and “rights and protections” seemed to never have considered black women in any form or fashion. Reconstruction failed white and black women, while white women remained vastly more socially protected than their previously enslaved counterparts.

The newfound privileges for black citizens landed a large number of newly-free men in Congress – power positions deemed unjustly won by a large population of white people threatened by the changing face of American politics.¹¹ The transition into free American-ness, and the speed by which this transition reconstituted black personhood, led to increases in white paranoia and perceived vulnerability. Freedom did not relieve the terror of slavery, but rather shifted the administration of terror out of the hands of slave owners and overseers and into the hands of those more immediately threatened by the black underclass—those whites whose social standings were no longer protected from class definitions that would blur along racial lines. In answer to Reconstruction emerged the development of Jim Crow laws, black codes established at a state level to control marriage and education, which provided new definitions of criminality that applied to black people, and reversed the rights given to black male American citizens.

White lawmakers implemented Jim Crow, beginning in 1876, in an attempt to return

¹¹ The film, “The Birth of a Nation,” contains a scene of “The riot in the Master’s Hall,” “AN HISTORICAL FACSIMILE [sic] of the State House of Representatives of South Carolina as it was in 1870” depicting “The negro party in control in the State House of Representatives, 101 blacks against 23 whites, session of 1871.” During the scene, black actors laze about the Hall, drink alcohol, eat meat with their hands, and take off their shoes, while white actors in blackface stand up and incite a riot. This *unruly* congress enacts a law in which “all whites must salute negro officers on the street.” This fictional depiction of Reconstruction, demonstrates the racial attitudes concerning black rule during Reconstruction.

white citizens to the legal standing to which they'd grown accustomed during slave times—stripping black men of their newly-designated rights to public office and protection by and from local government. Jim Crow laws attempted to reassert the social delineations previously determined by slave law. While certainly it remained illegal to cross racial lines sexually,¹² Jim Crow provided legally supported physical boundaries intended to police social interaction. This legally sanctioned social regulation also provided the backdrop and justification for a rise in racial violence by white mobs as the nineteenth century came to a close. New American “citizens” swung from trees, tortured, dismembered, burned, often sharing the horrifying space with black women and children who remained unrecognized by the United States Constitution.¹³ The historical narrative concerning “lynching in America” followed the precedent created through *The Constitution*: Lynching became known as a condition of and threat to black manhood, with the instances of violence against women, while contemporarily reported, falling out of the larger narrative.

Yet among the ebb and flow of violence against black persons, the nineteenth century also marked extraordinary change and progress.¹⁴ Between 1837 and the close of the century, and with the help of white patrons, 74 schools that are now known as part of the Historically Black College and University (HBCU) system were established expressly for the education of

¹² State anti-miscegenation laws remained on the books and in effect in many American states until 1967 when the Supreme Court judged them unconstitutional in *Loving v. Virginia*. For more about this case, see: *Loving V. Virginia in a Post-Racial World: Rethinking Race, Sex, and Marriage*, edited by Rose Cuison Villazor and Kevin Noble Maillard; and *Loving V. Virginia: Lifting the Ban Against Interracial Marriage* by Susan Dudley Gold.

¹³ For in depth accounts of the lynching of women, see Kerry Segrave's *Lynchings of Women in the United States: The Recorded Cases, 1851-1946* (2010) and Crystal Nicole Feimster's *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (2009).

¹⁴ In this, “progress” means shifts in the conditions and efforts of black persons along the Western/American value system of success, achievement, and criteria for citizenship.

black people. Two of these schools were for women¹⁵ and seven of them were established before Emancipation.¹⁶ Jim Crow had another, less traumatic side, as well. Because of racial separation, black people relied upon one another to provide goods and services within racial ranks. Black businesses were born and thrived. Black churches extended and expanded the histories of antebellum slave meetings as the centers of both spiritual and political gathering. All-black towns were established throughout the South, providing safer and more economically sound environments for recently freed slaves and their progeny. It comes as no surprise that standing at the close of a tumultuous century, black women would examine the ways that their and black men's identities had been radically transformed.

III. Ovidian Rebirth and Transformation of the "Tragic Mulatta"

Much like their great granddaughters – the late twentieth-century black women writers who, in response to marginalization by the Feminist and the Black Power movements, reconsidered and rewrote the slave narrative into stories of female empowerment – Black New Women rewrote "mulatta" narratives popularized by nineteenth century American romance and challenged not only the racial but also gender implications of fictional depictions of the black feminine. They wrote against the narratives of "True Womanhood," standards that black women

¹⁵ Spellman College in Atlanta, GA was founded as Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary in 1881; St. Phillips College in San Antonio, TX was founded as St. Philip's Sewing Class for Girls in 1898 (Jackson and Nunn 114-15, Thurston 7).

¹⁶ I did not count Harris-Stowe in my number (7), above, because it did not establish a school for blacks until 1890, but I included it in the following list for historical accuracy: Cheyney University of Pennsylvania in Cheyney, PA was founded as the Institute for Colored Youth in 1837; University of the District of Columbia, in Washington, DC was founded as the Milner Normal School in 1851; Lincoln University in Chester County, PA was founded as the Ashmun Institute in 1854; Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, OH was founded in 1856; Harris-Stowe State University in St. Louis, MO was founded as the St. Louis Normal School in 1857 for whites and then established as the Stowe Teachers College in 1890 for blacks; LeMoyne-Owen College in Memphis, TN was founded as the LeMoyne Normal and Commercial School in 1862; Virginia Union University in Richmond Virginia was founded as Wayland Seminary in 1864; Richmond Institute in Richmond Virginia was founded in 1865 (Virginia Union University and Richmond Institute merged in 1889 (Jackson and Nunn 73-85).

could never meet, and those through which romantic depictions of black women emerged as nearly white or almost-not-black – the “mulatta,” “quadroon,” and “octoroon.” In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby highlights “the cult of True Womanhood” as an ideology functioning, more than anything, to police women’s reproduction (24). For black women, True Womanhood functioned as an extension of the policing of black women’s bodies during slavery—the bodies that bore and defined the enslaved black body. Later nineteenth-century women writers, both black and white, took into consideration how this ideology played out through a subject’s potential shift in the cult of True Womanhood—as a woman’s identity transforms from white to black or remains hidden to those around her. In her essay “Adding Color and Contour to Early American Self - Portraits: Autobiographical Writings of Afro - American Women,” print culture scholar Frances Smith Foster counts the “tragic mulatto” as the most common depiction of black women in nineteenth century fiction:

The earliest and most pervasive image of the female protagonist in Afro-American literature is that of the tragic mulatto, the epitome of True Womanhood. Not only is she pious and pure, but she is also beautiful and more refined than most white women. The most heart-rending passages in the slave narratives concern the alabaster-skinned concubine of “unparalleled beauty” whose natural grace and refinement have only hastened her tragic fate. In the early novels, these gentle creatures are models of domesticity and refinement, winning the devotion and gratitude of the white lovers if not the sanctity of marriage of which they yearn. (Foster 1 34)

The literary “tragic mulatta” is more of a True Woman than her literary or historic white sister, her tragic fate made more so because she fulfills the expectations of gentility, “domesticity,” and “refinement.” As Jennifer Brody reminds us in *Impossible Purities*, after the Civil War, the newly-legible black women heroines find their ways out of the helpful and rescuing hands of

white European men who legitimize them through marriage and consensual sexual relationships, and become the ruined, tragic figures stereotypically associated with the passing genre.

Upon the explosion of strict and institutional racial roles of slavery, the heightened paranoia and fear of miscegenation¹⁷ transforms the “mulatta” into the “tragic mulatta,” as her tainted blood threatens the once-static definitions and understandings of whiteness in America. Rewriting this tragedy, Black New Women interrogated the instabilities of identity by concentrating on the potential for “mulatta” illegibility. They wrote “mulatta” characters that choose to pass or did not know of their black genealogies and thereby articulated through a type of racial disappearance, their own erasure from the black movement agenda. Harnessing a variety of literary conventions and mores, they converted the inevitable “tragic” sentimental endings of their heroines into successful black uplift, arguing for the inextricability of black women from the success of the late nineteenth-century Race Movement. Through their creative production they argued for their own value and involvement in the Movement.

For black women authors, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* provided a literary palette from which their stories could be reconsidered as a part of the American intellectual and artistic landscape. Ovid rewrote Vergil, amongst others, in his collection of tales explaining the origins of the world through the founding and history of Rome. However, *Metamorphoses* is more than a simple rewriting of previously written or orally circulated stories; instead, it demonstrates the evolutions of the mythologies, themes, and concerns of Ovid as a Roman citizen one generation after Vergil. Having already written the first half of the *Heroides*, the *Amores*, and a volume concerning women’s cosmetics by the time he wrote *Metamorphoses*, Ovid had already demonstrated his

¹⁷ A sharp increase in lynching and racial cleansing marks the increased racial tension in the late nineteenth century, and particularly around the turn of the century. The anti-lynching works by Ida B. Wells parallels Hopkins and Dunbar-Nelson. For additional discussion of Wells’s anti-lynching activism and writing, see *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (2006) by Jacqueline Goldsby.

preoccupation with the voices and stories of women not yet considered citizens by Rome.¹⁸ Ovid explores the idea of “metamorphoses” not only as the changes to the universe that occur as gods and men come into being, but also stories of human corporeal change—characters’ bodies shift in form or function as a result of punishment by angered gods, reward for religious piety, unusual happenstance, or the power of their own emotions. People change, or are changed into plants, earth formations, animals, and mythic beings, statues and trees become animate and give birth to human beings, thus collapsing the distinction between the sentient and inanimate. Ovid’s exploration of transformation reflects the ways that stories mutate to accommodate the new material circumstances of their storytellers.

Ovid’s poetry betrays his preoccupation with oral performance as the primary form for disseminating his work. Ovid’s concerns with the poetry out of his hands and onto the written pages held by audience, the shift from authorial control to not only audience reception but also interpretation, provided a model for black women’s investigations of oral versus written literature. As an extension of Ovid’s concern about the publishing of his poetry in written form, as opposed to the lost practice of verbal repetition by audiences, often en masse, he grappled with the fragility of his work and the tension born through this transformed publication (Enterline 47-49). In *The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare*, classical literary theorist Lynn E. Enterline argues that Ovid demonstrates his own anxiety concerning the potential for his lost authorial voice (42). She further claims that:

Ovid’s recurrent fantasy about a voice that fails in its purpose may well mark something of such diminished expectations for rhetorical performance. In such political circumstances as those surrounding the shift toward declamation as a form of display

¹⁸ While I wish to poke at Ovidian gender conventions, certainly, I’m not trying to argue that Ovid was making a case for female citizenship. I do, however, believe that his own preoccupations with lineages, birth, and rebirth—with the history of Rome and the birth of the Roman Empire under his own emperor, Augustus—made (at least organic) room for wider gender considerations. I will explore this in more detail later in the Introduction.

under the principate, Ovid's exaggerated tropes of orality – that is, the power of Orpheus's voice to move even stones – as well as his attendant fascination with the many unexpected ways a voice can fail could not help but underline oratory's decline in public life. (48)

Thus, in the same way that Ovid marks his text with the shift from public rhetorical performance, Black New Women also highlighted the tension between the oral traditions in the African American community and the growing canon of black literature. Additionally, and in works like Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) and Sutton E. Grigg's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), black American authors wrote grand rhetorical speeches and argued for the value of political speech as it figured in the Race Movement.

As perhaps a primitive version of male-written feminism, and at least a demonstration of new Roman poetics, many of Ovid's women characters narrate their own stories and verbally challenge the men who wronged them. Ovid writes the words that women speak in *Metamorphoses*, and some of those characters articulate desires and protests absent from their previous incarnations in Greek and Roman literature. In other words, in Ovid's poetry, the women get to speak and they say things that women are not supposed to say: that they sexually desire their father, that they value themselves because of their sexuality, that they resent the men who have undervalued them, that they have stories that are their own and can serve as warning to the women to whom they are relaying their stories. Black women wrote in this Ovidian tradition—bringing voice and, therefore, subjectivity to types of women characters that had previously been silent and unable to talk back to those who did them wrong.

As the African American literary canon and tradition continued to emerge, even towards the end of the nineteenth century, oral tradition played an important part within the works of its authors. Black women wrote about silence, voice, and performance. In effect, the women at the

center of this study joined their male peers to transform black literature from a largely oral tradition to a written one. Black New Women simultaneously joined and extended a long history of creative linguistic production while helping to create what we now know as “African American literature,” turning to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to do it.

IV. Black Classicist Lineage and the Emergence of *Classica Africana*

My study of black women rewriting Ovid extends the emerging, but still understudied area, “black classicism.” The scholarly area known as black classicism, while rooted in the end of the eighteenth century, has only recently gained attention within the academy, at large. Black classicism is the study of black scholars and writers deliberately engaged in the elaboration of the classical tradition as well as the creative and intellectual production by those scholars and writers. The contemporary area of study has been credited to the conversations begun by Frank Snowden and Martin Bernal. Snowden (1911-1970) spent the bulk of his career as a professor of classics at Howard University and published *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (1970) and *Before Colour Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* (1983). *Blacks in Antiquity* was the first book to consider North African potential influence on Greece and Rome and to clarify notions of race in antiquity. Snowden presented Grecian art, literature, and architecture as evidence of Greco-Roman interaction with “Ethiopians”—the moniker given all dark-skinned, continental Africans with whom the Greeks came in contact – and marked the emergence and symbolism of race in Greece and Rome. Snowden’s study determines that “race,” the construction of difference as we currently know it and as it was developed through European colonialism beginning in the sixteenth century, did not exist in antiquity. He concluded that blackness signified a level of inferiority to the citizens of both Greece and Rome, but attributed

that categorization to overall sentiments that equate social superiority with full citizenship within each culture. To be Greek or to be Roman meant to be superior. Thus, blackness denoted only that one was not Greek or Roman, and therefore belied inevitable inferiority based in nationality, not *because* of race or color. Instead, blackness simply identified a particular type of foreignness.

Snowden argued that Ethiopians faced no greater prejudice than any other non-Greeks or non-Romans, and as an example highlighted the Greek description of Germanic tribes as “barbarians.” Knowing his European and American audiences, he also made clear that blackness and slavery were not equated in European antiquity. The argument continued in *Before Colour Prejudice*, as Snowden contended that the majority of Africans in ancient Greece and Rome hailed from ruling and military classes and that most of the slaves in Greece and Rome came from Greek, Roman, or other European spaces and were read as “white” in comparison to Ethiopians. His conclusions about slavery can be applied as a critique of American Antebellum use of the classics, such as Thomas Jefferson’s use of Aristotle, to justify Atlantic slavery. Snowden makes clear that class stigma attached to color emerged much later in European history. While his work remains groundbreaking, particularly because at the time that he wrote, Africa, in any form, was largely absent from the study of Greek and Roman literature, art, and architecture, Snowden’s work largely aligned with the Eurocentric trends in classical studies. At the heart of his scholarship, Greece and Rome exist as the beginning of the classical tradition. Martin Bernal (1937-2013), on the other hand and with great controversy, tried to shift this center from Europe to Africa.

Bernal’s *Black Athena* trilogy (1987, 1991, 2006) shook the philology community, and inspired a remarkable amount of resistance to his claims by fellow classicists. A variety of people joined together to dispute his contention that Greek and Roman cultural production had

roots in Africa. In what has commonly been referred to as the “*Black Athena* controversy,” the ostensible argument about rigor and scholastic validity also exposed the racism plaguing classical studies. Upon publishing his first volume of *Black Athena* in 1987, Bernal came under rapid fire from a number of classical scholars, most notably Mary Lefkowitz whose critique of Bernal was put side-by-side with Bernal’s work in the *New York Review of Books*, bringing the controversy out of the cloister of the academy and into public view (Griffin). Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers edited a volume in response to Bernal’s work entitled *Black Athena Revisited* in 1996. Lefkowitz and Rogers’s volume of 20 essays, including one written by Snowden, responded to Bernal’s central claim that Greece was colonized by Egyptians and Phoenicians and to his evidence that classical literature was, therefore, largely African derived. Afrocentrist scholars, long stereotyped within the academy as producing work without rigor and which promote false premises and conclusions, latched onto Bernal’s work as proof that Africa was the center of civilization and proof of European conspiracies that deny Africa’s historical provenance.

Afrocentrists who extended a narrative of African superiority, beginning at least during American slavery with stories of black Americans as progeny of African royalty and, therefore, unjustly enslaved, hurt Bernal’s case, relegating his scholarship to the world of “conspiracy theory” and easily disproven supplemental history. I do not land on any side of this controversy, feeling that I still have a lot to learn about the entire unfolding of the controversy. In the words of one of the controversy’s leading historians, Ancient Near Eastern studies scholar Jacques Berlinerblau, who wrote *Heresy in the University: The Black Athena Controversy and the Responsibilities of American Intellectuals*: “at least a decade would be required to explore the *Black Athena* Controversy thoroughly” (xi). Rather, I acknowledge this as an example of the

stakes illuminated by and the tensions that rise out of this history of black classicism, writ large. There was very little initial attempt to recover Bernal's work—those moves came later in the controversy, years after the initial volume and the subsequent attacks. I believe that the reaction to Bernal, as well as the lack of support for his thesis, betrays the historical insularity and the defensiveness of the classicist world. In short: folks weren't ready for the conversation that Bernal attempted to start. More than that, it became clear how few people participated in and embraced the project of black classicism at all. The classicist academic world remained stubbornly distanced from conversations exploring the relationships between African peoples and the origins of Greco-Roman classics. Moreover, the controversy surrounding Bernal's work woke up the disparate worlds of classics and black studies to the absence of Africa and its diaspora from classicist conversations. I feel safe in claiming that Bernal's work opened the door for what we now call "black classicism," and the now-growing number of scholars and studies that make claims of black creative production and scholarship in the classical tradition.

In 1996, Michele Valerie Ronnick¹⁹ coined the category *Classica Africana*, introducing the term at the American Philological Association's 1996 annual meeting and making an argument for it as a sub-set of classical study. Soon after the APA meeting, Ronnick reported a list of ten historic classicists²⁰ in a pamphlet supported by a grant awarded by the National Committee for Greek and Latin and entitled "Classica Africana: The Influence of Classical Studies on People of African Descent" (1998). She also published her initial work in print and online through the Committee for the Promotion of Latin and the Classical Association of the

¹⁹ Ronnick's in depth study of William Sanders Scarborough, who Ronnick calls "the first professional black classicist," the publication of Scarborough's *Autobiography*, along with her extensive archival work, places Ronnick at the front of the line in historical research on black classicism.

²⁰ Ronnick confirmed the date of publication, December 1998, and the funding source via an email addressed to me on February 28, 2014. See Chart #1 for the names originally included in Ronnick's pamphlet.

Middle West and South.²¹ Ronnick intended the pamphlet to not only educate those already producing classicist scholarship, but also as a means of inspiring new studies that would move past the *Black Athena* controversy:

It is time for scholars and educators to look beyond the Martin Bernal - Mary Lefkowitz debate, and turn toward other types of research. One of these new approaches is *Classica Africana*, a name patterned upon Meyer Reinhold's pioneering book *Classica Americana* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), which examined the impact of classics upon eighteenth and nineteenth-century America. The new subfield sharpens the wide view taken by Reinhold concerning the influence of the Greco-Roman heritage in America, and looks at the undeniable impact, both positive and negative, that this heritage has had upon people of African descent, not only in America but also in the Western World (1). The past 400-500 years offer us many noteworthy examples of people of African descent who used their knowledge of classical studies in their creative and/or professional lives. This *terra incognita* of intellectual inquiry is worthy of attention today and tomorrow. (Ronnick, "Classica Africana")

Without disparaging the absence of non-whites in Reinhold's *Classica Americana*, Ronnick situates her terminology and research within the legacy of particularly American classicism. *Classica Americana*,²² which Ronnick calls a "wide" study, charted the influence of Greco-Roman classics on American society, beginning with the Founding Fathers and ending in 1970.

²¹ In 1999 it was also reprinted twice: as "Serious African-American Study Transcends Bernal-Lefkowitz Dispute" in the *American Classical League Newsletter* and in *New England Classical Journal*.

²² *Classica Americana* has subsequently been extended by several works, including but not limited to Carl J. Richards's *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (1995), David J. Bederman's *The Classical Foundations of the American Constitution: Prevailing Wisdom* (2008), and Catherine Winterer's *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910* (2004) and *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900* (2009). Richards and Bederman touch upon race when evaluating Thomas Jefferson's reliance upon Greek discussions of slavery to justify his own stance on the American chattel system. On the other hand, Winterer has not only included significant work on Wheatley, but has discussed at greater length the intersection of classics and race in America in both of her volumes.

Reinhold's work expands the very definition of "classicism," as it suggests that classicism exists not only outside of the confines of institutional scholarship, but also in the deliberate cultural interventions buttressed by classical texts and philosophies. Reinhold's study suggests that legal and philosophical turns in American history were more than influenced by classical philosophy, but were instead applications of those philosophies—echoing my own example of Jefferson's use of Aristotle. My study argues that the application of classical forms, such as the rewriting of classical texts, serves as literary interventions by black women in the long nineteenth century. These deliberately classicist rewriting practices pair with cultural and political criticism; thus, the literary projects of Black New Women always engaged in, at least, the double-work of creative and critical production. Reinhold's work, in 1987, the first study of its kind, reconsidered the classicist tradition in American history and made way for additional subsets, including Ronnick's *Classica Africana* and the still-growing field of feminist classicism.²³

Ronnick's pamphlet confronts those who would see black classicism only within the framework of Afrocentrism and "debunked" scholarship, and encourages naysayers to consider a long history of black students and scholars dedicated to classical languages and literature. She contends that black figures factor into the "heritage" of classical scholarship, a move previously evidenced by the fictional works of black women rewriting Ovid and works by other classical authors, projects largely unrecognized by her 1990s classicist audience. Four of the classicists she listed in the pamphlet were women, although additional names and writings have since come to light. Her inclusion of Zora Neale Hurston, because Hurston's "book *Dust Tracks on the*

²³ See *The Tears of Narcissus: Melancholia and Masculinity in Early Modern Writing* (1995) and *Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare* (2000) by Lynn Enterline; *Abandoned Women: Rewriting the Classics in Dante, Boccaccio, & Chaucer* (2004) by Suzanne C. Hagedorn; *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900* (2009) by Caroline Winterer; *Classics and Feminism: Gendering Classicism: The Ancient World in Twentieth-Century Women's Historical Fiction* (1997) by Ruth Hoberman; *Gendering the Classics* (1997) by Barbara F. McManus; *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (1993) edited by Nancy S. Rabinowitz and Amy Ellen Richlin; *Feminist Interpretations of Plato* (1994) by Nancy Tuana.

Road, described how she first drew attention to herself in grade school by reading the story of Pluto and Persephone aloud with zest and accuracy,” may seem a bit tenuous compared with Pauline Hopkins’s rewriting of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* “Book X,” or Anna Julia Cooper’s study and teaching of both Greek and Latin, as well as Cooper’s work as a literary critic who began women’s writing with Sappho. In 1999, Neal Lester made a case for the influence of Greco-Roman rhetoric on the African American oral tradition in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Still, Ronnick’s pamphlet was a groundbreaking political move—insisting that the history of classicism in America was not only more varied by race, but also by gender, and that the *Black Athena* controversy left the field of *Classica Africana* as still uncharted territory.²⁴

Chart #1	
Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Mid-Twentieth Century Black Classicists	
Phillis Wheatley* (c. 1753-1784)	Early American poet, learned Latin, and translated portions of the poet Ovid.
Sarah Jane Woodson Early* (1825-1907)	One of the first women of African descent to serve on a college faculty, and was made preceptress of English and Latin at Wilberforce University in 1865.
Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912)	Born in St. Thomas, VI, to free Igbo parents, he taught classics at Liberia College.
William Henry Croghan (1841-1931)	Born in St. Martin and emigrated to Massachusetts at age 14. First person to earn degree of Doctor of Letters from Atlanta University in Latin.
Richard Theodore Greener (1844-1932)	Attended Oberlin and was the first African American to graduate from Harvard (1870) with honors and serve as a dean of Harvard Law School (1878-80). Professor of philosophy and law. First African American to be elected to the American Philological Association (1875).
Frazelia Campbell (1849-1930)	Taught Latin, Spanish, and German at the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia and Allen University in Columbia, S.C.
James Monroe Gregory (1849-1915)	Professor of Latin at Howard University and published a biography and criticism of Frederick Douglass as an orator (1893).
Wiley Lane (1852-1885)	Phi Beta Kappa graduate from Amherst College (1879) Professor of Greek Language and Literature at Howard University.

²⁴ For the sake of my argument, I will only discuss Scarborough and Cooper. Please see “Chart #1” for a Ronnick-style and -adapted listing of those black authors and figures I identify as classicists.

H. Cordelia Ray (1852?-1916)	Poet who rewrote Ovid and Wheatley's <i>Niobe</i> as well as several other classically themed poems in her volumes, <i>Sonnets</i> and <i>Poems</i> , published in 1893 and 1910, respectively.
William Sanders Scarborough* (1852-1926)	America's first professional classicist of African descent. His <i>First Lessons in Greek</i> was published in 1881.
Charles W. Chesnutt* (1858-1932)	Before his career as a novelist and businessman, taught himself to read Latin. His daughter, Helen M. Chesnutt, was a Latin teacher in Cleveland, Ohio.
Pauline E. Hopkins (1859-1930)	Founding member of Boston Literary and Historical Association (1901); editor of <i>Colored American Magazine</i> (1900-1904); professional orator; fiction writer and essayist. Her serial novel, <i>Of One Blood</i> , is a rewriting of Ovid's <i>Metamorphoses</i> , "Book X."
Daniel Barclay Williams (1861/2-?)	First instructor of Greek and Latin at the Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute (1884-95).
John Wesley Gilbert (1864-1923)	Archeologist who studied Greek literature and archeology in Athens at the American School (1890-91). Helped excavate Eretria and drew the first map of Ancient Eretria.
Reuben Shannon Lovinggood (1864-1916)	Served as chair of the Greek and Latin department at Wiley College in Marshall, TX, and a leader in the Methodist Episcopal Church.
Lewis Baxter Moore (1866-1928)	First African American to earn his Doctor of Philosophy degree from the University of Pennsylvania. Wrote his classics dissertation entitled "The Stage in Sophocles' Plays." Taught Latin, pedagogy, psychology, philosophy and education at Howard University; served for many years as the Dean of Howard's Teachers' College.
W. E. B. Du Bois* (1868-1963)	Taught Cicero's <i>Pro Archia</i> to students in rural Tennessee in 1886, and served as chair of the classics department at Wilberforce University from 1894 to 1896.
George Morton Lightfoot (1868-1947)	Professor of Latin at Howard University. He earned an M.A. in History from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. (1922) where he wrote his thesis entitled "The Question of the Origin of Roman Satire." Founder of Howard's Classical Club, he set up a special program for Vergil's 2000th birthday in 1930.
Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935)	Taught rhetoric and classics in translation to school children in Washington, D.C., Brooklyn, N.Y., and Wilmington, D.E. Her unpublished novella, <i>A Modern Undine</i> , rewrites the Ovid's stories of Galatea and Scylla.
Helen Maria Chesnutt (1880-1969)	Daughter of Charles Chesnutt. Earned M.A. in Latin from Columbia University (1925). Taught Latin at Central High School in Cleveland, OH where she met and taught Langston Hughes. Co-authored Latin textbook, <i>The Road to Latin</i> (1932).
Julian Abele (1881-1950)	One of the chief architects of the neoclassical Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Philadelphia Free Library.

Sarah "Sadie" Delany* (1889-1999)	Studied Greek at Saint Augustine's School in North Carolina with Professor Charles Boyer.
Augusta Savage (1892-1962)	American sculptor whose <i>The Amazon</i> (1930) depicts her interpretation of Dahomean Amazon and <i>Terpsichore at Rest</i> (or <i>Reclining Figure</i>) (1929) refers to one of the nine Greek muses. (See Leininger-Miller)
Paul Robeson* (1898-1976)	Tutored the son of his football coach at Rutgers, G. Foster Sanford Jr., in Latin and set the stage for Sanford's excellent record in Latin at the University of Pennsylvania.
Aaron Douglas (1899-1979)	American painter and art professor who established Fisk University's art department in 1939. During the 1930s, he painted the Cravath Library/Hall murals that depicted African-American history, utilizing Egyptian and Greek images, linking the New World history to an ancient past.
Cyril Lionel Robert James (1901-1989)	Afro-Trinidadian political theorist, philosopher, essayist, scholar. Compared the societies of Trinidad and Athens in "Every Cook Can Govern: A Study of Democracy in Ancient Greece" (1956), "The Artist in the Caribbean" (1959), and <i>Beyond a Boundary</i> (1963). (See Greenwood.)
Langston Hughes* (1902-1967)	An American poet, says that he was inspired by his high school Latin teacher.
Countee Cullen* (1903-1946)	American poet, received special honors in Latin at New York City's DeWitt Clinton High School in 1922.
Zora Neale Hurston* (1903-1960)	In her book <i>Dust Tracks on the Road</i> , described how she first drew attention to herself in grade school by reading the story of Pluto and Persephone aloud with zest and accuracy.
Romare Bearden (1911-1988)	American artist known for collage and painting. His 1977 collection, <i>A Black Odyssey</i> , depicted the intersection between Homeric mythological images and themes and black American cultural production.
Ralph Ellison (1914-1994)	Harlem Renaissance fiction writer who rewrote Homer's <i>Odyssey</i> as his novel <i>Invisible Man</i> (1947). (See Rankine.)
James Baldwin (1924-1987)	Mentee of Countee Cullen, self-educated in classics, expert in black evangelical rhetoric. His character Rufus from the novel, <i>Another Country</i> , is a rewriting of Sophocles's Ajax.
*As originally published in Ronnick's 1998 <i>Classica Africana pamphlet</i> .	

There is a myriad of definitions of the word "classical." Modern classical studies include ancient art, architecture, and philology. Roman art scholar Jaś Elsner defines "Classicism" [sic.] as "the emulation of any earlier set of visual styles, forms, or iconographies, which in the very fact of their being borrowed are established as in some sense canonical (or classical)" (271). For Elsner, that which is classic or holds the attentions of scholars of classicism is canonical, by default. Elsner discusses this definition while arguing whether ancient Roman art can be

considered classical within the confines of a more typical Hellenistic model. From his definition and as known by the Romans, Greek art was the “classical” art from which Roman work derived. However, and much more to his point, Roman art has now entered into the very same canonical space as Greek art, and therefore lives safely in the category “classical.” He relies heavily on the etymology of “classical,” which comes from the Latin word “classis,” a nautical term identifying the finest ships in a fleet (Arciszewska 2). Architectural classicist Barbara Arciszewska also argues that “classical” always denotes quality and ranking, and therefore always worthy of “emulation” (Ibid.). Rhetorician Mark Kaunisto explores the uses and dynamic definitions of “classical” and “classic,” landing on the “fundamental” issue of both value and canon. Kaunisto argues that “the greatness of canonical works is self-explanatory” (70), but quickly reminds his readers that “[w]hat exactly can be regarded as belonging to a canon, however, is an issue where subjective viewpoints again enter the scene, and disputes on the matter are highly likely in the absence of an absolute authority” (71).

I must attend to Elsner’s capitalizing of the term, “Classicism,” and particularly the relationship between this form and what we consider the “canon.” It would have made far greater sense to me that Elsner also capitalize Canon, although his use of Classical and its inextricability from canon reflects not only some of the political valences unearthed by the “*Black Athena* controversy” and the preciousness often associated with classical areas of study. Early in my work on this project, I, too, relied on a capital C. One of my advisors challenged me to consider the implications of my spelling—to consider the ways that the Classical may work against my own dedication to challenging Canon and the politics that work against authors marginalized because of gender, race, sexuality, or any other reason of so-called non-normativity. The hard work of black feminist scholars in the 1970s through 90s brought to the academic fore

the long history of black women's marginalization in political, historical, academic, and popular spaces. My study takes into account those arguments as they applied to the places of Phillis Wheatley and H. Cordelia Ray within the world of classicism. Throughout my analysis, I consider the "cultural capital"²⁵ that these authors acquired through their reading and rewriting of the classical canon.

The original black woman classicist, Wheatley, is acknowledged within the classicist tradition by William W. Cook and James Tatum in their *African American Writers and Classical Tradition* and Patrice D. Rankine in *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature* (85-85), the former dedicating an entire chapter to the eighteenth-century enslaved poet. My discussion of Wheatley draws heavily upon Cook and Tatum's claim that by Wheatley, the Ovidian figure Niobe, "has been set up as a more sympathetic figure" although she "has asked for it [punishment by Latona]" (44, 45). They highlight the fact that Wheatley's poem ends not in Niobe's transformation into a forever-weeping boulder, as in Ovid, but, rather, while Niobe still suffers her punishment in her human form. They contrast Wheatley's rewriting of *Metamorphoses* with Frederick Douglass's self-taught proficiency in classical rhetoric, a tension through which they assert the "point, that it would be a mistake to think there was some single notion of Greco-Roman classics informing African American writers" (3). Through these examples, Cook and Tatum argue that African American engagement with the classics comes in a variety of forms, from the home schooling of Wheatley to Douglass's self-directed education. Paired with Cook and Tatum's Wheatley discussion, this study also rehearses Rankine's claim that the "classical authors who adapted Homer's characters were writing under one regime or other" (38). Thus, Ovid, writing under and criticizing Augustus' rule, logically appeals to black

²⁵ By the use of "cultural capital," I gesture towards John Guillory's discussion of canon formation and class in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*.

women contemplating the totalizing effects of slavery and its aftermath. Wheatley rewrites Ovid who rewrites Vergil who rewrites Homer, the process through which the Niobe myth sustains subtle, but important, alterations, betraying, for purposes of my study, the slave system under which Wheatley lived and wrote.

Chapters 1 and 2 trace the emergence of Phillis Wheatley, and her direct connection to the work of Black New Woman poet, H. Cordelia Ray. In the first chapter, I argue that Wheatley's poem, "Niobe in Distress," rewrites Ovid's story from Book IV and highlights not only Niobe's hubris but also her position as a mother with no control over the fates of her children. I read Wheatley's "Niobe" as a meditation upon slave motherhood, and also a re-articulation of Ovid's own concerns with authorial control. Wheatley's poem demonstrates the practice of rewriting in the classical tradition and challenges definitions that would deny her literary production as "classicism."

The second chapter focuses on Wheatley's direct poetic progeny, Ray, who rewrites Ovid and also rewrites and writes to Wheatley. A participant in the Women's Club Movement, along with Cooper, Hopkins, and Dunbar-Nelson, Ray wrote poetry that challenged the limits of form that mirrored her criticism of race-delineated boundaries in her contemporary America. Ray writes her own "Niobe" poem, while not in the style of Wheatley, certainly as an extension of Wheatley's work. Extending the final moment in Wheatley's "Niobe in Distress," the sound of Niobe's cries echoing in the surrounding hills, Ray employs the echo in both form and theme in two of her poems. I study Wheatley and Ray in the tradition of self-described "critical race feminist"²⁶ classicist, Shelley P. Haley. Haley has been publishing articles on black feminist classicism since the early 1990s; and she read Euripides' "Medea" and Morrison's *Beloved*

²⁶ From Haley's paper entitled "Re-presenting Reality: Provincial Women as Tools of Roman Social Reproduction," given at the Annual Meeting of The Women's Classical Caucus, in Chicago, Illinois, "Provincial Women in the Roman Imagination" (January 2014).

together in 1995,²⁷ long before the bulk of African Americanists felt comfortable acknowledging Morrison's classicist underpinnings.

Tracey L. Walters deliberately took up Haley's project with her 2007 *African American Literature and the Classicist Tradition: Black Women Writers from Wheatley to Morrison*. Concentrating mostly on twentieth century writers Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison, and Rita Dove, Walters' study argues that the feminine black classical project begins with Phillis Wheatley and moves through the nineteenth century before reaching the more contemporary works upon which the volume concentrates. My project most closely aligns with those of Haley and Walters, as I discuss in my first three chapters authors Walters touches upon in her second chapter: Wheatley, Ray, and Hopkins. *Niobe Repeating* builds upon Walters's argument concerning the origins of the tradition of black women writing to and rewriting classical works and looks closely at the works of each of these authors, with the addition of Alice Dunbar-Nelson, as rewritings of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This project also extends Walters's inaugural and solitary study of black women classicists and her claim that for nineteenth century black women writers, the classics created "a liberating space to engage readers in a feminist critique of the misrepresentation, silencing, and subjugation of black women both in literature and society" (51).

V. American Classicist or Traces of Classical Education in America?

Much of the creative production of the nineteenth century bears traces of classical forms and allusions as an extension of formal educational practices and the American nation-building

²⁷ "Self-Definition, Community, and Resistance: Euripides' *Medea* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," published in *Thamyris: Mythmaking from Past to Present*.

project²⁸ that was largely indebted to classical philosophical and political frameworks. A carryover from the British education system, most formally educated persons during the colonial period in America studied Latin, rhetoric, and Greek literature at least in translation. In *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900*, Catherine Winterer argues that “American neoclassicism” was at its height between 1800 and 1830, although the term was not coined until the late nineteenth century. “American neoclassicism should be seen not just as an expression of early nationalism but more broadly as a subset of the transatlantic conversation about taste and gentility, a dialogue in which women became active participants” (103). The “gentleman,” the “lady,” the formally educated person was versed in at least classical works by Homer and Vergil in translation. She or he practiced classical rhetorical argument. The most highly educated would also have learned Latin and possibly Greek, reading and orally performing the texts in their original languages as well as practicing writing their own philosophies and stories in the manner of the Latin ancients. Carl J. Richards, in *The Golden Age of the Classics in America: Greece, Rome, and the Antebellum United States*, argues that Antebellum America did more than educate their genteel in classical literature and philosophy. Instead, it was during this time that the classics moved into a more popular cultural position, making their way into the parlor, conversations at the club, and into the working-class classroom:

The expansion of classical interest beyond ancient political history and theory, the great preoccupations of the founders’ age, to include classical mythology, as found in Greek

²⁸ In her *Afro-Greeks: Dialogues Between Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the Twentieth Century* (2010), classicist scholar Emily Greenwood proposes “that dialogues between Anglophone Caribbean literature and Classics [sic] reveal a disarming minority position in which Greece and Rome survive because of their distance from a European classical ideal” (19). She makes a compelling argument that Greco-Roman literature provided for Caribbean writers such as C.L.R. James, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite a counter narrative to the “macro-Cosmopolitan model of empire” (Ibid.), weighing the size and mobility of the ancient states. “Niobe Repeating” also takes up the concerns of national state formation, not the colonial European narratives driving Caribbean scholarship and creative production, but the European elitism un-transferrable to the struggling citizens of American idealizing democracy and a country without royal rule.

drama and Roman poetry, gave the politically disfranchised and others focused on self-improvement a greater connection to the classics than had previously been possible.

(Richards xi)

This move to the popular grew out of the precedent set by the Founding Fathers' use of Enlightenment classicism—the value system for gentility that Winterer observes. And, as classical Greek texts had been written and rewritten, then written again by the Romans, the American political and material environment gave way to a canon of liberal education that focused on epic poetry instead of the previously central Platonic, philosophical texts. Volumes, including the very popular Thomas Bulfinch's *The Age of the Fable* (1855), provided to American popular audiences “a compendium of Greco-Roman myths, drawn largely from Ovid, Homer, Virgil [sic], and Sophocles” (Richards 33). Bulfinch's collection served as America's most popular shortcut into Greek literature until Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, originally published in 1942. Bulfinch heavily relied upon Ovid, rewriting many of the *Metamorphoses* tales; however, he cleaned up some of the more unsavory or shocking aspects and rearranged the order of Ovid's original text. For instance, readers of *Bulfinch's Mythology*, as it was nicknamed, never met Myrrha of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, “Book X,” let alone witnessed Myrrha succeed in tricking her father into participating in incest with her. Ovid traces Pygmalion's lineage through the tale of Pygmalion and his ivory statue's granddaughter, Myrrha, and then the short-lived relationship between Venus and Adonis. In *Metamorphoses*, Myrrha's story directly follows the tale of Pygmalion and the statue. Bulfinch removed Myrrha's story, altogether, and substituted, instead, Dryope's story from Ovid's “Book IX's” (Bulfinch 91-97). Bulfinch interrupts the Pygmalion lineage with another story of a girl turned into a tree. As if her story is interchangeable with Myrrha's transformation into a myrrh, Dryope is turned into a tree because she unwittingly plucks lotus flowers in celebration of the nymphs and for her infant son. In an

ironic twist and despite her intentions to celebrate the nymphs by collecting flowers, Dryope does not understand that she harvests flowers from a tree that was once the nymph, Lotis. As punishment for her mistake, Dryope becomes spontaneously encased in the bark of a tree, presumably a lotus, which mirrors the shape of her body and allows her face to be visible, especially to the shock and dismay of her sister. Dryope's story, while as tragic as Myrrha's, does not contain any of the disturbing desire emerging from Myrrha's story of incest. In the compendium, Pygmalion's story remains sexually charged, despite the sanitizing of his granddaughter Myrrha's story. It appears, then, that Bulfinch reconstructed ancient stories not out of extreme chasteness, but rather as a means of promoting only normative types of sexualities.²⁹ Without falling into the conservative, Puritanical views of sexuality, Bulfinch managed to at least police some of what Frank Justice Miller, the translator for the Loeb Classical Library edition of *Metamorphoses* (1916), interpreted as "unnatural" sexuality (75).³⁰

In *Classics & Feminism: Gendering the Classics*, Barbara McManus argues that the American reformation of classical education was the deliberate construction of an anti-European nation-building project. McManus points out that by opening up the classics to a variety of classes in America, the alternate forms (read: translations and compendiums) and themes made way also for women classical scholars. She charts the emergence of women's education in America – embedded in the forms of women's schools and co-education – as also the origin of feminism in classical scholarship.

McManus begins her study of feminism, classics, and classicism, arguing that the "very

²⁹ Albeit, sex with a newly animated statue is hardly "normative," I simply suggest that Bulfinch maintained stories of heteronormative, less taboo sex.

³⁰ Miller interprets the end of Orpheus's dedication to his songs as: "I would sing of boys beloved by gods, maidens inflamed by unnatural love and paying the penalty of their lust" (75). I interpret the original lines, "nunc opus est leviora lyra, puerosque canamus / dilectos superis inconcessisque puellas / ignibus attonitas meruisse libidine poenam," as: "I now sing lighter chords of boys / beloved by the gods and girls who make concessions [who consent] to / the flames of shocking lust and [therefore] deserve punishment" (ll. 152-54).

name [classics], suggests both chronological priority and normativeness” (1). Black feminists have already made clear the ways that white men, white women, and black men marginalized black women. I must acknowledge this history, but don’t want to dwell on it. Instead, what is most important is that the canon has certainly been unconcerned with black women’s literary production, particularly from the nineteenth century. Even today, much of the lauded and crucial New York Public Library Schomburg Collection of nineteenth-century black women’s literature—a 30-volume project that reprinted some of the Schomburg holdings in 1988 and 1991—now remains out-of-print.³¹

VI. Scattered Archives and Elevated Writing: Black Classicist Women’s Archives

This study began with my reading of the Schomburg Collection’s *Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers* series both in print and online. It was during preparation for my graduate school comprehensive exams that I came to understand that not only would my eventual dissertation project come from the texts in the Schomburg Collection series, but that my experience with the print project’s configuration, the online resource, and the physical archive in New York would raise questions about black women’s archival preservation. Along with the question concerning the definition and categorization of “classicist” and “classicism,” my project also explores a largely missing archive that, if it existed, would correlate with the works preserved by the Schomburg. Even writers moving into canonical status, like Wheatley and Hopkins, do not have archives of personal papers and artifacts to supplement our readings of

³¹ Fortunately, many of the works published by the Schomburg are now available in their digital collection, which is open to the public. Schomburg makes available not only brief biographies of the 37 authors (plus one “Anonymous” author of *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, A Coloured Woman* from 1863), but also a digital archive of 52 works.

their creative works.³² In order to do original historical research on each of them, for instance, one would have to travel to any variety of archives—projects taking great time and resources that thankfully Wheatley and Hopkins’s biographers, Vincent Carretta and Lois Brown, respectively, have painstakingly endured. There is little to no historical work on Ray; and Ray’s biography remains relegated to encyclopedias and footnotes, as it seems her records are lost. This scattered information evidences the neglect of these authors during their lifetimes, as no one sought to preserve their papers during their lifetimes or soon after their deaths, and the ease by which history lost sight of their importance. So, this project had no central archive, with only the exception of Alice Dunbar-Nelson, whose marriage to Paul Lawrence Dunbar and relationship with her librarian niece, Pauline A. Young, secured the preservation of her extensive archive, including her library, lesson plans, and journals, held by the University of Delaware.

One central question arises at the intersection of classicism and the fragmented archive, the result of my own concerns raised and discussed with Hortense J. Spillers³³: What does it mean that authors who sought to elevate their creative work through rewriting classical forms and themes and publish popular works became lost to black readers and the archive, writ large? I explore this question throughout “Niobe Repeating,” and particularly in Chapters 3 and 4, discussions of Pauline Hopkins’s serial novel *Of One Blood* and Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s

³² To be fair to our archivists and scholars, Hopkins lost her life in a house fire that likely consumed what papers she might have saved. I have already begun to lay plans with two librarians, Deborah Lilton of Vanderbilt University and Jennifer Schnabel of University of Memphis, for a long-term digital project that will map the scattered archives of these authors. While the initial project roll-out will be within two years of consistent work on the project, I see a “live” digital map that grows more complex as archival work on these authors continues to flourish and evolve. See the Coda for additional discussion of this project.

³³ Spillers did not create this question, but, rather, when discussing the stakes of black classism in my project, brought to my attention the conundrum of the black popular political project explored through elite status brought to black authors who also sought elite status through the classics.

unpublished³⁴ novella *A Modern Undine*. In Chapter 3, I explore the themes of lineage and birth as troubled through the history of slavery and the traces thereof present in the lives of turn-of-the-century black Americans. I explore Hopkins's rewriting of "Book X" of *Metamorphoses*, and particularly the stories of Pygmalion and Myrrha as they apply to the construction of the black feminine and the racially charged history of incest as they emerged through American slavery.

In Chapter 4, I primarily concentrate on the legacy of texts into which Dunbar-Nelson intervenes. *A Modern Undine* takes up not only Ovid's stories of Galatea and Scylla, nereids who suffer unwanted pursuit by "monstrous" creatures,³⁵ but also the Undine myth as written in *Undine* and *The Little Mermaid*, by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué and Hans Christian Andersen. Dunbar-Nelson denatures the unruly and wild feminine desire as presented in the works of Ovid, Fouqué, and Anderson, providing, instead, a distant and seemingly passionless "lazy woman" identity for her Marion-Undine. I argue that Dunbar-Nelson reassesses the body of a character transformed through rewriting, and particularly the monstrous conversion of Ovid's Scylla by Circe. She undermines the very nature of "the monstrous," by rewriting the dangerous sexuality that emerges when Ovid and Fouqué's texts intersect as the figure of fierce motherhood (a generative and successful intellectual and creative progenitor).

In the conclusion of *Niobe Repeating*, I reflect upon my experience in the archive and examine the outstanding issues facing researchers of Black New Women literary production. I

³⁴ *A Modern Undine* was printed in the Schomburg Collection's second volume of *The Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson*; however, the novella was not published independently or for its own sake. Dunbar-Nelson, herself, could not get it published. I expand on this in the fourth chapter of this study.

³⁵ Although Justine McConnell's volume focuses primarily upon twentieth century literature and criticism, my fourth chapter's reading of Alice Dunbar-Nelson's character, Howard from *A Modern Undine*, takes up her discussion of the Cyclops in African American literature, and the inversion of "the roles of Odysseus and the Cyclops in terms of their positions as victims and aggressors" (9). I argue that Oxford classicist McConnell continues Rankine's reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as Homer's *Odyssey* in the book chapter "Invisible Odysseus: A Homeric Hero in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" from *Zero to Hero, Hero to Zero: In Search of the Classical Hero* (2010) edited by Lydia Langerwerf and Cressida Ryan, and more extensively in her monograph, *Black Odysseys: The Homeric Odyssey in the African Diaspora since 1939* (2013).

reflect upon the fragmented remains of Sappho's poetry and Ovid's concerns with fragmentation as they intersect with issues of Black New Women archives. I contemplate the question Glenn W. Most raised in his essay "On Fragments": "Where all that matters is the past as it persists into the present, or the present as it persists into the future, what place can there be for fragments?" (9). I analyze the relationship between "the fragment" and black women's speculative literature, and argue that Black New Women's work anticipated and therefore mapped spaces of rupture for contemporary scholars like myself, who task themselves with reading and reconstructing the scattered pieces of these authors' archives.

At its core, my study questions the difference between a classicist and someone who has been educated in select classical texts. My study hinges on black women's deliberate speaking back to classical texts and concerns itself with black American women classicists, defined as women who identified with either a free or enslaved black racial ancestry and studied and practiced classical languages, literature, and literary forms. Particularly, the four women at the center of this study, Phillis Wheatley, H. Cordelia Ray, Pauline E. Hopkins, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, rewrote portions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, suggesting that they mastered the text at least in translation. Moreover, each of these authors takes up their rewriting through the lenses of gendered racial subjectivity in the face of a new century.

In light of the ways that canons and conversations work in the academic sphere, I am obliged to justify my arguments, particularly because the subjects of my study come from a population that is largely ignored by the classical canon, and more broadly the English literary Canon [sic]. My project is partly the work of recovery, and I look to bring into the spotlight texts that have not only influenced black literary-cultural production, but fit into conversations outside of African American studies. Additionally, I extend the studies of my contemporary black

classicists who largely concentrate on twentieth century literatures. Through my work, I hope to expand the value of these literary products. Part of this aspect of my project, then, relies upon the quality of the key authors' literary projects. The classicist—the woman who studied Greek and/or Roman literature and languages—writes to and in the legacy of classical literatures. She rewrites classical plotlines and uses classical forms as a means of generating her own creative work and simultaneously informing her audience's readings of the literatures from which her work derives. In short, rewriting promotes her analysis of classical literatures, through which she intervenes in the history of literary production and stakes a claim in this heritage. Likewise, she uses the classics to advance critiques of her gendered black experience and launch them into the popular sphere, her criticism validated by her mastery of the canonical.

CHAPTER 1

Wheatley, In the First Place: Origins of Black Classicist Tradition in America

I. Introduction

O little maid from Afric's slave coast brought
By traders cruel to be put up and sold
As other goods by scheming merchants are,
A human life exchanged for senseless gold.
Rude, helpless child, right glad am I
That then thy lot and tender years
A woman's generous sympathies awoke
And thou wert christened with a woman's tears.

Oh, little did she dream that genius rare
Slumbered within thy childish brain,
Or that the time would come when thou
Wouldst lasting fame obtain;
But nurtured by a Christian woman's care
In all the graces true and sweet thou grew,
And soon the wise, the famed and the great
To pay thy genius homage quickly drew.

-Katherine Tillman, "Phyllis Wheateley" [sic]

In her 1898 essay "Afro-American Poets and Their Verse," Black New Woman Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman claimed that Phillis Wheatley received more classical training than the much lauded abolitionist poet, John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892). Tillman's revolutionary and swift move placed Wheatley in a lineage of classicism and put the eighteenth-century enslaved poet side-by-side with the highly regarded white American anti-slavery advocate and writer. Tillman, at the end of the nineteenth century, made a case that Wheatley's literary and political value inextricably intersected. In the words of Tillman, whose essay provided a genealogy of poets beginning with Wheatley and ending with the *Christian Recorder* editor, H. T. Johnson:

The first to break the silence of African bondage was the gifted slave poetess, Phyllis Wheatley [sic], who was, contrary to the custom of the time, well educated by her mistress, receiving more training in the classics than did Whittier, New England's Bard. Phyllis wrote a book of poems that attracted attention both in the Old World and in the New. (95-96)

Tillman identified Wheatley as the original source of her own poetic genealogy as well as the founder of all "Afro-American" poetry. Beginning her essay with a Wordsworth epigraph, Tillman situates all of black American poetry within the world of English and American letters, writ large. She invokes the history of William Dean Howells within the African American literary community—for "discovering" and "introducing" Paul Laurence Dunbar to the mainstream American public—and marks the persistent and knotty tradition of black writers endorsed by white patrons. She connects Wheatley to this larger literary world and argues that Wheatley's poetry reached a wide-reading audience with varied literary investments.

Through the poem "Phyllis Wheateley" and published it in her volume, *Recitations* (1902), Tillman further emphasized the expansive reach of Wheatley's work as proof of Wheatley's literary prowess. In the poem, she marked Wheatley's poetry as "genius," acknowledged Wheatley's book history, and highlighted the influence that Wheatley's English audience had upon her literary success: "And England, too, applauded thee, dear one, / and read thy graceful verses, with all pride" (ll. 25-26). Tillman suggests that Wheatley's work belongs to American and English audiences—a sense of belonging elicited through identification and gratification by her readers. The "pride" that Wheatley inspired in her English readers resulted in

book sales and, more importantly, pressure put upon her legal owners, John and Susanna Wheatley, to free Wheatley.³⁶

My project charts moments in two of Wheatley's neoclassical works where subject position and literary criticism collide. This chapter begins by making a case for reading Wheatley as the progenitor of the black classicist tradition: first through the case study of Black New Women's critical engagement with Wheatley's work through Tillman's essay and poem dedicated to Wheatley, and second by contemplating how Wheatley's "firstness" in black letters resituates classicism within the area of black literature. My critical reading of Wheatley's biography situates my work within the history of Wheatley criticism. I question the misleading and reductive readings that separate Wheatley from her raced and gendered version of classicism. I enter into the record my own findings, which take their places next to the critical readings of contemporary black classicist scholars, Tracey Walters, William Cook and James Tatum, and Patrice Rankine. I read "To Mæcenās" as Wheatley's deliberate intervention into the classicist and neoclassicist canons. In this poem, Wheatley utilizes classical conventions and forms to elevate herself as a poet among ancient poets. She argues that her work deserves the attention given also to Homer, Vergil, and her fellow African, Terence. Moreover, she critiques the system of patronage that surveils her literary production and controls publication.

I then move on to Wheatley's "Niobe in Distress," through which Wheatley argues that the products of her creative production, her literary children, remain always outside of her control. Through "Niobe in Distress," Wheatley provides a model of motherhood that corresponds with her potential subject position as enslaved mother. Wheatley's Niobe provides a model of the rebellious black woman slave who challenges power structures and cultural norms.

³⁶ Throughout this chapter, I will refer to Phillis Wheatley as "Wheatley" and those who owned her either by the combination of their first and last names, or solely by their first names.

Through Wheatley's poem, I reevaluate the Ovidian Niobe and her motivations for rebellion. Bringing together "To Mæcenus" and "Niobe in Distress," I interrogate the complex racial and gender critiques that Wheatley embeds in her work as literary rebellion against the many people and influences inhibiting her creative production.

Like Frances E.W. Harper's "The Slave Mother," Wheatley's Niobe discovers, in the end, that her children are "not hers, for cruel hands / May rudely tear apart / The only wreath of household love / That binds her breaking heart" (21-24). The silent weeping of Wheatley's Niobe opens the space in which the wails of Harper's slave mother echo. Within the American slave system, which legislated that the slave-born follow the condition of the mother, Wheatley's Niobe poem reflects themes of tragic motherhood that would emerge again in the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass as well as in Pauline Hopkins' fiction. In the canon of literature discussing mothers bought and sold, "'mother' and 'enslavement' are indistinct categories of the illegitimate" (Spillers 75). Niobe's hubris lies within her assumptions of motherhood rights and her inexperience with one goddess presiding over Thebes. Through her punishment of Niobe, the goddess Latona reminds Niobe of her foreignness while simultaneously laying claim to all of the children in Thebes. For Wheatley, and as she highlights in Latona's voice, Niobe's greatest crime is her arrogant counting of her children. Wheatley's version of Niobe is inextricable from the chattel system that binds Wheatley, which ostensibly ripped her from the arms of her foreign mother. Like the poem that Harper writes nearly sixty years after Wheatley's, "Niobe in Distress" demonstrates the unique political position of the mother who has no control over the destinies of her children.

II. In the First Place, Wheatley

Wheatley holds many of the “first” positions in black publishing. She was the first black woman to ever publish in the United States. She was the first African enslaved person published in America and the first African enslaved in America who published in Europe. Wheatley was the first publically known and published black classicist—the first black person known by the general public to study classical literature and languages—in America. I also suggest that she was the first black human “curiosity” known for her intellectual talents rather than her physical attributes alone.³⁷ Additionally, Wheatley was the second woman to be published in America. Her poetry serves not only as an introduction of black American letters to the world, but also as a reminder that her African birth complicates the notion of “African American-ness”; I am compelled to refer to her as “black” because her origins and forced travel to America make it easy to categorize her as a subject of the Diaspora but difficult to call her “African American” as the term is currently used.³⁸ She was the first person to live through the middle passage—her name a permanent reminder of that passage—and to publish.

³⁷ In, “The Contemporaneous Reception of Phillis Wheatley: Newspaper and Magazine Notices during the Years of Fame, 1765-1774,” critic Mukhtar Ali Isan argues that in notices of Wheatley’s publication and her public appearances in both Boston and in London, “The value of her poetry is recognized, but there is also extraordinary emphasis on her status as a black poet, a slave turned intellectual, and a pious prodigy” (261). Wheatley’s physical appearance and social standing (read: black and enslaved) paired with her literary production are the very factors that made her a curiosity to both American and European literary publics. And yet, she is the first example of a black woman displayed for her creative production outside of singing, dancing, or another solely physical performance. It would be interesting to know more about Wheatley’s performance during her book tour through Europe, which was cut short by Susanna Wheatley’s illness and, thus, Susanna’s “need” for Wheatley to return to America and resume her role as slave and attendant.

³⁸ I make the distinction because now and what I will call colloquially, “African American” really means those who are American born to American parents. In truth, this gets very blurry, especially around Wheatley’s time, as many black people in America were still being imported as chattel, shipped from the shores of West Africa. Throughout my project, I refer to the New Women I study as “black,” also, because of the complicated subject identities that many of them held. For instance, Alice Dunbar-Nelson was black, yes, but identified also as a New Orleans Creole. Finally, I keep the term “black,” because, while my project in its current iteration concentrates on nineteenth century writers in America, it lends to extending the study to, at least, twentieth century and Caribbean writers, as well. I hope to establish terminology in this dissertation that I can carry into future projects.

Her education in the home of her slave owners, and presumably by the woman of the house, Susanna Wheatley, included not only learning English as a second language after age eight and at record speed, but also reading and writing classical texts both in translation and in Latin. Thus, as the first black person to be published in America, she begins the black classical tradition in America.³⁹ It is important to mark beginnings, but it is not simply the “beginning” that fills my claim.⁴⁰ As black American letters begins with Wheatley, classicism has always been a part of that literary tradition. Thus, it becomes impossible to disentangle the intersections of race, gender, and classicism within the black American literary tradition. Moreover, and in light of my study, the existence of this intersection from the beginning of black American literature suggests that creating a case to argue for a canon of nineteenth century black women classicists seems nearly redundant and markedly late coming.

Furthermore, it is shortsighted to suggest that Wheatley is the first *African* person reading and writing in classical languages.⁴¹ During the fifth century, St. Augustine wrote in and studied

³⁹ See my definition of “black classicism” in the Introduction.

⁴⁰ To this I mean that much of discipline of African American literature remains concerned with which works are “first” in the line of production, theme, style, etc. See for instance the ongoing discussion of *The Bondwoman’s Narrative* versus *Our Nig*, and particularly Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s preface to the 2002 edition of the novel and Gates’s companion text, *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on The Bondwoman’s Narrative* (2004). Additionally, see Roger Lathbury and Karen H. Meyer’s *Backgrounds to American Letters: Realism and Regionalism, 1860-1910* (2010); R. J. Ellis’s *Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig: A Cultural Biography of a “Two-Story” African American Novel* (2003); and *The New York Times*’ announcement of Gregg Hecimovich’s research and “discovery” of Hannah Bond, the *Bondwoman’s* author (September 18, 2013). I only mark Wheatley’s first-ness as a means of establishing a tradition of black women classicism in America. Moreover, on more than one occasion, when I have shared my project with other scholars, admitting that I begin with Wheatley, I have often been met with an, “Everyone starts with Wheatley.” First, everyone does *not* start with Wheatley. However, I would be remiss if I did *not* start with her and her work, as she is, quite literally, the first black person to publish in the classicist or neoclassical tradition.

⁴¹ Not to mention, in the timeline of the classical tradition, there is much evidence connecting Greek mythology to that of Egypt and Nubia. Besides the very controversial *Black Athena* series and the scholarship supporting claims of African roots of Greek literature (see William M. J. van Binsbergen’s 2011 edited volume *Black Athena Comes of Age*), Cheikh Anta Diop’s *African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (1989) and Stanley M. Burstein’s *Graeco-Africana: Studies in the History of Greek Relations with Egypt and Nubia* (1995) make cases for the “borrowings” by Greece from north African cosmology.

both Latin and Greek while living in Northern Africa.⁴² According to the Augustine biographer, Peter Brown, “It is most unlikely that Augustine spoke anything but Latin” (10). Most often, Augustine is categorized as Roman African, a nod to his Roman paternity and the regime under which he lived, as well as to a Eurocentric qualification of both his intellectual production and his linguistic prowess.⁴³ Furthermore, he was not a classicist, per se, because he was part of forging that which we now call “classical.”

Wheatley, herself, reminded her readers that the Roman writer, Publius Terentius Afer, was African. In “To Mæcenus,” Wheatley writes:

The happier Terence* all the choir inspir'd,
His soul replenish'd, and his bosom fir'd;
But say, ye Muses, why this partial grace,
To one alone of Afric's sable race;
From age to age transmitting thus his name
With the finest glory in the rolls of fame? (ll. 37-42)

*He was an African by birth.

The footnote, included in the original publication of *Poems on Various Subjects*, brings readers' attentions to Terence's origins in addition to identifying him as “one [...] of Afric's sable race.”

Wheatley's narrator issues a complaint against the Muses, and asks why literary inspiration seems to have only touched the head of Terence while she, now, writes in a similar vein to Terence. Here, Wheatley uses the complaint to highlight the complicated relationship between her subject position and her creative production. In ““What is Hecuba to Him or [S]he to Hecuba?” Lucrece's Complaint and Shakespearean Poetic Agency,” Mary Jo Keitzman argues that Shakespeare also uses the literary device: “The complaint mode enabled Shakespeare to dramatize practical rationality, a complex responsiveness to one's concrete situation that captures

⁴² Augustine of Hippo was an African-born, nationally mixed (Libyan and Roman), African Roman professor of rhetoric. His mother, was posthumously canonized Saint Monica by the Catholic Church.

⁴³ In other words, Augustine is more often discussed in a Roman-centric context, rather than an African-centric one.

the sheer complexity and the agonizing difficulty of choosing who to be and how to act” (22).⁴⁴

Keitzman argues that both Lucrece and Hamlet demonstrate the difficulty juggling their material existences and the process of self-identification—a complicated practice that I would argue directly applies to Wheatley.

Wheatley argues that the “grace” that the Muses issue is only “partial,” in that history only acknowledges Terence’s work. “To Mæcenus,” therefore, issues a criticism of the gaps in literary history; surely others “of Afric’s sable race”—apart from Terence and Wheatley herself—also wrote. Additionally, the poem demonstrates Wheatley’s self-conscious intervention into literature and criticism. Through her conspicuous footnote (the only one in the collection⁴⁵), she also asks her audience and the Muses why Terence’s Africanness remained largely occluded while his work remained in circulation. Terence, born in Carthage around 195 BCE, entered the Roman Republic as a slave, although he also lived as a playwright (Augoustakis 2). Purchased by a Roman senator, Terentius Lucanus, Terence shared more than his slave status with Wheatley. Like those who purchased Wheatley, the Roman senator saw to Terence’s education and eventually freed him. Some biographers suggest that Terence’s “beauty” garnered him a lot of attention in Rome from any variety of aristocratic patrons⁴⁶—which would explain how six of his plays⁴⁷ were produced during his lifetime, the texts and production notes of which remain presently available.

⁴⁴ Keitzman utilizes Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of Aristotelian “practical reasoning,” when taking up her discussion of the complaint: “with Aristotle, that practical reasoning was accompanied by emotion is not sufficient for practical wisdom; that emotions are not only not more unreasonable than intellectual calculations, but frequently are more reliable, and less deceptively seductive” (Nussbaum 40).

⁴⁵ There is also the possibility that John Wheatley or an agent of the publisher wrote this footnote.

⁴⁶ See Augoustakis (2013) and Manuwald (2011).

⁴⁷ From Augoustakis’s (ed.) *Companion to Terence* (2013): “From 166 to 160 BCE, Terence produced six plays; of these, *Hecyra* was performed three times, since the actors abandoned the stage during the two previous performances, as Terence informs us in his Prologue: *Andria* (Megalesian Games, 166); *Hecyra 1* (Megalesian Games, 165); *Heauton Timorumenos* (Megalesian Games, 163); *Eunuchus* (Megalesian Games, 161); *Phormio*

In a poem that serves as the entry into her collection, Wheatley highlights her connection to an ancient African-Roman poet and playwright through patronage, and Terence's experiences of enslavement and celebrity. Wheatley understood the set of traditions in which she was writing a place for herself. It seems her work also anticipated the various kinds of naysaying that would follow her literary career—beginning with the trials authenticating her work in 1772⁴⁸ and continuing up to and through the Black Arts Movement in the mid-twentieth-century. So, while Wheatley may be the first black or African American neoclassical writer and classicist, her education and career fall in a much longer history of Africans in the ancient canon. As the examples of Terence and Augustine suggest, it is impossible to trace the “first” time African peoples engaged with Greek and Latin. Instead, I am inclined to contextualize Wheatley and the other women in this study within a longer tradition of Greek and Roman letters studied, written, and rewritten by peoples of Africa and its Diaspora. Yet, to be fair, Wheatley remains the first and foremother of the black classical tradition in America.

III. From African to African American

Somewhere around the age of eight, Phillis Wheatley was kidnapped from her home, presumably in Senegal or Gambia, to the coast of West Africa. Upon reaching that shore, she was made to board the slave ship “Phillis” and transported in the belly of that boat, through the Middle Passage to Boston (Carretta 1-5). As part of what the Wheatley biographer and historian

(Roman Games, 161); *Adelphoe and Hecyra 2* (Funeral Games for Aemilius Paullus, 160); *Hecyra 3* (Roman Games, 160).”

⁴⁸ These trials did more than authenticate her work—Wheatley was put on trial to “prove” that she could write her poetry (that she had the intelligence and capability), but also highlighted the assumption by white Americans that African Americans could not produce art or any other creative product that emanated from the human soul. In short, and not surprisingly, the 1772 trials were also trials of Wheatley's humanity. I will explore these further in my discussion of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (2003), later in the chapter.

Vincent Carretta has identified as “disappointing” cargo of “refuse slaves,” only 75% of whom survived the nearly 240 day trip from Senegambia to Boston, the young girl was an unusual human good (7). She was small and frail, and worth less because of it. Upon landing in Massachusetts in 1761, John Wheatley purchased for his wife the young child whom he (re)named Phillis, linking the child for the rest of her life to her experience on the slaver and to her slave status. The last name under which she published, years later, came from John and his Boston family who bought and owned her.

The act of renaming marks the transformation of a young girl into a slave child, the latter position that both enabled and then bolstered her literary career. It is, indeed, possible that if Wheatley had never been enslaved, she may not have been a writer. It seems unlikely that she would have been a writer of English language poetry. Thus, it becomes impossible to disentangle her personal history from her creative production—her poetry and literary career remain embedded within the context of her kidnapping, forced servitude, and complex relationship with those who owned her. This complication extended beyond Wheatley’s physical life and resonates throughout the history of criticism that followed her work.

Although the young enslaved Wheatley was bought as a gift and personal servant for Susanna Wheatley, it is largely believed that she was treated more like a substitute child than a servant to the family. Several biographers suggest that Wheatley supplemented the loss of John and Susanna’s daughter, who died at a similar age and years before John purchased Wheatley in the Boston harbor. John Wheatley wrote a letter to the publisher of *Poems of Phillis Wheatley: A Native African and a Slave* (1838) and suggested that parameters other than master/slave determined his family’s relationship with Wheatley. John’s rhetorical strategies obscure the legal relationship that Wheatley had with John’s family: “Without any assistance from school

education, and by only what *she was taught in the family*, she, in sixteen months' time *from her arrival*, attained the English language, to which she was an utter stranger before [...] to the great astonishment of all who heard her" (my italics, 8). John avoids articulating the circumstances under which Wheatley found herself in his household, writing in the letter that Wheatley "arrived" in his family. "The family," devoid of the possessive in John's words and therefore belonging exclusively neither to him nor to Wheatley, bore the responsibility of educating Wheatley. More specifically, Susanna and her eldest daughter, Mary, taught Wheatley to read English, particularly *The Bible* and Latin poetic works. It was more likely that Wheatley was called "servant" instead of "slave," as evidenced in the caption of the frontispieces of *Poems on Various Subjects*⁴⁹ and much like her fellow bound brethren in the North. The linguistic turn found in the word "servant" betrays a sharp contrast to our modern linguistic modes of describing slavery and the Southern version of slavery that proliferates in our cultural memory. The close proximity of enslaved persons with their legal owners in the urban North complicated the relationships that emerged therefrom. The use of "servant" instead of "slave" mirrors John's ambiguous and sentimental language within his letter. Furthermore, this language positions John and his family as responsible for, not just beneficiaries of, Wheatley's talent—as any family might of their child. She is the adopted daughter whose talents are unlocked by the Wheatley family's care and tutelage.

Wheatley "arrives" in John and Susanna's house at a time when notions of adoption were changing in America. The rise of post-Revolutionary War sentimentality for children and the decline of indentured servitude at the end of the eighteenth-century gave rise to, in the words of historian Susan L. Porter, "a culture that revered the family" (37). In Porter's study of early

⁴⁹ Wheatley's portrait is captioned with her signature, "Phillis Wheatley," and the words "Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley of Boston."

nineteenth century orphanage adoptions (1900-1920), she asserts that the turn of the nineteenth century saw a rise in adoptions in middle-class couples. However, it wasn't until the mid-1800s that the majority of adopted children were free of the indenture contracts that accompanied their arrivals into new homes (38-39). Despite the narratives of sentimentality, many of the children entering economically privileged homes did not experience upward mobility in mainstream society (39). Even adoption didn't change one's economic class status. Thus, the sentimental notions surrounding Wheatley's "arrival" into the Boston family existed within a context of adoption-as-indenture. Wheatley's servitude was exchanged for access to a middle-class household but without achieving American middle-class status. The sentimentality surrounding Wheatley's servitude did not alter her status as slave until John and Susanna relented to the pressure of Wheatley's European audience and emancipated Wheatley.

Wheatley's history paints a picture rivaling the most romantic and tragic heroine. Commonly, critics and historians report that the young Wheatley was in poor health and nursed by Susanna, although she suffered throughout her short American life. Of course, her poor health was likely the result of traveling from West Africa to North America in the belly of a slave ship. In *The Slave Ship*, Marcus Rediker imagines the slaver environment through the testimonies of British slaver captains and crew during the slave trials leading to England's abolition of slavery. He argues that the crew and captured aboard slave ships equally suffered poor health as a result of their time in the Middle Passage.⁵⁰ Rediker makes several references to the health of the crew

⁵⁰ According to Rediker, merchants commented frequently on the need to provide for the health of crew members. They advised that sailors be kept sober, as intemperance in the tropics was believed to contribute to premature death. They also requested that sailors be given proper care [...] and that they not be abused or overworked in the hot climate" (198). Rediker goes on to argue that merchants connected the health statuses of sailors to that of slaves, and argues that slaves may have been treated better than sailors as they were precious cargo. For additional conversations concerning slave ship environments, see Maggie Montesinos Sale's *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity* (1997); Leif Svalesen's *The Slave Ship Fredensborg* (2000); Emma Christopher's *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807* (2006); and Erik Calonius's *The Wanderer: The Last American Slave Ship and the Conspiracy That Set Its Sails* (2008).

members, including homelessness and illness around harbor docks, outbreaks of yellow fever on ships, and the abandonment on Caribbean shores of many crew members who were unable to fulfill their sailing duties. According to Rediker, West Africa was a “graveyard for sailors,” and therefore for the human cargo that they ferried across the Atlantic.

In the middle of the ocean and in close quarters, it seems likely that the health of the sailors correlated to the health of the persons regarded as cargo. Sociologist Eddie Donoghue discusses the variety of human cargo aboard European and American slavers – valuations created as a means of assessing investment and potential returns for ship owners. Amongst this system of value, Donoghue defines “refuse slaves” as “a category of slaves which nobody wanted. [...] captives who did not excite the interest of buyers and were often left to die or were killed” (18). These slaves, often ill or too young for work, were sold for less than their healthy, adult equivalents (Rediker 124). As pointed out by her biographer, Vincent Carretta, Wheatley was likely considered “refuse” because of her age and size (1). I suggest that, at the very least, the body of a child labeled “refuse” would likely bear evidence of her Middle Passage experience—whether the health in question be physical, emotional, or spiritual. Ill health bookended Wheatley’s time in the United States, as she would draw her last breath just shy of her thirtieth birthday and as a result of a prolonged sickness that she suffered along with her infant son. She died in a sick house with her baby in her arms.

It seems important to many of Wheatley’s biographers to couch Wheatley’s life in a narrative of benevolent ownership by John and Susanna: the Wheatley story soothes American guilt concerning slavery. Surely, John and Susanna were not the only people who owned a slave whom they deliberately educated.⁵¹ I suggest that the kind master/lucky slave narrative also

⁵¹ Several Southern states (among them, Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia) adopted laws making the education of the enslaved illegal. This suggests any number of things, the

supported the already-successful abolitionist project in England, enabling Wheatley to conduct her first and only book tour with the support of her European audience. The publication of Wheatley's poetry reveals a desire to benefit from the "good slave owner" narrative—especially since Wheatley's reception in Europe was soon followed by pressure from her English audience to free her from her status as human chattel. Very few critics discuss the possible benefits the Wheatley family received from Wheatley's publications. The notion of the Wheatley family's kindnesses and near-adoption of the enslaved girl support previous popular criticism of Wheatley's work as sympathetic to slavery. This foregrounds the pressures and narratives surrounding Wheatley's writing and publication. This pre-existing narrative of benevolent slavery and the motivations for this narrative may have influenced Wheatley to stay on the easier side of the critical discourse around slave ownership. Her career and position within the Wheatley family household relied upon John and Susanna feeling no insult from her work.

IV. Lauding and Naysaying: Historical Reception of Wheatley's Work

Wheatley's work spent a long time in a literary limbo, recognized as historically significant but disregarded as nonartistic or promoting treacherous politics. In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), Jefferson denies the ontological ability for blacks to produce art from imagination while also relegating love between slaves to corporeal and animalistic lust. His critique is devoid of analysis and, however it betrays both Jefferson's analytical shortcomings as well as his understanding of slavery's horrors:

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery

least of which is that some slave owners were, in fact, educating their slaves. For more on this, see Heather Andrea Williams's *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (2009); Craig Stephen Wilder's *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (2013); and Jeffery C. Stone's *Slavery, Southern Culture, and Education in Little Dixie, Missouri, 1820-1860* (2013).

enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Wheatly [sic]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. (147)

Jefferson acknowledges that the circumstances under which poetry arises, “misery,” indeed plague black people; however, he also seems unaware of his own participation in that misery. Jefferson’s language slips and confirms that slavery induces misery for those in bondage—for according to him, the enslaved have all of the motivation necessary to create “the most affecting touches of poetry.” But he denies then the analytical skill and the “sentiment” necessary to create literary verse (145). To be sure, many scholars have aptly criticized Jefferson’s accusations of Wheatley, from his misspelling of her name to his outright dismissal of her work.⁵² Still, the context into which Wheatley wrote highlights the very argument I bring here to bear: Wheatley’s work reflects, always, the environs under which she produced it. How, then, could Wheatley’s work not be political?

The 2003 study of Wheatley’s authenticity trial published by Henry Louis’ Gates, Jr., suggests the political nature of Wheatley’s poetry—but that political reading is based on by the work of Walter Grigo, a journalist who believes that Wheatley’s poetry contains anagrams. Gates originally presented Grigo’s “discovery” in a National Endowment of the Arts lecture delivered in 2002, during which he expanded into *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America’s First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (2003). In both the book and the original lecture, “Mister Jefferson and The Trials of Phillis Wheatley,” Gates tackled Jefferson’s critique of Wheatley and ended his historical and literary argument concerning the racial validity of

⁵² See John C. Shields and Eric D. Lamore’s (eds.) *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley*; Henry Louis Gates’ *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America’s First Black Poet* (2010); John C. Shields’ *Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics* (2010); Robin Santos Doak’s *Phillis Wheatley: Slave and Poet* (2006); Jacquelyn Y. McLendon’s *Phillis Wheatley: A Revolutionary Poet* (2003); and Susan R. Gregson’s *Phillis Wheatley* (2002).

Wheatley's work with "Welcome home, Phillis; Welcome home." Assuming a familiar form of address and establishing himself as the usher for her redemption, Gates validates Wheatley's education and aptitude through a recreation of her "trial," an oral examination set up by her owner, John Wheatley, to prove her work as her own.

Gates recalls the rejection of Wheatley's work by critics, particularly in 1960s when those like Amiri Baraka dismissed the genius of Wheatley's work and denied her investment in themes of race and slavery as reflections of her circumstance.⁵³ According to Gates, Grigo approached him with a claim to have broken a code embedded in Wheatley's work. Gates utilizes Grigo's reading as the way to recover Wheatley from racial shame and restore her to the African American canon. Gates posits Grigo's discovery, an intricate set of embedded anagram clues in her poetry, as Wheatley's racial redemption. In particular, Grigo deciphers the poem Gates calls the most "reviled" of Wheatley's works, "On Being Brought from Africa to America." This passage comes at the close of Gate's book version of this reading of Wheatley:

It is indeed the case that every letter in Wheatley's poem can be rearranged to produce an entirely new work, one with the reverse meaning of the apologetic and infamous original. Grigo adds that the title of the poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America," can be rearranged to read "Bitter, Go I, Ebon Human Cargo, From Africa." Moreover, he continues, the five italicized words—Pagan, Savior, Christians, Negroes, Cain—are an anagram of "grasp a great vision: no races in chains." (88-89)

⁵³ The following volumes support the claim of Black Arts criticism of Wheatley through Smith: Linda Garber's *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminst*. [more here]. Several critics cite David Lionel Smith's discussion of The Black Arts Movement in *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History*, vol. 5 (1996) as the source claiming that Black Arts poets and critics dismissed early African American literary production for not being "black" enough. Along with other "controversies" that cloud my study (e.g., Bernal, Rediker), I had trouble finding many original sources of negative criticism of Wheatley by Black Arts authors. Instead, several sources cite Smith's criticism from the *Encyclopedia*. This leads me to question the validity of the claim, only because original source material would illuminate *specific* attitudes by Black Arts membership. Perhaps more than the specifics, it is the lore of Wheatley as "not black enough" that becomes most important to this discussion. In other words, perhaps the drive toward recovering Wheatley's work came from this very claim—a motivation I see as parallel to Bernal's relationship with black classicism.

Gates provides a caveat to Grigo's reading, and suggests that the flexibility in Wheatley's work coincidentally fit the anagram framework. However, rhetorically, Gates issues this evidence right before closing his argument and "welcoming" Wheatley (back) into the black intellectual fold. Thus, this additional, however potentially specious, layer of Wheatley's work offers for Gates and his readers justification for the more troubling constructions in Wheatley's work. In particular, Gates attempts to recoup Wheatley as a rebellious figure through the very work most often criticized as apologetic for and sympathetic to slavery's missionary and colonizing projects.

Wheatley's critics remain largely uncomfortable with the assimilationist and even grateful sentiments "On Being Brought" expresses. I admit these lines are hard to swallow:

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

In this particular verse of the poem, Wheatley contends that her soul found redemption in her enslavement through her exposure to Christianity. I agree with the many critiques of this poem as apologetic and potentially harmful to anti-slavery sentiments and action. As difficult as it is to understand what it means that a middle passage survivor might pen these words, it is doubly-confounding to contemplate what it *was* to live in the middle passage. Additionally, both Gates and the critics he critiques never weigh the particularly gendered pressures surrounding Wheatley's performance as a poet. Above all things, "On Being Brought" argues that the writer falls within the Christian piety rhetoric most clearly articulated through the post-Romance-era

“cult of True Womanhood.”⁵⁴ As a result, I hold off my judgment of Wheatley, and especially the adolescent and enslaved Wheatley who wrote the poem. I cannot imagine what it would mean to write poetry under the watchful tutelage of my “benevolent,” Christian owners. Gates, via Grigo, attempts to recover the above poem by interpreting the poem through anagrams. “It is indeed the case that every letter in Wheatley’s poem can be rearranged to produce an entirely new work, one with the reverse meaning of the apologetic and infamous original” (89-90). I appreciate Gates and Grigo’s efforts to find another layer of genius in Wheatley’s work.

However, I am compelled to point out that we are still unpacking the very genius in the language as it is arranged on the page. What if Wheatley wrote “On Being Brought” with irony? What if she was completely sincere, as so many other black people found Christianity in America and denied any value in their Africanness? As her intentions remain undecidable, it behooves us to keep the potential contradictions and complications on the surface of poetic analysis. To deny these complications means to also deny the gendered conventions and subject position Wheatley experienced as an enslaved woman. Attempting to categorize Wheatley as either “pro-black” or “anti-black” gets us virtually nothing except a disavowal of the complicated state of humanity that Wheatley experienced and articulated. In short, we deny Wheatley’s humanity as expressed through her poetry by relegating her work to simple categories. Likewise, we obscure the various moving socio-cultural parts involved in her biography, her creative production, and publication

⁵⁴ In an 1966 issue of *American Quarterly*, Barbara Welter originally coined this terminology and described it thus: “The attributed of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes” (152). Although Welter and other critics maintain that True Womanhood became formalized in the early nineteenth century, the roots of the cult began, at least, in the mid 1700s. Wheatley wrote in New England while True Womanhood concretized. In the words of Lynn Enterline used in discussion concerning this portion of my argument: Wheatley proved in this poem to be a “good Christian girl.” “On Being Brought” makes a case, therefore, not only for her own Christian piety, but her womanhood/personhood, as it was defined through the dominant gendered value system in which she lived.

of her work. Simplifying Wheatley's rhetorical strategies means reifying the contemporary pressures surrounding Wheatley.

If a newly converted, sincere adolescent could write "On Being Brought," we might remember that the mature woman might still examine the subject position of the foreign-born slave mother through her reimagining of "Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo." In a way, it seems fitting that her work would be so uncomfortable and contentious for critics. The English-language poetry of a kidnapped and enslaved African girl necessarily eludes easy categories. How could it be anything but complicated? But, what do we do with this complication? While the literary critical world would have us tread carefully when applying her life and experience to the poetry she produced, how can we talk about Wheatley's work without talking about the experience of the child and woman, herself? Moreover, why would we want to?

V. Classicism in Wheatley's work

Phillis Wheatley's "To Mæcenus," demonstrates the importance of both writing and reading to the poet. Highlighting the breadth of her classical literary education, the poem sets the tone for the rest of the collection that is as "various" as the title suggests. Her first poem renders reductive Jefferson's critiques of her religiosity and Civil Rights critics' accusations that she was a race traitor. That is, the first poem of the volume is not a religious poem. Through this poem, Wheatley dedicates the collection to a secular literary tradition that she claims as her own, and to those from whom she has learned her craft – particularly to her unexpected racial connection to classical literature through Terence: "Wheatley's bold reminder that Terence was black and her use of neoclassical verse undermines the attempt to marginalize blacks and women from

mastering the codes of elite literary culture” (Walters 6).⁵⁵ Wheatley’s complaint concerning Terence does triple-work: it establishes a long history of black classicism, demonstrates the author’s neoclassical literary proficiency, and deploys a gendered and raced critique of the literary canon. Thus, the poem takes a critical, didactic turn wholly missed by Jefferson: it teaches her readers that the classical tradition, upon which Western literature is founded, has long included writers with African heritage.

African American Writers & Classical Tradition attributes Wheatley’s and Douglass’ textual control to the classical traditions in which each author was trained—Wheatley as a neoclassicist and Douglass as a rhetorician. However, the volume deliberately distinguishes between the educations of each. The authors remind readers that Wheatley’s poetic construction deliberately followed the tradition in which she was educated—an education afforded to her through the particularities of John and Susana Wheatley’s New England household. Phillis Wheatley moved beyond the basic education of her teachers, Susanna and her daughter Mary, to write poetry in the manner of Milton, Dryden, and Pope. Additionally, she not only accomplished a published volume before securing her freedom, but also gained American and English sponsorship as an artist.

Contrastingly, Douglass wrote a completely different set of literary projects than Wheatley, and experienced an education nearly opposite from Wheatley’s regulated home instruction. According to the *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass began his education literally on the streets, gleaning whatever instruction he could from the boys he encountered. In effect, Douglass stole his initial education, his enslavement regulated in a way very different from Wheatley’s. While I would argue that many white slave owners educated the black people

⁵⁵ Anna Julia Cooper later employs this strategy when, in *A Voice from the South* and as I argue in the Introduction, she cites Sappho as the start of women’s literature.

they enslaved in the South,⁵⁶ Douglass's *Narrative* illustrates the illegality of his education and contrasts greatly with the public acknowledgement of the instruction Wheatley experienced. Tatum and Cook investigate how far Douglass' autobiography and novella draw on the tradition of classical rhetoric only to conclude that, unlike Wheatley, Douglass "was not a classicist in any sense of the word." Instead, Douglass' education through *The Columbian Orator* and training as a minister versed him at least as well as Wheatley in *The Bible*; but Douglass' rhetorical style remains one generation removed from the Latin and Greek texts from which the *Orator* mimicked its structure and style. Wheatley's classicism shines a spotlight on the reception of Douglass by Black Arts Movement critics, like Amiri Baraka. The convergence of Wheatley's subject position, her deliberate interventions into the classical literary canon, and her self-reflective foray into mainstream publication, unearths questions about the potentially gendered motivations for Douglass's elevation to exemplar status.

Cook and Tatum argue that in "To Mæcenas," Wheatley blends the voices of the poets that she invokes in her poem, complicating the works of each and, particularly, building "on Vergil's contrast of freedom and servitude" (17). Wheatley undermines her slave position by claiming autonomy and control over her creative production. The speaker of the poem denies her poetic skill, arguing that she "cannot raise the song" that would prove her the worthy poet. "But I

⁵⁶ I make this claim based on the illegality of slave education as regulated particularly in the South, beginning with South Carolina's Act of 1740 which reads: "who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe, in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall, for ever such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds, current money" (Goodell 319). I maintain that within each line of the Slave Code are behaviors that had come into some type of normalcy. Thus, miscegenation must become illegal, because of the large number of cases of cross-race sexual contact and the dangers that this behavior brings to being able to "see" whiteness in America. I argue this point in depth in Chapter 3. For the sake of my discussion of Wheatley, the differences between Douglass's and Wheatley's educations betray the differences in the types of enslavement that each endured. More than that, had Wheatley been enslaved in the South, her education would have resulted in consequences for John and Susanna. Wheatley's and Douglass's literary projects also demonstrate the differences in the types of enslavement that each author experienced. Wheatley's poems, while addressing issues of enslavement, are not in the project of slave abolition; while, Douglass's *Narrative*, novel, and essays became mouthpieces for the Abolition Movement.

less happy, cannot raise the song, / The fault'ring music dies upon my tongue” (ll. 35-36).

Reading Wheatley through Vergil’s *Eclogues*, Cook and Tatum argue that “To Mæcnas” balances a variety of rhetorical moves, including: 1) “an exercise in *recusatio*,” through which Wheatley denies her abilities as a poet while simultaneously raising herself up to the level of Vergil; and 2) a comparison of her own enslaved subject position, which makes her “less happy” than the happy and living Mæcnas. According to Cook and Tatum: “This Mæcnas is an artistic soul fully alive to what the poet has created. These lines are about the power of sympathy, the “softer language” and “diviner airs,” suggest a feminine rather than masculine sympathy. Something like a feminization of heroic male classicism...” (17). Wheatley brings the patron back to life through her work, and thus becomes a patron to Mæcnas that rivals the divine. She suggests unworthiness, partly poetic genuflection to the poets who come before her and also the result of her unhappy lot, and alludes to her enslavement and the socio-political and institutional circumstances that deny the worth of her poetry and her person.

Reinforcing the complaint that she makes earlier in the poem, Wheatley raises her voice to the Muse, asking why her poetry does not reach the perfection of those she’s read along with Terence, Vergil, Homer, and Orpheus. She more subtly raises a question that asks why she, too, has not yet been lauded amongst these authors:

O could I rival thine and Virgil's page,
Or claim the Muses with the Mantuan Sage;
Soon the same beauties should my mind adorn,
And the same ardors in my soul should burn:
Then should my song in bolder notes arise,
And all my numbers pleasingly surprise;
But here I sit, and mourn a grov'ling mind,
That fain would mount, and ride upon the wind. (ll. 23-30)

These lines make a plea to the famous Roman patron who historically recognized and supported poetic talent. She promises that through patronage and fame, her work would become “bolder.”

Having already identified herself as the patrons of all patrons, Wheatley argues for a freedom under no other master—freedom to write the bold words that she cannot while enslaved and surveilled by her owner-patrons. She thus asks Mæcenus to “defend [her] lays” (55) and calls out for additional help, not to the Christian God but to the Muses. In “To Mæcenus,” Wheatley deploys an argument through the rhetoric and style of the classical tradition, and thus aligns her work with that of Homer, Vergil, and Ovid via her invocation of Terence. This intersection of race and classical practice became a template for Black New Woman Katherine Davis Tillman at the turn of the twentieth century.

In her 1902 ode, “Phyllis Wheateley,” Tillman deliberately places Wheatley in a line of American neoclassicism and classicism, aligning her with Terence, and claiming that Wheatley’s verses inspires Tillman’s contemporary black artists beyond the fraught black stage performances popularized throughout the nineteenth century: “Afric poets still are inspired by thee, /And thou wilt help them tune their harps / To grander strains of minstrelsy!” (30-32). Tillman invokes Wheatley’s language of inspiration and flight, positioning Wheatley as her own classical influence. The poem’s speaker argues that her writing and literature will soar above the visual spectacle of race demonstrated on stage through black performance. She situates her Wheatley poem amongst other poems for recitation practice, thereby intervening in the “minstrel” tradition of poetic performance. Keeping in mind the complicated understanding of “minstrelsy” at the turn of the twentieth century (and even the minstrel tradition in the longer European sense), I interpret Tillman’s use of the terminology to mean the composition and performance of poetic song. Still, Tillman promotes “high” black art during a time of burnt cork performances based on

black caricature, and by invoking the minstrel image while lauding Wheatley, Tillman undermines the popular stage performance genre as only promoting stereotype.⁵⁷

Tillman may also be referring to the poem entitled “George Eliot (A Tribute),” written by Abraham Hosking Saunders and published in 1886 (Wright 410-13). Saunders wrote the memorial poem in which he wishes for Eliot, after death, to:

Sleep on, great one! great now, but greater far
In the eternal round to be—
When grander strains of minstrelsy
Than those which in our earthly temples are
Shall fill thy soul with sweetest melody (ll. 48-52)

Tillman’s memorial to Wheatley also seems to claim that Wheatley’s work is “greater far” because she influenced her contemporaries; she assumes that Wheatley’s work will impact generations thereafter. In Tillman’s hands, Wheatley’s heritage spans Ancient times to Victorian England, beyond Jefferson, and then forward and through the turn of the twentieth century. The poem presents Wheatley as a black genius, an alternative racial performance available to late nineteenth century readers and those practicing the art of recitation.

As part of the “Recitations” section in her collection, Tillman pays homage to a racial and gendered literary tradition that begins with Wheatley. She also identifies Wheatley’s Christian conversion and genius as an inextricable portion of the tradition Tillman maps. In the mode of Wheatley, Tillman’s stanzas “suggest a feminine rather than masculine sympathy. Something like a feminization of heroic male classicism” (Cook and Tatum 17). Tillman highlights the feminine inspiration for Wheatley’s conversion, the Christian salvation gifted to Wheatley by her mistress and painted (and revered) in Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America”:

A woman’s generous sympathies awoke
And thou wert christened with a woman’s tears.

⁵⁷ My reading is partially influenced by Daphne Brooks’s reading of subversion in the blackface performances by Burt Williams and George Walker. See Brooks’s *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (2006).

Oh, little did she dream that genius rare
Slumbered within thy childish brain
Or that the time would come when thou
Wouldst lasting fame obtain;
But nurtured by a Christian woman's care (7-14)

Tillman argues that Wheatley's "genius" awakes through her conversion and as a result of her tutelage by her benevolent female patron and owner. Alluding to the gratitude that Wheatley communicates in "On Being Brought from Africa to America," Tillman pushes her audience to recognize the complex relationship between Wheatley and Susanna, one that produced Wheatley's anomalous career. Tillman connects her ode to Wheatley's own educational practice, the classical education that included language study and imitation. In "All beautiful in woe": Gender, Nation, and Phillis Wheatley's "Niobe," Jennifer Woe reminds her readers that Wheatley wrote and published while classical education suffered tremendous scrutiny and ridicule in America. The transition between education-for-the-privileged and public education included a sharp criticism of the potentially negative influence of classical education on boys. Classical education included the study of Greek and Latin as well as the imitation and recitation of works in those languages. Tillman acknowledges and argues for this type of educational practice by creating her own set of "Recitations."

Tillman does not linger on an argument concerning Wheatley's religion but concentrates instead on the feminine space that gives birth to the poet. In Tillman's verse, Wheatley is "christened with a woman's tears," reborn through Susanna's care. This anointed young woman created poetry worthy of international praise that remains, one hundred years later and during Tillman's lifetime, important to the world of black and American letters.

In "To Mæcenas," Wheatley identifies herself as the source of her own conversion. She acknowledges the influence of her woman owner-patron; however, Wheatley deems herself a

patron in her own right when she removes herself the laurels from Mæcenus's head and lays them upon Homer's crown (Cook and Tatum 14): "I'll snatch a laurel from thine honour'd head, / While you indulgent smile upon the deed" (ll. 46-47). Taking the honor of crowning the poet Homer herself, Wheatley claims her genius and conversion as part of her poetics. In particular, she claims herself a patron of Homer. Wheatley, as the narrator of the poem, displaces all other patrons, including Susanna, , and the authenticating documents published within the original volume of *Poems on Various Subjects*. She subverts her initial claims to unworthiness by standing before Homer and valuing his work: the lines suggests that she herself is a worthy judge and critic (read: classicist), not only poet (read: neoclassical writer). "To Mæcenus," then, works not only as an *ars poetica*; it also lays claim to her critical engagement with the classics. The poem casts Wheatley as a supporter of the classical writers through her criticism as much as her creative poetic production.

Wheatley simultaneously bridges the racial gap between herself and Susanna and deploys particularly gendered critiques of patronage through her epyllion, "Niobe in Distress." Wheatley explores the tragic position of Niobe, a mother of sixteen children who is rendered childless at the whim of the goddess, Latona. At the time that Wheatley pens the poem, she has yet to become a mother. Meanwhile, and as I explored earlier in this chapter, Susanna Wheatley has suffered the death of at least one daughter. Moreover, John Wheatley's purchase of Wheatley may have been intended to supplement his and Susanna's loss. Thus, "Niobe in Distress" explores a loss that directly relates to Susanna's history. The power structures governing Susanna's position as mournful mother and slave owner defies comparison to that of an enslaved mother losing her child through the American slave system of bodies controlled, sold, maimed, and murdered. And yet, bringing together Tillman's reminder to her readers of gendered

connection between both Wheatley and Susana with Wheatley's "Niobe in Distress," the racial divide becomes restructured along gender lines. While not yet a mother, Wheatley's enslaved black female subjectivity determined that the status of her future children would follow her condition and be subject to the whims and interests of their slave owners. Both Wheatley and Susanna are women who, through subject position or actual experience, know what it means to have no control over the fate of their children. Mortality rates and the precariousness of birth (even now) link all mothers to this potential grief.

VI. Niobe's Rebellious Countrywomen: Ovid's Arachne

The story of Niobe was known to Homer, as evidenced in the last book of the *Iliad* (Cook 6) and in the 1960s, the classical anthropologist R.C. Cook traced this story to at least the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. The fates of Niobe's children, the Niobids, were glazed upon pottery and painted on marble long before Vergil and Ovid wrote them into poetry. The story has many iterations, but the oldest Greek versions usually includes the story of one woman, Niobe, who offends the goddess Leto, the mother of Diana and Apollo. Claiming fertility and maternity as the basis for feminine value, Niobe compares herself to the goddess and claims that Leto deserves no worship because she has only two children. As punishment for the offense, the goddess sends those children, the very reason for Niobe's critique of the goddess, to kill all of the Niobids. Depicted in art and literature from anywhere between four to fourteen children, the Niobids are shot with arrows by Apollo and Diana. Sometimes their mother witnessed their deaths, sometimes they are out of her sight. Reportedly, the story maintained its symbolism, regardless of the number of children depicted and without Niobe's presence: the collective suffering of the Niobids signifies their mother's mistake and punishment. Even *in absentia*,

Niobe embodies extreme maternal grief and warning for those who challenge the worth of a god or goddess.

In Ovid's version of the Niobe myth, Niobe is a foreign-born queen of Thebes who interferes in the preparation for Latona's (in Greek: Leto's) festival. Appearing in Book VI of *Metamorphoses* (ll. 146-312), Niobe's story immediately follows Ovid's account of Arachne (ll. 1-145), a childhood friend and countrywoman of Niobe. Punished by Pallas for hubris not unlike Niobe's, Arachne offends Pallas when she denies that he taught her how to weave and simultaneously claims that her weaving is superior to anyone else's. Arachne's offense, therefore, is twofold: she denies Pallas's status as revered teacher and creator of human skill, and she rebels against the god-human hierarchy by claiming herself superior to a god. Crucial to her connection to Niobe, Arachne argues the value of her human production: Arachne weaves a tapestry—her artistic production—as Niobe creates her children. Through the stories of Arachne and Niobe, Ovid considered the risk for women, claiming their value through their unique production. Each of the characters challenges the authority of the gods and rebels against the power structures that expose women to acts of undeserved violence deemed as “punishment” by the gods.

Upon hearing Arachne deny her status and assuming that she will win, Pallas disguises herself as an old woman and challenges Arachne to a contest of weaving skill. Pallas weaves a beautiful tapestry with the pantheon of gods at its center, and Jupiter featured in the middle as king. She also depicts her battle with Neptune, a battle that she won (ll. 70-71, 75-77). Her work reinforces the celestial hierarchy and underscores her rightful place amongst the gods with her own image prominently representing her as a warrior:

at sibi dat clipeum, dat acutae cuspidis hastam,
dat galeam capiti, defenditur aegide pectus,
percussamque sua simulat de cuspide terram

edere cum bacis fetum canentis olivae;
mirarique deos: operis Victoria finis. (ll. 78-82)

Giving herself a shield, sharp-pointed spear, a helmet upon her head, and a protective aegis, she points her spear to the ground and from which olives grow to the admiration of gods who recognize her work as Victory [over Neptune].

Pallas Minerva takes on not only her battle regalia, but depicts herself as the creator of nature, and specifically fruit-bearing olive trees. The progenitor of trees, and thus a creator in her own right, Pallas takes her place among a pantheon of gods who regard her powers with awe and as greater than that of Neptune. In an attempt to undermine Arachne's denial of her weaving ability, Pallas asserts her revered place among the gods, and thus makes an argument that she deserves Arachne's respect.

Surrounding the central portraits, Pallas weaves four examples of humans punished by gods for various offenses, not unlike Arachne's crime against her. Pallas provides these examples as additional warning to Arachne of the potential consequences of the contest ("ut tamen exemplis intellegat aemula laudis, / quod pretium speret pro tam furialibus ausis," ll. 83-84). And, perhaps because Pallas wears a disguise, Arachne does not understand that she has guaranteed her own punishment long before she agrees to the contest. In the four corners of her tapestry, Pallas depicts Haemus, transformed into ice-capped mountains,⁵⁸ the Pygmy queen, and Antigone (who are each turned into birds by Juno), and finally Cinyras, who is prostrate, embracing the temple steps that were once the bodies of his daughters. These figures, and particularly Haemus, remind readers of humans who dared to place themselves at the level of the gods. The Pygmy queen and Antigone each claim to be more beautiful than Juno, and thus insult

⁵⁸ Some versions of this story suggest that both Haemus and his wife were both transformed into mountains. If we include his wife in the Ovidian version, then all of Pallas's examples are transformed women, and underscore her tapestry as a warning for Arachne. This is also the place that, in Book X, Orpheus exiles himself after he fails to rescue Eurydice from Hades.

the goddess.⁵⁹ And much like Arachne's blindness to divine order, she further ignores Pallas's cautionary tales and answers the tapestry with her own historical account of human and god interaction.

Undermining Pallas's work and sealing her tragic fate, Arachne weaves a tapestry accounting for no fewer than 12 examples of "caelestia crimina" (l. 131) of gods assuming disguises and raping human women. Arachne rewrites Pallas's depictions of human transformation and instead weaves images of gods who transform so that they might victimize women. Like Pallas's finished work, Arachne depicts Neptune: Ovid thereby reminds readers of a god who in previous books was responsible for a variety of crimes against women. She also features Jupiter, not as the king of the gods, but as a sexual criminal—and does so six different times. Ovid tells us that Pallas cannot deny the quality of Arachne's work. Despite (and perhaps because of) this, Pallas strikes Arachne twice in the head with her shuttle, and curses Arachne and all of her future progeny, saying: "lexque eadem poenae, ne sis secura futuri, / dicta tuo generi serisque nepotibus esto!" ("[I] rule this same punishment, do not [presume your] secure future, / also upon the race of your grandchildren forever!" l. 137-38). The goddess transforms Arachne's body but also curses the future "dicta" or language of Arachne's future children. Thus, Pallas turns Arachne into a spider, not only as a means of punishment, but to quash any future creative production that reports the criminal behavior of the gods. The lesson, it would seem, persists: people remain subject to the god's desires. Human production, the replication or representation of their humanity—whether in the form of children or poetry—remains always threatened and mediated through those gods. In this particular instance, Pallas's desire for reverence supersedes any success of Arachne's. And yet, considering the unfolding of the story, and the fact that Arachne answers Pallas's god-centered and human-punished art with her own

⁵⁹ Antigone claims to have more beautiful hair.

version of (mythological) history, Ovid suggests that Arachne must first interpret Pallas' work before she provides her response. In short: Arachne fully understands and chooses not to heed Pallas's warnings. Perhaps for Arachne and those who would hear (and write) her story, rebellion may be worth the risk. At the very least, rebellion forever marks Arachne's body and the bodies of all who follow her.

The text of Arachne's story transitions into Niobe's, Arachne thus motivating Niobe's rebellion. With the "rumor" of Arachne's transformation "roaring" to a variety of places, Niobe hears of her countrywoman's punishment ("Lydia tota fremit, Phrygiaeque per oppida facti / rumor it et magnum sermonibus occupat orbem," ll. 146-47), which has torn the communities of Asia Minor ("Lydia"), including Phrygia. It eventually reaches Thebes and inspires Niobe's outrage for her countrywoman. It also motivates Niobe to offend the goddess—the result of which will end no better for Niobe than her childhood friend. Niobe is introduced through the end of Arachne's story and as Arachne's countrywoman whose husband and wealth do not bring her as much pride as her children. Already, the source of Niobe's pride frames the unfolding of her story. Thus, for Ovid, it will be her love of her children combined with her outrage over Arachne's fate that drives Niobe's actions. Arachne and Niobe's relationship—the significance of Arachne's story for Niobe, the national connection between the women, as well as the similarities in the stories of each—extends Ovid's representation of human value in relation to the gods, but also the way that Book X confirms the cost of human rebellion against divine claims of power.

VII. Ovidian Niobe's Pride and Punishment

Ovid's version of Niobe's tale both defies and reinforces the warning emerging from Arachne's fate. In the wake of learning about Arachne's transformation into a spider, and adding to Arachne's defiance against the gods, Niobe interrupts the Theban women's preparations for Latona's feast. Arguing that Latona is less of a goddess than herself, Niobe counts her own ancestry in her evidence against Latona's status, arguing that her grandfathers, the god and titan, Jove and Atlas, respectively, qualify her as a goddess in her own right. She further argues that if fertility is the mark of goddess-ness, she is more of a goddess than Latona because she has 14 children, while Latona only has two ("digna dea facies; huc natus adice septem / et totidem iuvenes et mox generosque nurusque!": Ll. 182-83). Convinced either by Niobe's case or status as queen, the Theban women cease their preparations and remove their laurels, crowns worn for the festival that represent the blessings bestowed to them by their patron god. Latona sees her festival arrangements end as a result of Niobe's claims and becomes indignant at Niobe's insolence. She then stakes a greater claim to motherhood, arguing that she is also Niobe's mother, and therefore claims Niobe and the Niobids as her own ("Indignata dea est summoque in vertice Cynthi / talibus est dictis gemina cum prole locuta: / *'en ego vestra parens...*' ll. 204-06, my italics). Next, she calls her children, Diana and Apollo to go Thebes and kill all of Niobe's children as punishment for the insult. The crimes of one mother against another, Niobe's denial of Latona's children, bind the divine family together in outrage. By claiming to be Niobe's mother, Latona's vengeance manifests as mother enacting vengeance against her own daughter. Furthermore, by dispatching Apollo and Diana to exact her revenge, Latona proves the might of her divine children versus Niobe's mortal many. Children kill children, and the mothers witness the destruction, one to her satisfaction, and the other to her ruin.

Apollo reaches Thebes and kills each of Niobe's sons as the boys are in the midst of any variety of activities. As Apollo's quills find and end them, each boy is identified by name and recreation. The first dies while riding his horse. Apollo shoots two boys, oiled and wrestling, with one single arrow. The boys die while still embracing one another, "pectora pectoribus" (l. 243). The last of the boys to die has enough time to implore Apollo to spare him ("parcite!" l. 264); however, while time allows for the plea, it is too late for the arrow. Apollo hears the boy's cries and is moved by the entreaties only after the quill has been released. This last boy dies of the shallowest wound: the arrow piercing his heart. The Theban oracle rushes to tell Niobe of the attack on her sons, and Niobe gets to the scene after all of the boys are dead. Upon hearing about the slaughter, Niobe's husband takes his own life.

Niobe then appeals to Latona's mercy, and yet, in her appeal she can't help reminding Latona that even if the killing stops with the boys, Niobe still has more children than Latona. Much in the same way that Arachne refused Pallas' warning, Niobe holds fast to her claim of superior motherhood while surrounded by the blood of her sons: "...exsulta victrixque inimica triumpha! / cur autem victrix? miserae mihi plura supersunt, / quam tibi felici; post tot quoque funera vinco!" ("you have triumphed! / What is this triumph? Still, in my great misery, / I am happier than you; for [even though there are so many] victims, I win [because I still have more children than you]!" ll. 283-85). Of course, Niobe's victory speech is met with more arrows, this time by Diana, and Niobe witnesses all of her daughters die. Like the boys, Diana kills each girl one at a time. However, the girls' murders take up much less space on the page than their brothers.' Readers do not learn Niobe's daughter's names or recreations. Also, unlike their brothers, the girls anticipate their end, and run to and fro, trying to avoid Diana's perfect aim. One daughter even runs towards Niobe as if to shield or comfort her mother from the horror and

grief of watching her die. Finally, Niobe is left with only one daughter, whom she embraces while, finally and without any hubris left, begging for her child's life. To answer, an arrow pierces the body of the last daughter, still being held by the heartbroken mother. Children and husband gone, Niobe returns to her homeland and petrifies, the transformation directly resulting from her grief. Her body turns into to stone that eternally weeps.

VIII. Niobe, Revisited: Wheatley's "Niobe in Distress"

The entire title of Wheatley's poem, "Niobe in Distress for her Children slain by Apollo, from *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Book VI. and from a view of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson," resituates the Niobe myth not only within the milieu of Augustan Rome, but also in the mid-eighteenth-century British context.⁶⁰ The thirty-fourth poem in a collection of 39, "Niobe in Distress" follows a poem dedicated to a father's loss of his adult daughter. A poem written and dedicated to "A Young African Painter" follows "Niobe," in which Wheatley lauds the work of "S.M." whose art gives the narrator's "soul delight" (l. 5). At least 14 the poems in the collection are memorial poems dedicated to a variety of lost figures and illuminating any number of relationships effected by the losses. Three of the poems are dedicated to parents who lost infants, another three to mothers or fathers loosing children of different ages. It is fitting, then, that a poem concerning the classical story of child death and maternal mourning lands in this collection; however, it is particularly important that Niobe's story of mass loss exists between a

⁶⁰ Wilson's painting, "The Destruction of Niobe's Children," depicts Niobe in her still human form and reaching, in terror, towards her still living daughters who are threatened by the stretched bows of Apollo and Diana. Two of Niobe's sons lie at her feet, and three girls reach to the heavens, imploring Latona, Apollo, and Diana, to have mercy. While her arms reach towards the girls, Niobe's eyes cast downward and away from them, indicating the inevitable and tragic end to the story. The deep hues of the painting, blues, greens, and greys, evoke signifying storms, and Mt. Sisyphus looms in the background, foreshadowing Niobe's transformation. Wilson's dark and saturated oil on canvas leaves his audience caught in the worst of possible liminal space—where terror meets mourning. I accessed Wilson's painting through Yale News, the report of the Yale Center for British Art's 2014 exhibition of landscapes ("Lush Landscapes").

poem dedicated to paternal bereavement and another that describes the visual art of an African artist. Therefore, Thomas Hubbard and Scipio Moorehead⁶¹ serve to frame “Niobe in Distress” for the reading audience.⁶² According to Gates, the slave-holding and peddling Hubbard participated on the inquiry side during Wheatley’s authenticity trial (15). Moorehead, a painter and poet,⁶³ created the famous portrait of Wheatley, published as the frontispiece engraving of *Poems on Various Subjects* and included in subsequent republished collections of Wheatley’s work. “Niobe in Distress,” then, was published between poetic discussions of child loss and African creative production, subject matter central to Wheatley’s portrayal of Niobe.

Demonstrating her critical reading abilities along with her poetic competency, Wheatley alters the Ovidian Niobe story—shifting her audience’s focus rather than changing any events within the myth. Niobe remains haughty and full of pride concerning the number of her children. She certainly interrupts the Theban women, convincing them to put down their laurels and therefore inflaming Latona’s fury. There are, however, three distinct and important ways that Wheatley changes the Ovid: 1) in the form of the poem, where Wheatley writes “Niobe” as an epyllia with heroic couplets and in iambic pentameter; and 2) in the content of the poem, where Latona identifies Niobe’s sentiments and the actions of the Theban women as “rebellion”; and 3) in the poem’s ending, when Wheatley does not describe Niobe transforming into stone but ends as she still holds the cooling body of her dead daughter:

One only daughter lives, and she the least;
The queen close clasp’d the daughter to her breast:

⁶¹ Moorehead’s contribution to the Wheatley frontispiece is cited in several articles in John C. Field’s edited collection, *New Essays on Phillis Wheatley* (2011).

⁶² There is no evidence that Wheatley organized the final manuscript, so I am not claiming the framework for “Niobe in Distress” as her deliberate intervention. However, it remains important to analyze the ways in which Wheatley’s other work provides a context for her reading audience. Moreover, reading the two poems that border “Niobe in Distress” puts Wheatley’s discussion of Niobe into the particular context experienced by reading the collection straight through.

⁶³ “Still, wondrous youth! each noble path pursue; / On deathless glories fix thine ardent view: / Still may the painter’s and the poet’s fire, / To aid thy pencil and thy verse conspire!” (ll. 7-10).

“Ye heav’nly pow’rs, ah spare me one,” she cry’d,
“Ah! spare me one,” the vocal hills reply’d:
“In vain she begs, the Fates her suit deny,
“In her embrace she sees her daughter die” (ll. 207-2012)

The original 1773 printing of *Poems on Various Subjects* ends the poem with the above lines.

Added at some later date,⁶⁴ an additional stanza with conspicuous quotation marks closes the poem with the transformed Niobe and with the following note added to the beginning line (line 213): “This verse to the end is the work of another hand” (Wheatley 1).⁶⁵ While the changes to form seem inevitable because of the intersection of literary trend and classic mimetic practice—meaning by the latter, the rewriting of previously written works into more modern forms.

Grouping these changes together, Wheatley significantly recasts the figure of Niobe as far more complicated than simply a woman who purposely defies the goddess through the story of her children. Instead, Wheatley’s Niobe is a woman whose very claim to her children *is the act* of rebellion. She no longer stands as a memorial to a mother’s grief. Instead, and like the Niobe in

⁶⁴ The collection entitled *Poems of Phillis Wheatley: A Native African and a Slave* (1838) included the additional stanza. This was the earliest example that I could find of this addition.

⁶⁵ I will not attend to this additional stanza in my analysis of “Niobe in Distress,” because there remains an outstanding question of its author; however, I wish to acknowledge that this is one of the many ways that editorial handiwork presents itself in Wheatley’s work. Moreover, my analysis relies upon getting as close as possible to Wheatley’s original work as a means of evaluating her literary projects. Fortunately, this stanza was footnoted at an early date, allowing me to weigh this potential for this to be Wheatley’s footnote or an addition at the hand of an editor who felt it necessary to “complete” her poem. The creation of this stanza highlights Wheatley’s (and Ovid’s) argument concerning the dangers facing a rebellious poet. Additionally, the quotation marks surrounding the stanza suggest a different style, particularly because it contains only a narrator’s voice and the earlier version, what I consider the “original,” only marks character speech in quotation marks:

“The queen of all her family bereft,
Without or husband, son, or daughter left,
Grew stupid at the shock. The passing air
Made no impression on her stiff’ning hair.
The blood forsook her face: amidst the flood
Pour’d from her cheeks, quite fix’d her eye-balls stood.
Her tongue, her palate both obdurate grew,
Her curdled veins no longer motion knew;
The use of neck, and arms, and feet was gone,
And ev’n her bowels hard’ned into stone:
A marble statue now the queen appears,
But from the marble steal the silent tears.” (ll. 213-24)

Wilson's painting, she emerges reconstituted in flesh and blood, her grief warm, breathing, and palpable.

The problem for Wheatley is not only that Niobe staked her claim of worship-worthiness on the day of Latona's feast. Rather, the problem is that she would claim her children at all. In a world of Greek mythology, certainly one's claim to anything is, at best, precarious. The gods often create high stakes for humans as a result of their petty and jealous whims. At any time, they could be listening. But certainly, if there were any day that Latona would have her ears and sights upon Thebes, it would be her feast day. And what Latona hears is Niobe claiming her noble heritage and the children that prove her goddess status. Niobe's "pride" exceeds Latona's tolerance and her "rebel mind" must be whipped. Latona's punishment performs double work: it removes the source of Niobe's pride and also tempers the mind that would rebel against her.

The children not only follow the condition of their mother, but also serve as the bodies upon which their mother's punishment is enacted. Latona's punishment is twofold: she punishes Niobe, directly, for her impudence and also punishes the children as an extension of their mother. Latona demonstrates her power by sending Apollo and Diana to do her bidding; she proves to Niobe and all of the women who ceased preparations for her feast that her two children were more powerful than all of Niobe's. In a battle between the mothers, the children's bodies are at risk in the war. Acting as proxies for their mothers, the children embody the will or lack of will of their mothers. If Niobe is the black enslaved mother, Latona serves as the white mother-nation. The poem replicates the growing plantation populace—the small white family who wields power over a large population of enslaved black persons. For Wheatley, Latona is the United States whose guns, will, and re-casting of African slavery bends the black body to achieve her goals. Latona is the torturer-slave-master.

IX. Niobe's Rebellion, Hubris, and Claim to Human Value

Wheatley's poetic form keeps Niobe couched within in the epic tradition. In the popular style of eighteenth-century poetry, and particularly the rewriting of Greek and Roman works by Alexander Pope and John Dryden, Wheatley does not translate Niobe out of the epic form, but rather modernizes her and shifts her directly into a contemporary context. In Wheatley's work, Niobe becomes a rebellious eighteenth-century black heroine—foreign-born, full of pride, and challenging the inequality between herself and powers that control her.

Honoring Ovid's interest in female hubris, Wheatley stresses the Turkish-born Theban queen's prideful love for her children as her motivation for her crimes against Latona, Apollo, and Diana.

Where'er I turn my eyes vast wealth I find.
Lo! here an empress with a goddess join'd.
What, shall a *Titaness* be deify'd,
To whom the spacious earth a couch den'd?
Nor heav'n, nor earth, nor sea receiv'd your queen,
'Till pitying *Delos* took the wand'rer in.
Round me what a large progeny is spread!
No frowns of fortune has my soul to dread.
What if indignant she decrease my train
More than *Latona's* number will remain? (ll. 73-82)

Wealth, pedigree, and number of children account for Niobe's claim to worship. She builds a case against the preparations for Latona's feast and challenges the standards governing religious deference. Cook and Tatum point out that in Ovid's version, Niobe implicates and condemns the Theban women. "Ovid characterizes the [hubris] of Niobe quite directly, and gives greater space to her obnoxious comments, including her anger at the Theban women for daring to honor Latona rather than herself" (42). Wheatley frames Niobe's actions further as insurrection, repeating the words "rebel" and "rebellion" together three times in Latona's quoted speech.

Latona's words in Wheatley's poem and the presence of Arachne's story in Ovid's poem both stress that Niobe's interruption of the feast is rebellion. And yet, while she does thwart the feast preparations, the women do not begin to worship Niobe. Wheatley paints the scene of Niobe's rebellion:

[“]Then hence, ye *Theban* dames, hence haste away,
No longer off’rings to *Latona* pay?
Regard the order of *Amphion*’s spouse,
And take the leaves of laurel from your brows.”
Niobe spoke. The *Theban* maids obey’d,
Their brows unbound, and left the rights unpaid. (Wheatley, ll. 83-88)

Ovid's version of the same moment in the story unfolds:

“quis furor auditos” inquit “praeponere visis
caelestes? aut cur colitur Latona per aras,
numen adhuc sine ture meum est? mihi Tantalus auctor,
cui licuit soli superiorum tangere mensas;
[...]
ite—satis pro re sacri—laurumque capillis
ponte!” deponunt et sacra infecta relinquunt,
quodque licet, tactio venerantur murmure numen. (ll. 170-73, 201-03)

“What madness is this?” she asked, “to prefer what you cannot see /in heaven? Or why is Latona worshiped at the altars; / When my incense is still unlit? I have Tantalus, / The only mortal ever allowed to touch the table [of the gods, on Mt. Olympus]; / [...] / Quickly, go! Cast off your laurel / wreaths.” And they [the Theban women] left their sacrifices unfinished / to the goddess whom they still [secretly] worshiped.

In both Ovid and Wheatley, there is no evidence that Niobe desires that Theban women worship her. Despite her complaint (“When my incense is still unlit?”), Niobe is additionally concerned with disrupting Latona's rites and questioning the requisite elements for divinity than achieving worship for and of herself. However, the Theban women in Ovid's rendition leave the scene still desiring to worship Latona, although keeping it to themselves, whispering Latona's rites as protests and under their breaths (“tactio venerantur *murmure* numen,” my italics). Ovid's Theban women do not fully ascribe to the change in the system of worship, but do what they are told, in part because Niobe reminds them of her earthly powers while standing before them.

Latona's absence enables and inflames Niobe's rebellion—just as slave rebellions were more likely to occur in spaces with absentee or outnumbered landowners. Wheatley's Theban women do not protest Niobe's instruction. Instead, in her version of Thebes, the women simply take off their laurels and abandon their stations. In short, Wheatley's Niobe more successfully instigates Theban rebellion against Latona. Casting off the laurels, the physical symbols of deity worship (Gruen 10), the Theban women release themselves from the rites of the goddess and signify unity with Niobe's rebellion. Freeing their heads (and minds) from the confines of Latona—the unseen, “new sprung deity” (l. 65)—the Theban women set themselves free. Again, returning to the legacy of rebellion begun by Arachne, Niobe's actions disrupt and challenge the order established by the gods. Niobe challenges the value system that makes Latona worthy of worship, and rebels against a system that keeps intact an arbitrary hierarchy.

Throughout *Metamorphoses*, Ovid accuses the gods of any variety of arbitrary crimes that directly affect the lives and often the very corporeality of humans. Arachne's tapestry serves as a summary of some of these crimes and particularly accents those violent crimes against women. When discussing twentieth-century African American adaptations of Homer's work, Patrice Rankine reminds us that the “classical authors who adapted Homer's characters were writing under one regime or other: a religious order in which man is subject to capricious gods; an autocratic regime; or even an ostensibly egalitarian, democratic rule that denies the humanity of a foreign woman” (38). Rankine argues that the works of Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison respond not only to the plotlines and forms of works by Aeschylus and Sophocles, but also to the factors influencing these latter authors' revisions to Homer. I apply this theory to Wheatley's interpretations of Ovid. For instance, Wheatley shares a version of exile that Ovid also experienced in his lifetime. Ovid wrote *Metamorphoses* under the reign of Caesar Augustus, and

found himself in exile at during the last ten years of his life and career (Anderson 2 xii).

Wheatley, as I've already pointed out, held a precarious position of forced exile from her place of birth and then as enslaved and somewhat adopted. Both Ovid and Wheatley stress Niobe's foreignness. As one of "Afric's sable race," foreign born, enslaved in the northern United States, and denied the acumen for verse layered with "sentiment," Wheatley held a foreign subject position in the United States not unlike Niobe in Ancient Thebes. In the midst of the historical corruption of motherhood through chattel slavery, Wheatley conjures American images of the foreign mother who ultimately possesses no control over the fate of her children.

Like her countrywoman, Arachne, Niobe denies the system that would subordinate her to a goddess and deny her self-defined social value. She does not desire to be put in the place of Latona, but rather challenges the notion that Latona would be in a place above her. As Wheatley's Latona observes, Niobe desires equalization.

[“]Niobe sprung from *Tantalus* inspires
Each *Theban* bosom with rebellious fires;
No reason her imperious temper quells,
But all her father in her tongue rebels;
Wrap her own sons for her blaspheming breath,
Apollo! wrap them in the shades of death.”
Latona ceas'd, and ardent thus replies,
The God, whose glory decks th' expanded skies.

“Cease thy complaints, mine be the task assign'd
To punish pride, and scourge the rebel mind.”
This *Phæbe* join'd.—They wing their instant flight; (ll. 95-105)

Niobe continues her family's legacy of human sacrifice and blasphemy, initially shown by her father, Tantalus, who sacrificed his own child and fed the baby to the gods in Olympus. As a reversal of Tantalus's story, Niobe's children will die as her punishment and simultaneously serve as the sacrifice to Latona on her feast day—the human sacrifice for which the gods once punished Tantalus. Sacrifice doesn't lead to Niobe's redemption, but rather to her being fixed in

agony and condemned to eternal suffering. Ovid's Niobe becomes frozen in her agony, transformed into eternally weeping stone, a monument to her hubris and to Latona's power. More than expressing her "indignance" upon hearing Niobe's insults, Latona accuses her of inspiring "rebellious fires" in the Theban women. Latona acknowledges the danger in Niobe's influence, and ties that to Niobe's paternity. For Latona, Niobe continues in her father's custom: she disrupts the sanctity of the gods' rule and steps above her place, thereby threatening the entire system. Within the context of the Atlantic slave trade, the Tantalus story acquires new resonance: Tantalus feeds his son's body to the gods as Africa feeds the slavery engine. As part of the American national project, the American founders were compared to members of the ruling Greek and Roman classes – this comparison orchestrated through and partly justified by the founders' classical educations. In this, I am reminded of the political cartoons of the nineteenth century, which drew imagistic lines between consumption of the slave body and the politics of the country surrounding slavery:

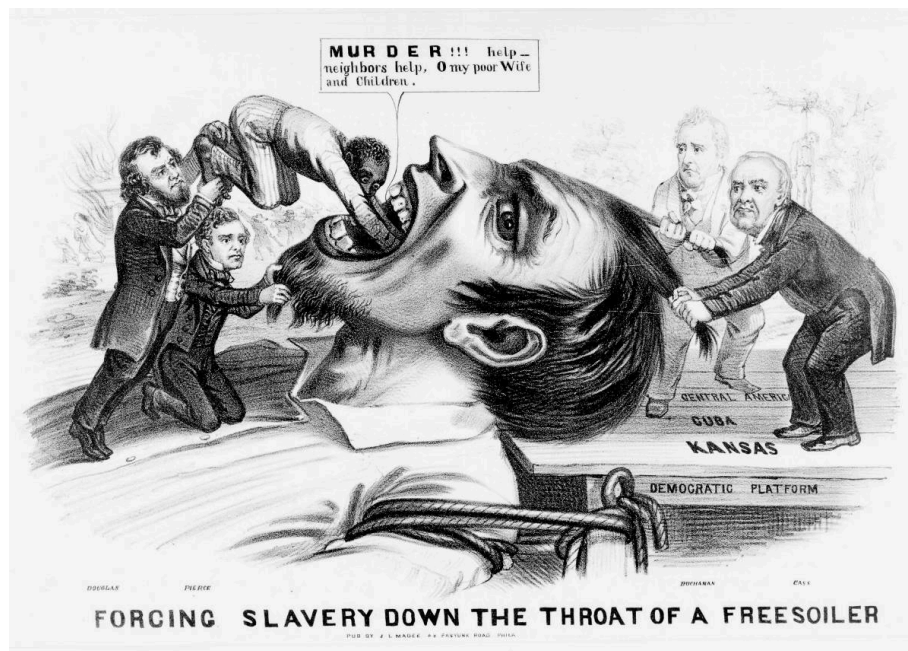


Fig. 1 "Forcing slavery down the throat of a freesoiler" by John L. Magee c.1856

Tantalus desecrates the Olympian table by serving his son, an insult after being invited as the first and only human to dine with the gods. The 1856 cartoon, above, argues the concerns of “free states” pressured by “slave states” to legalize slavery. The consumed slave body is literally murdered, as the historical record shows; and figuratively “murdered” through the proliferation of slavery. This complicates the notion of Tantalus as a “rebel” against the gods. Instead of only defying or defiling the gods by feeding the gods his son, Tantalus reveals the gods’ collective relationship with humanity. Gods consume the bodies of people, and particularly women, through sexual and other acts of violence. The complex relationship between human worship and the all-consuming gods, then, is supported by Wheatley’s grateful sentiments in “On Being Brought.” Following the rites means saving one’s life. Rebellion from the gods, from the system that enslaves you, means revealing the flaws in the system. Thus, while Latona claims that Niobe follows in her father’s image, Wheatley suggests that the mother/daughter relationship between Latona and Niobe bears a closer family resemblance, and draws sharper correlations between the goddess and the rebellious queen.

After Niobe also “hears” of her son’s deaths, she expresses her own “indignant” feelings. Like Latona, Niobe believes herself undeserving of injury. Moreover, each woman calls the name of Jove, and identifies herself as deserving of Jove’s protection.

The angry goddess heard, then silence broke
On *Cynthus*’ summit, and indignant spoke;
“*Phæbus!* behold, thy mother in disgrace,
Who to no goddess yields the prior place
Except to *Juno*’s self, who reigns above,
The spouse and sister of the thund’ring *Jove*.”] (ll.89-94)

[...]

On the swift wings of ever-flying *Fame*

To *Cadmus*' palace soon the tidings came:
Niobe heard, and with indignant eyes
She thus express'd her anger and surprise:
"Why is such privilege to them allow'd?
Why thus insulted by the *Delian* god?
Dwells there such mischief in the pow'rs above?
Why sleeps the vengeance of immortal *Jove*?" (ll. 161-168)

Both Latona and Niobe are related to Jove and expect his protection. Latona holds herself in a position similar to Ovid's Pallas, nearly central to the pantheon and solidly positioned above all earthly women. Like the wings carrying Apollo and Diana to slay Niobe's children, *Fame*, standing in for the town gossip of Ovid's version, brings Niobe the news of her sons' murders. Niobe hears of the attack upon her sons before she sees any evidence, and Wheatley's line break (l. 163) suggests that through the news that the scene rises to Niobe's vision. The contradiction, that "*Niobe* heard, and with indignant eyes" marks the point of her initial trauma—where her senses and sense of "privilege" blur. Latona wins this contest and squashes Niobe's rebellious nature by eliminating Niobe's primary claim to greatness.

X. Conclusion: Wheatley and Black New Women of the Late Nineteenth-Century

I return, now, to Tillman's essay and poem featuring Phillis Wheatley. The "courtly praise" Tillman identifies as originating from both white American and European audiences and "lade"/laid upon Wheatley underscores the class-based, eighteenth-century cultural values influencing the publication of Wheatley's work. The rising Victorian American bourgeoisie in New England followed in English footsteps and valued socio-economic class through frameworks of educational gentility and intellectual-celebrity (concerns that continue to plague these cultures). Like her name, "Phillis" remains always linked to the slaver that brought her to American shores, and these class concerns are "lade" upon Wheatley. Her poetry, therefore,

betrays signs of these class-based pressures at every turn, demonstrating piety, erring on the side of formality, and genuflecting towards a largely Eurocentric literary canon. Moreover, the “attention” that Wheatley “attracted” was not cost-less. Instead, Wheatley’s poetry bears the marks of her complicated and largely tragic biography:

Thy verses with their melancholy strain
Breathed from a soul so filled with poesy
Won my friends to thee, O Phyllis dear,
And made thy mistress more than proud of thee.
And Washington, our nation’s chief,
Paid tribute to thee, gifted Afric maid,
Much pleasure found in the lines thy dark hands penned
And thou with courtly praise did lade.

And England, too, applauded thee, dear one,
And read thy graceful versus, with all pride.
Alas, that thou while in the bloom of life
Thy earthly task gave o’er—and died!
But, ah, thy memory is still green,
And Afric poets still are inspired by thee,
And thou wilt help them tune their harps
To grander strains of minstrelsy!

Through counting Wheatley’s admirers, Wheatley’s “mistress,” and the leader of the nation in which Wheatley’s enslavement was legal, Tillman reminds her readers that Wheatley’s “melancholy” poetry remains tied to her subject position: her enslavement, her kidnapping, her genius, and her emancipated life, which ends early, in poverty, and as a result of disease. Despite Wheatley’s “gift” and the ways that her career bucked American custom—particularly her popularity in England—Wheatley’s personal history casts a shadow on the “lasting fame” left through her poetry: “Unfortunate in her marriage, Phyllis died while in the bloom of life, and now lies at rest in some unknown New England grave” (Tillman 196). Wheatley’s work made her famous but could not save her from the stigma and burden of her post-enslavement raced life. Perhaps despite and certainly because of her personal and publication history, Wheatley inspires

Tillman and “her friends,” the Black New Women re-writing Wheatley and writing in Wheatley’s name.

I approach Wheatley’s work with the same respect and reverence as Tillman. This chapter extends Tillman’s project by arguing for the intersections and complications of race, gender, and class demonstrated within Wheatley’s literary projects—and particularly within her two poems, “To Mæcenus” and “Niobe.” I look to each of these poems to establish Wheatley’s investment in Ovid and his *Metamorphoses*, and at the same time to examine the author’s critical discussions of black feminine identity and the fate of her own literary production. As examples of her classicist interventions, these poems spell out Wheatley’s deliberate critiques of racial and gendered marginalization, particularly of enslaved women in America. In “To Mæcenus,” Wheatley demands that the classical and neoclassical communities acknowledge her presence and production. “Niobe,” on the other hand, highlights the limits of her power over her own literary production by arguing that rebellious poets face perpetual threat by those they critique. Critics before me have discussed each of these poems within a classical context, and my chapter builds upon the readings of Wheatley by Tracey Walters, and William Cook and James Tatum by illuminating the connection between Wheatley’s exploration of identity and the literary genealogy of Wheatley’s project through Black New Women writing.

The Black New Women, like Tillman, who read and promoted Wheatley’s poetry carried on the Wheatley-esque re-situation of canon. Perhaps more importantly, the relationship between Wheatley and her Black New Women audience demonstrates how the project of black feminine identity both had and had not changed throughout the nineteenth-century, and largely remained in flux at the turn of the twentieth-century. Considering again Stuart Hall’s description of

identity formation,⁶⁶ this “becoming” reveals the instability inherent when gender and race intersect. Black New Women followed Wheatley’s model and, through their own literary projects, argued for control and recognition of their creative production. These poems, essays, and fictional works dismantled identity constructions previously written by those from outside black feminine subject positions. Like other New Women writers, these black women writers seemed invested in the project of “writing themselves into existence,” as people and as writers. They also took up a set of double-residencies, writing to become visible members of the movement for black advancement. Even more, these black women writers utilized a long history of feminine construction to argue that they always existed, despite the ways that the early feminist and Race movements largely ignored their presences and labor. Their projects extend to the present moment, not only because contemporary African American writers still bear the traces of their classicist literary genealogies, but because the project of “becoming” proves to be always emergent and changeable.

⁶⁶ See the Introduction (6).

CHAPTER 2

Niobian Echoes: H. Cordelia Ray Writing in the Classicist Tradition of Phillis Wheatley

I. Introduction

Miss Ray had all the qualifications of a gentle woman. She was well-born, well bred and enjoyed all the advantages accruing to her position in a family where birth, breeding and culture were regarded as important assets. The parents of the Ray Children could afford to give them all the intellectual advantages of the time. Those who lived were well educated and three of the girls were college graduates. Cordelia became proficient in French, Greek and Latin and was an English scholar. By opportunity, habit and inclination, she was essentially a student.

-Hallie Q. Brown, *Homespun Heroines* (1926)

A large expanse of history and cultural changes separated the lives of Henrietta Cordelia Ray and Phillis Wheatley. In some ways, it seems unlikely that an upper middle-class teacher, born around 1850, known for her poetic works, her mixed heritage, and her famous father might directly link to and compare with an African-born, orphaned, eighteenth-century enslaved servant. And yet, in an early biographical sketch of black women writers, *Homespun Heroines*, Hallie Q. Brown places Ray's poetry beside Wheatley's, and labels their collective works as some of the most influential and important literature by black women within three generations.⁶⁷ Brown connects Ray's writing to her class advantages and begins her sketch of Ray with the assessment of Ray's poetry. However, Brown primarily concentrates upon Ray's biography and admits that she she purposely elides any in-depth literary criticism of Ray's work. In Brown's words:

Were it as discreet as agreeable, a critical reading of at least one of her poems would form a fitting conclusion; but such an indulgence may to an extent defeat the intent of this volume. The

⁶⁷ Brown chronologically bridges her assessment of Wheatley and Ray with Frances E. W. Harper; however, she shies away from engaging in an in-depth critical examination of the three women's works. I also connect the work of Wheatley, Ray, and Harper through a lens of black classicism, although I give less attention to Harper in this dissertation. I see Harper's fiction, and particularly *Iola Leroy*, as an example of African American engagement with and demonstration of classical rhetorical practice.

immediate purpose of this book is to be something beyond a vehicle for information or a source of casual enjoyment. It is designed to arouse that admiration that leads to emulation, to emphasize the doctrine of personal responsibility.” (175)

Brown hopes that her assessment inspires her middle-class audience to follow in her own footsteps by reading and appreciating the work of this nineteenth-century “gentlewoman,” Ray. Brown highlights Ray’s pedigree as a mix of Ray’s Northern birth and multi-racial heritage that traces back at least five generations, as well as the poet’s intelligence, piety, and humility. So, while Brown identifies Ray and Wheatley as related through their creative production, she also suggests that class privilege, or in Wheatley’s case the privileges experienced by her slavers, enables these women’s work to see the printed and circulated page.

Categorizing Ray’s work as understated but aesthetically sound, Brown argues that a “peculiar share of clarity and elevation” makes Ray’s work exceptional and worthy of praise. Brown wrote that, “Cordelia Ray's poetry, with less exuberant fancy may be likened to the quaint touching music of a shell murmuring of the sea—a faint yet clear note sounding all the pathos and beauty of undying life” (171). Brown highlights the musicality in Ray’s work and associates Ray’s verses with instances of harmony and sound in nature. Thus, Brown argues for an inherent “pathos and beauty” that emerges in Ray’s poetry, when human device and desire intersects with images of nature. What Brown describes as the subtle music emerging from seashells, I identify in Ray’s work as the “undying life” of Niobe’s persistent heartbeat buried in stone as well as the “soul’s complaint” that Echo whispers into Narcissus’s ear and that is carried by the wind.

My own desire to place Ray next to Wheatley is driven by the content of each woman’s work and the Ovidian text that links them.⁶⁸ This chapter analyzes Ray’s “Niobe,” published in *Sonnets* (1893), and examines how Ray situated the poem inside of a genealogy of black

⁶⁸ I am not the first to see Ray’s work in a genealogy with Wheatley. Tracey Walters also connects Wheatley and Ray through the classicist tradition.

feminine identity, begun by Wheatley. While Wheatley's "Niobe in Distress" generates a complete argument about the unjust suffering of Niobe, and more broadly about the similar power dynamics controlling both Niobe and Wheatley's subject positions, Ray's poem expands and highlights one small detail in Wheatley's poem: Niobe's cries that echo against the hills surrounding Thebes and never reach the ears or sympathy of Latona or her vengeful children. Ray extends Wheatley's argument and examines the conditions of black feminine identity and creative production through the form and image of the echo, both in her "Niobe" and then more in depth through the longer poem, "Echo's Complaint." By resituating the character Echo and the literary form of the echo, Ray connected her work to Wheatley's and meditated upon Niobe's afterlife as a monument to tragic motherhood.

In Ray's "Niobe," the heartbeat of the petrified and suffering mother resonates throughout the poem in a repeating choriambus (_ u u _) meter,⁶⁹ and undermines the past tense grammatical structure within the poem. The poem opens in the past tense and finds its way into the present only in the last lines: "Alas! what weight of woe / Is prisoned in thy melancholy eyes! / What mother-love beneath the Stoic lies!" (ll. 12-14). Niobe's heartbeat, the choriambus throughout the poem ("what weight of woe," "Is prisoned in," "What mother-love"), serves as a reminder of the anguish and vulnerability, that remain alive long after Artemis and Apollo have slain the Niobids. Ray presents her audience with a monument that holds forever the "weight" of Niobe's suffering, suspended and encased within Niobe's petrified body. Undermining Wheatley's ending by returning Niobe to her Ovidian, petrified form, the pain suffered by Ray's

⁶⁹ A choriambus is "an iamb and a trochee combined to make a metric foot of two stressed syllables enclosing two unstressed.... In English verse, rare as the basic scheme of a poem; but not infrequently found in combination with other feet" (Cuddon 122). While the overall poem can be read as iambic, there are internal choriambus rhythms imbedded inside of the iambic. For instance, I read "O mother-heart" with the stresses on the "O" and "heart," the rhythm of which is reflected in discreet phrases throughout the poem and as I argue later in the poem. According to *The Eton Latin Grammar: With the Addition of Many Useful Notes and Observations and Also of the Accents and Quantity* (1830) argues that a proper choriambus meter terminates with a word (204). Most famously, the choriambus is associated with the "Sapphic line" and utilized by Sophocles in *Ajax* (Smith 710; Sophocles 117).

Niobe remains alive and in the present, while the events that led to this suffering stay in a distant past. The last line of the poem returns readers to the first, “O Mother-heart/What mother-love” (l. 1, 14), creating a closed circuit and inevitable repetition of Niobe and her children’s agony.

As homage to Wheatley’s “Niobe in Distress,” Ray’s poem suggests that while slavery is in America’s past, the traces of crimes, especially against black women, haunt the American cultural memory. “Echo’s Complaint” recovers Echo’s inhibited linguistic authority while simultaneously articulating a shift in Echo’s identity. The poem situates Narcissus at the center of Echo’s language and as the solitary subject of desire, while it also reinstates the voice that Echo loses in *Metamorphoses*. In Ray’s poem, Echo articulates her desire through uninhibited vocabulary and syntax, language that seems reflective of nothing but her own thoughts, the linguistic control unavailable to her in the Ovidian rendition. Ray imagines an Echo with a full vocabulary and reveals the motivations for Echo’s pursuit of Narcissus and eventual disembodiment. Written as an internal dialog, Echo articulates her shifting identity that morphs through her obsessive desire for Narcissus. Thus, for Ray, Echo transcends her previously spoken language—an argument that easily translates into feminist considerations of women’s creative production and the limitations upon publication and celebrity available to Black New Women writers and intellectuals—although, she cannot escape her transformation. Together, “Niobe” and “Echo’s Complaint” makes it possible to trace Wheatley’s black classicism and critical eye left within Ray’s oeuvre, and more broadly within Black New Women literature.

This chapter investigates the ways that the Niobe myth changes between the publications of Wheatley and Ray as a strategy for deciphering the vast differences between the two versions of “Niobe.” Ray shifts Wheatley’s criticism of raced motherhood in America by leaving in the past the abuses that Niobe suffers at the hands of Latona and her children. Still, Ray keeps the

echoes of that past alive through the image of petrified mourning: Niobe's body transformed into weeping stone. Ray's use of the echo, mirrored language and repeating rhythms within the sonnet, picks up where Wheatley leaves her Niobe. Ray ties the character Echo directly to Niobe, asking her audience to consider the ways that history reverberates in her late nineteenth century moment. Together, "Echo's Complaint" and "Niobe" reopen considerations of black motherhood—the conditions that began during slavery and repeat themselves well after Emancipation—and black feminine identity formation. Commenting upon the classical traditions into which she writes, Ray amends Echo's language and reveals an internal monologue that denies the limits of repetition.

II. Black New Women's Club Movement and Ray's Connection to Wheatley

Both Wheatley and Ray were black women living in America, and therefore, it seems logical that they would be invested in conversations around slavery. However, and perhaps obviously, I do not suggest that *because* these women were black, that they embedded political argument in their poetry. Certainly, each of them has been accused of neglecting discussions of racial politics within their work. I've already spent ample time in Chapter 1, challenging the critiques of Wheatley that would deny the political arguments made in her work. And also obviously, Wheatley was considerably closer to slavery than Ray.⁷⁰ Ray was born within one generation of Emancipation and was directly connected to the anti-slavery struggle through her father, a famous and important New York abolitionist. Charles Ray settled in New York after leaving Wesleyan University in 1832 when his white colleagues protested his enrollment in the

⁷⁰ Although, I would like to only point out that Wheatley's Boston servitude was also leaps and bounds away from the plantation slavery that lives as most typical in the American historical memory. Still, Wheatley was enslaved while Ray was not.

Connecticut university. Ray and her sister, Florence, co-authored a biography entitled *Sketch of the Life of Rev. Charles B. Ray* (1887). In the biography, the sisters traced their father's political trajectory that began in his home state, Massachusetts, and included his founding of the weekly black newspaper, *The Colored American*, and his ministerial work in Bethesda Congregational and Crosby Congregational Churches in New York. In this, at least one of Ray's creative products relies upon her father's race efforts and political leanings. It stands to reason, therefore, that her other work was also influenced by her father's biography. Additionally, Ray wrote several memorial poems to political and race leaders, including Frederick Douglass, Toussaint L'Overture, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Abraham Lincoln, William Lloyd Garrison, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Together with considerations of her father's legacy, Ray's work calls into question the fact that, much like Wheatley, her critics have considered her an a-political writer.⁷¹ As I've already argued about Wheatley, I believe that these readings of the apolitical miss crucial intellectually generative and critical moments embedded within Ray's biography and poetic projects. Ray's creative production relies upon her subject position and the politics surrounding her; and the little that we know about her biography, including her career as an educator, her participation in the Women's Club Movement, and her classicism, supports a more complicated reading of the identity politics in her work.

It is obvious through the language and content of her "Niobe" poem and her two poetry collections, that Ray read Wheatley; however, and while there is no evidence that she studied

⁷¹ It is also worth noting that Ray's sister, Charlotte E. Ray was the first black woman lawyer in America (Howard University, 1872), and the first black woman to be admitted to the District of Columbia Bar. Charlotte's law career suffered from gender and race biases, which forced Charlotte to abandon law and build a more sustainable teaching career in New York (Drachman 45). Charlotte also associated with the National Women's Suffrage Association along with Mary Ann Shad Cary, and, along with her younger sister Ray, held membership in the National Association of Colored Women (Terborg-Penn 38, 50).

Wheatley's work in school, she may have read "Niobe in Distress" while a member of the Woman's Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn, along with the other women in the Club Movement (McHenry 242). Wheatley's popularity amongst the African American club population was not only reflected in their reading lists, but the ways that they named their clubs. In the words of Elizabeth McHenry, author of *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*:

That [African American club women] named their women's clubs again and again after past African American female literary figures like Phillis Wheatley and Sojourner Truth, as well as those literary luminaries of their own time like Frances E.W. Harper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, serves to underscore the extent to which these figures captured their imagination and served to inspire them to excel in their own literary efforts. (244)

African American clubwomen turned to the works of black authors, bolstering their educations, creating intellectual and social communities, and simultaneously helped to create and strengthen the Race Movement in the United States. For them, the Race Movement was a literary and intellectual movement—strengthening the race meant always intellectual and creative training and production. These efforts extended the education-as-liberty and as-a-right arguments made by pre-Emancipation race leaders, such as the case made by Frederick Douglass in his *Narrative*,⁷² and nineteenth-century Suffragists, as outlined, for instance, in the Seneca Falls Convention's "The Declaration of Sentiments."⁷³ The growing economic and intellectual elite

⁷² Douglass's self-directed education, his bribing poor white boys with bread to teaching him how to read and then applying those lessons to *The Columbian Orator* (Douglass 39-40), therefore, demonstrating his intelligence, craftiness, and self-determination, serves as the foundation for his eventual escape from enslavement. Douglass famously wrote, "Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read" (36). For more concerning Douglass's study and practice as an orator, see David B. Chesebrough's 1998 *Frederick Douglass: Oratory from Slavery*.

⁷³ The Seneca Falls Convention (1848), conceived of and organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Elizabeth Mott, included the reading and signing of "The Declaration of Sentiments," which outlined the gender concerns shared by the signees (68 women and 32 men). The document includes, among a variety of other "repeated injuries and

classes of blacks in America during the late nineteenth century, already benefiting from the power that came with their class privilege as: education, formalized schools, associations, and clubs that were dedicated to black education and empowerment for themselves and their economically disenfranchised brethren. Black women, at the forefront of this effort—writers, lecturers, teachers, nurses, and philanthropists—created social projects and institutions with the intention of lifting up all black people and particularly focused on empowering other women.

Ida B. Wells founded a Chicago club bearing her name in 1893—the third African American women’s club in the United States (Lerner 161). Soon thereafter, Chicago could boast of its “Phillis Wheatley Club,” which was dedicated to improving the city’s African American neighborhoods and concentrated, particularly, on establishing a girls’ home (Ibid.). Like the other women in this study, and many of her other contemporary writing colleagues, Ray participated in a local “Negro protest and women’s right society” (Osofsky 157).⁷⁴ Records indicate that Ray participated in club activities as early as 1896 (Ruffin and Ridley), when she served as the secretary (Ruffin and Ridley). In 1902 and presumably as an extension of her position as a club officer, Ray wrote at least the “Report of the Woman’s Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn.”

Despite her writing career and heritage, much of Ray’s biography remains contradictory, without significant detail, and relegated to the pages of anthology section headers and

usurpations on the part of man toward woman,” the denial of formal education: “He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education, all colleges being closed against her.” (Rothenberg 540)

⁷⁴ The Woman’s Loyal Union was one of the first clubs organized by and for African American women (Lerner 161). Mrs. Victoria Earle Matthews founded the society in New York in 1892. Born into slavery and in Georgia right before the beginning of the Civil War, Matthews developed the club’s largest project, providing a safe haven for those girls and women, like herself, who had moved from the South to New York.⁷⁴ As the Chicago Wheatley Club did only one year later, Matthews established a home for women called White Rose Working Girls’ Home which fed, housed, and educated women while they searched for employment in the city. The “settlement house” prepared women for their new lives in New York and provided classes ‘in domestic training and “race history,”’ and held a “library of books on Negro life” (Osofsky 157).

encyclopedia entries.⁷⁵ Ray was born to Rev. Charles Bennett and Charlotte August (Burrough) Ray in New York City and sometime around 1849 (Banks 366). Different biographers report her birth year between 1848 and 1852, but as it was well documented because of her successful writing career, all agree that she died in 1916. Some say that she was the baby of the Ray household (Page 486), some suggest that she was second born into the family that would see five of their children grow to adulthood.

Regardless of the order of her birth, it was well known that she and her sister Florence were very close. Florence influenced Ray to follow in her footsteps and become a teacher. Later in life, Florence convinced Ray to retire from teaching and dedicate herself entirely to her writing career. The two sisters lived most of their adult lives together, never marrying nor having children. In 1891 Ray earned a masters of pedagogy degree from University of the City of New York (now known as New York University) and after studied Greek, Latin, and French⁷⁶ in Sauveteur School of Languages (Mitchell 115, Banks 366). It is more than possible, then, that Ray not only read the story of Niobe in Wheatley's poetry, but also in Ovid's original Latin.

III. Literary Retelling: H. Cordelia Ray's "Niobe"

Ray's sonnet gives few details of Niobe's story, and instead contemplates most centrally upon Niobe's end, shifting readers' perspectives from the horror of the children's slaughter to the event's afterlife. In the previous chapter, I explored Wheatley's rewriting of the Niobe myth and argued that, for Wheatley, Niobe demonstrated the inevitable tragedy and grief experienced by

⁷⁵ As I've said elsewhere in this study, the lack of information about the biographies and archives of the authors featured herein remains a constant source of frustration for me. But, also, I see this state of affairs as an ample opportunity for those, like myself, who wish to see this information completed, supplemented, or finally deemed exhausted.

⁷⁶ Megan K. Ahern also claims that Ray was "proficient" in German (486).

black mothers enslaved in America. I argue that in “Niobe in Distress,” Wheatley made a case for black motherhood *as* creative production: just as the enslaved black mother had no control over the fate of her children, so (she as) the black woman writer had no control over the editing and publication of her work. “Niobe in Distress,” Wheatley’s lengthy score of heroic couplets and direct dialogue, came into print over one hundred years before Ray’s economical and Petrarchan lines. Wheatley’s poem resembles the Ovidian original far more than Ray’s and unfolds the details leading up to Niobe’s transformation from woman into weeping stone. Moreover, Wheatley concentrates particularly on the dialogue, subject position, and attitudes of the Theban queen as well as the goddess that Niobe insults.

Like Ovid, Wheatley took her time showing the deaths of all of Niobe’s children, forcing her audience to witness the blood and horror of Apollo and Artemis shooting child after child. Readers also experience Niobe’s words: those successful ones that influence the Theban women preparing for Latona’s feast and thus cause the central conflict of the story, and those that fail to change the course of Niobe’s punishment or save even one of the Niobids. In contrast, Ray offers no direct dialogue and abbreviates the story in such a way that Niobe’s offense becomes completely invisible within the poem. This means that Ray either completely relieves Niobe of her punishment (while not her grief) or that the audience must rely on a collective literary memory to identify Niobe’s grief as punishment. If Niobe is not being punished, then her children die for no justifiable reason. This absenting of the punishment plot suggests that a mother’s grief need not be earned and undermines the idea that the slaughtering of children can ever be justified.

Ray chose the form of the sonnet, which already required an economy that neither Ovid nor Wheatley employed in their longer, epic poems. The forms of the poems demonstrate the

differences in story telling and perspective between the poets. The dissimilarity in form of each poem can be attributed at least to a shift in literary trend between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries. Comparing the forms of Wheatley and Rays' poems reveals more than the shifting landscape of poetic expression, and instead also exposes a great shift in content. By the time that Niobe gets to the end of the nineteenth century, the catalog of her crimes and of the deaths of her children no longer require rearticulation. Instead, Ray's audience experiences the emotional echoes of the original story.

While the two authors direct their poetic gazes at different moments in the Niobe narrative, each linked Niobe to a seemingly disparate portion of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: the story of Echo. In Wheatley's poem, Niobe's final words echo against the surrounding hills, unheard by Latona and her wrathful children: "Ye heav'nly pow'rs, ah spare me one," she cry'd, / "Ah! spare me one," the vocal hills reply'd' (ll. 209-10). Niobe begs "in vain" for the gods to let her last and youngest child live (l. 211). Niobe's cries bounce off of the earth surrounding her city and foreshadow her transformation into Mt. Sisyphus. As a highlight to the singularity and profound loneliness created through Latona's punishment, there is nothing between Niobe and the very landscape that she'll soon meld into. The echo from the hills reverberates with Niobe's powerlessness and solitude; and her unanswered words returning to her and the final, live child whose life she begs for. Niobe cannot undo the insults that she's hurled at Latona. She cannot change the manner in which her children's bodies now litter the Theban landscape. She cannot intervene in the circumstances that she was born into: she is human and her life and the lives of her children belong to the gods. Important to my argument in Chapter 1 and to fair readings of the original poem, it is with this image that Wheatley closes her poem. Wheatley does not show her audience Niobe's transformed self, but instead, leaves her readers with the echo of Niobe's

cries washing over the cooling body of her daughter, still in Niobe's arms. This moment reminds Wheatley's readers that Latona ultimately teaches Niobe that a person never has any power over the fate of her children—at any moment, Latona or another god (or an accident or disease or a slave master) could destroy any and all human children.

For Wheatley's audience, Niobe's story translates into the conditions of those enslaved in America. The enslaved woman's body determines the slave status of her child. Slave mothers cannot protect their children from sale, torture, or death at the hands of slavers. Additionally, Wheatley reminds her readers of the power dynamics surrounding her writing and the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. We can imagine John and Susanna Wheatley first overseeing Wheatley's education and then watching over her shoulder as she pens her verses. Additionally, we know that Wheatley's poems emerged through a printing culture that had never before handled a book-length creative work by a black person in America. The inclusion of bibliographic information and a letter written by John Wheatley served as authenticating documents endorsing *Poems* for its contemporary audience. These moves to validate Wheatley also remind more modern audiences of the Boston trials organized to corroborate Wheatley's talents and capabilities, despite race—trials during which trusted white men interrogated Wheatley's humanity as much as her abilities to write poetry. Wheatley's Niobe, therefore, also exposes the authorial anxieties, and the influences and pressures surrounding Wheatley. Niobe stands in for the black woman writer, unable to control the fate of her creative progeny.

Ray takes up the echoes in Wheatley's poem through her own depiction of Niobe and, as I will discuss later in this chapter, in another poem entitled "Echo's Complaint." So, while Ray's poem certainly shifts the focus from this final and very tragic scene as depicted by

Wheatley, I argue here that Ray's poem reiterates Wheatley's work and asks its late nineteenth-century readers to bear in mind that the conditions of black motherhood, while having escaped the bonds of chattel slavery, still include the barely healed wounds inflicted during slave times. As Ray wrote and as was practiced throughout American slavery, whites policed black bodies. After Emancipation, Jim Crow and the ever-increasing threat of lynching replaced state-sanctioned chattel enslavement, shifting the claims of white authority to issues of citizenship⁷⁷ and criminality from that of property-ownership.

For Ray's audience, the face of black motherhood has hardened and become stoic in the face of a history of loss and torture. As Ray republished in her larger volume, *Poems* (1910):

Niobe

O Mother-heart! when fast the arrows flew,
Like blinding lightning, smiting as they fell,
One after one, one after one, what knell
Could fitly voice thy anguish! Sorrow grew
To throes intensest, when thy sad soul knew
Thy youngest, too, must go. Was it not well,
Avengers wroth, just one to spare? Ay, tell
The ages of soul-struggle sterner? Through
The flinty stone, O image of despair,
Sad Niobe, thy maddened grief did flow
In bitt' rest tears, when all thy wailing prayer
Was so denied. Alas! what weight of woe
Is prisoned in thy melancholy eyes!
What mother-love beneath the Stoic lies!

In sharp contrast to Phillis Wheatley's depiction of "Niobe," the foreign-born queen returns to her final Ovidian form: the image of the "Mother-heart" perpetually stricken with a hardened and

⁷⁷ As pointed out by Khalil Gibran Muhammad in his 2010 study, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, the advent of Jim Crow corresponded with an increasing discussion of black criminal behavior in America. Muhammad argues that through the statistical analysis (of course, skewed by his biases), Frederick L. Hoffman's *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* (1896) found that for both Northern and Southern blacks, "crime, pauperism, and sexual immorality are without question," and that Hoffman's "statistical data on black criminality secured a permanent place in modern race-relations discourse in the United States for the first time" (35). Hoffman's book and lecture tour spearheaded his campaign "to protect the health and welfare of the white citizenry" (47), justifying Jim Crow and other efforts to control the behaviors and actions of black Americans. Muhammad argues that Hoffman's work marks the beginning of an organized and scientific effort to justify the ongoing white supremacist efforts in the US with an argument of the inevitable and inherent black criminal.

“maddened grief.” In her final state, Niobe eternally suffers with invariable woe and horror. Niobe no longer sits in her “wailing prayer,” with her last and youngest child dead in her arms—the image with which Wheatley leaves her audience. Instead, Ray’s readers witness the transformed Niobe, whose heavy stony visage reflects the “weight of woe”—a physical monument that remains as present and material for Ray’s contemporary readers as it did for Ovid’s audience. There is no mention of Niobe’s crime against Latona; Ray’s central character experiences grief without guilt. The horror of the slaying stays firmly in the past, and grief “is prisoned” in the only bit of Niobe that betrays her previous human form: her eyes. For those of us who know Ovid’s story or remember the final and dangling stanza penned and attached by some other to Wheatley’s original poem, we imagine that Niobe’s woe drips from her eyes and over her hardened body. However, as Ray interpreted the Niobe’s tale, the Theban queen’s tears exist in the past, along with the “ages” that never gave rise to any “soul” who suffered greater than Niobe. Instead, profound grief and “mother-love” exist as forever entwined and submerged below the unyielding surface of Niobe’s face.

IV. Niobe Echo: Repetition in the “Niobe” Poems by Wheatley and Ray

Ray’s “Niobe” considers the mourning mother frozen in her stone form, highlights historical repetition, and supports my race reading of Wheatley’s rendition. As I’ve argued before, Wheatley’s “Niobe in Distress” argues the condition of slave motherhood as, first and foremost, the inability to control the destinies of one’s children. The gender implications traverse racial boundaries, as child mortality lies ultimately beyond the control of any mother. Yet,

unique to the conditions of enslaved black women in America⁷⁸ and the deliberate efforts of the white planter class to control physically and psychologically enslaved black populations, the circulation of children remained under the control and at the whims of slave owners. Ray, over a century later, writes Niobe as a stone monument to the slave mother who supposedly no longer exists in America. Ray writes her Petrarchan sonnet in past tense and therefore positions her audience, always, in a present moment looking back at Latona's punishment of Niobe. The poem does not indict Niobe's hubris. Instead, Ray's poem only marks the event as a series of crimes against Niobe and her children, which figure as state of perpetual punishment of and grieving by Niobe. Considering Niobe the black mother of the past, Ray, however, highlights through repetition the conditions that Wheatley argues.

But then, why is Niobe back in stone, when it would seem that she should be alive and in anguish, having never recovered her identity from her slave position? Her eyes, previously blinded by the "lightning" of Apollo and Artemis's arrows hold fast the "weight of woe"—marking the heavy stone now replacing Niobe's live body. Water meets fire as Ray's solid Niobe weeps her "bitt'rest tears" encased in the "flinty stone" once described by Ovid. Flint, used previously by Christopher Marlowe in his "Elegia XII" to describe Niobe,⁷⁹ suggests a fire that would exist were it not for the water flowing from her eyes, extinguishing the outrage and fury of the scorned mother—the very fury reserved for a goddess with questionable divinity and the codes of behavior and worship demanded by that unworthy goddess. Niobe's grief intermingles

⁷⁸ I do not wish to imply that this version of powerlessness is unique only to black women enslaved in the US. I limit my critique to America/US only because of the focus of this study, while understanding that a condition of enslavement, regardless of geography, periodization, and culture, implicitly and through the language and conditions of "ownership" denies control over one's body and the progeny that may emerge from that body.

⁷⁹ The east winds in Ulysses' bags we shut,
And babbling Tantalus in mid-waters put.
Niobe flint, Callist we make a bear
Bird-changed Progne doth her Itys tear;
Jove turns himself into a swan, or gold,
Or his bull's horns Europa's hand doth hold. (ll. 29-34)

with fury and indignation—the very emotions entangled in her original act of rebellion against Latona and the order created by the gods.⁸⁰

Ray renders the children silent in her poem and therefore suggests that the audience may already be familiar with the Niobe myth; indeed, her Club Movement peers would be familiar with Wheatley's "Niobe in Distress." Harkening back to the earliest renditions of Niobe, scenes of the Niobids on earthenware, Ray's 14 lines strip the story of many details painstakingly outlined by Wheatley and her Roman predecessor. Niobe's pain and agony petrifies, transformed from screamed pleas to Latona and her children into a disassociated numb/dumbness. In Deleuzian terms, "repetition is a transgression. It puts law into question, it denounces its nominal or general character in favour of a more profound and more artistic reality" (Deleuze 3). Repetition as art for Deleuze and for Ray undermines governing social mores and boundaries. Removing the singularity and *merely* representative position of the classical tale, Ray applies Wheatley's argument of the repeating historical instances of enslaved women whose children were taken away from them, but casts that history into the fin de siècle American moment. Niobe *should* be a monument and the historical representation of the abolished violence against black mothers and children. Niobe's story *should* exist as a reminder that through Emancipation, the conditions that led to the anguish of countless black mothers have been removed from American society. However, at the turn of the century and as lynching was on rise, Ray connects the violence against women to her present moment and reminds her reading audience of a history of maternal anguish.

Latona's god-children "smiting" each of Niobe's progeny figures not as Ovid and Wheatley's detailed descriptions, but as a rhythmic echo of this history: "one after one, one after one." Although Apollo and Artemis never make a physical appearance, Ray's poem leaves the

⁸⁰ See my argument concerning Niobe's reaction to Arachne's punishment in Chapter 1.

reader with the sound and sense of the destruction they leave in their mother's name. The repetition of "one after one" invokes the image of Latona's twins, Artemis after Apollo, working together to avenge their mother's reputation, as well as the many children killed one right after the other. This repetition counts the destruction of souls: the sound of air-born arrows flying and the now silent screams of first, Niobe's sons, then before her very eyes, her daughters, and finally, Niobe begging Latona for mercy.

Mirroring and highlighting the beating "Mother-heart" that opens and frames the poem, the "one after one" rhythm repeats in various lines throughout the sonnet, a live heart contrasting with a dead and past set of events. In the words of Gilles Deleuze, "The repetition of a work of art is like a singularity without concept, and it is not by chance that a poem must be learned by heart. The head is the organ of exchange, but the heart is the amorous organ of repetition" (1-2). The repeated work of art rearticulates the foundational motivation for producing art. Considering all works of art derivative in some measure, each new work emerges within an existing discourse. The practice of rewriting work, in this case Ray rewriting Wheatley rewriting Ovid, transforms not only the work, itself, but reconsiders the contexts under which these works are situated. The same tensions and issues driving Wheatley's work do not motivate Ray. However, some of Wheatley's motivations surely intersect with Ray's. If repetition is heart-work, as Deleuze argues, then, Ray is at least driven by her heart to rewrite Wheatley's (and Ovid's) work. Thus, it is the heart—the passions, the unresolved tensions, the desires—that inspire rewriting by these authors.

Just as Ray has returned Niobe to stone, she has also returned the Niobe story to an ancient meter: the choriambus, popularly used in both Greek and Latin verse. It is the alarm bell, sounded by the town seer who gravely informs Niobe of the attack upon her sons. The "knell," the vision by the oracle, cannot fully represent the width and breadth of the slaughter Niobe will

witness. It is the echoing death bell that betrays the inevitability of her youngest child's death. Looking at the poem only through its ta-titi-ta rhythm reveals an even starker version of Niobe's grief: "O Mother-heart [...] One after one, one after one, [...] thy sad soul knew [...] Thy youngest, too, [...] Was it not well, [...] just one to spare? [...] The ages of [...] The flinty stone, thy maddened grief [...] In bitt' rest tears, [...] what weight of woe [...] Is prisoned in [...] What mother-love [...] the Stoic lies!" The rhythm sits below the surface as the emotional pulse of the poem, punctuating the history of crimes against Niobe. Like a heart buried under layers of stone, it is persistent and haunting, like the sorrow that holds fast Niobe's body.⁸¹ The living blood coursing through the poem deconstructs the past tense—while Niobe's story seems past, her heart keeps a constant vigil for her murdered children and thus keeps alive the story of their destruction.

V. Towards a Theory of Repetition Through the Ovidian Figure of Echo

In Book III of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid introduces Echo and Narcissus through the story of Tiresias. The book opens with the founding of Thebes by Cadmus (ll. 1-137) but moves swiftly from the gods helping humans establish a city (read: civilization) to a series of stories of humans punished by gods for various crimes. Jupiter begins an argument with Juno concerning gender and pleasure, perhaps as a way to distract Juno from his most recent sexual transgression outside of his relationship with her. Jupiter argues that women experience more pleasure than men. Juno

⁸¹ One repeated description of the mother of the lynched child is "stoic." In her discussion of imagery of Charles White's "O Mary, Don't You Weep" as it evokes the images of the women of the Civil Rights movement and particularly that of Maimie Till Bradley, Dora Apel writes that: "Two black women, their arms protectively enclosing their bodies in gestures and expressions that combine fear, stoicism, resignation, and determination in a delicate web of finely cross-hatched lines, address the trauma of lynching from the perspective of the long-suffering mother who must absorb the disaster and carry on" (189). For Ray, the black mother's suffering does not cease, but instead freezes into an ever-present and overwhelming grief.

disagrees, and the gods call upon Tiresias to settle the argument, because Tiresias has lived as both a man and a woman. Tiresias agrees with Jupiter, which, not surprisingly, angers Juno. As punishment for siding with Jupiter, Juno blinds Tiresias. Perhaps as a boon for agreeing with him and also as recompense for the punishment administered by Juno, Jupiter gives Tiresias the gift of foresight although he does not reinstate Tiresias's physical ability.

Tiresias's first act as a seer is to answer the nymph Liriope's question about her son, Narcissus: "tempora maturae visurus longa senectae (Will Narcissus live to see old age)" (l. 347)? Tiresias assures Liriope that her son will, indeed, live many years, but only: "si se non noverit (If he never knows himself)" (l. 348). According to Tiresias, Narcissus is doomed to either death or a life without self-knowledge, unable to explore himself and his identity.

Narcissus's story confirms Tiresias's gift of sight and simultaneously rearticulates the troubling event of Liriope's "ravishment," the latter of which results in Narcissus's birth. The river-god, Cephisus, in water form "inplicuit (enfolded)" and "vim tulit (took power over [ravished/raped])" Liriope while she bathed in a river (l. 343, 344). Despite the violation that led to her son's birth, Liriope adored her son and was the first nymph to fall deeply in love with Narcissus. Narcissus was born with full beauty ("pulcherrima pleno"), driving others to nearly mesmeric love from the onset of his birth (l. 344). By the time that he was sixteen, he could be mistaken for either a boy or a man and many "youths and maidens" desired him. However, his cold pride ("tam dura superbia"), perhaps the result of a lifetime of adoration and spoiling, kept Narcissus from requiting any other's love (l. 354).

That Narcissus can never "know himself" certainly suggests that he cannot know how he came into being. He cannot know that his birth results from rape. Furthermore, that he remains inaccessible to anyone else, that he refuses the sexual advances of any other person, serves as an

antidote to his conception—Narcissus utilizes the privilege and power of refusal unavailable to his mother. Through Narcissus’s beauty and pride, Liriope takes revenge (however unintentional) upon those who would repeat her victimization and claim her son as their own.

Linguistic meaning changes with the introduction of Echo and when Echo repeats and reconfigures Narcissus’s words. The other significant nymph connected to Narcissus’s story, Echo, caught sight of Narcissus during this time (his sixteenth year) and while the beautiful boy was snaring a deer into a net. Doubling Narcissus’s catch, Echo falls madly in love with the boy and begins to follow him through the woods. Narcissus eventually detects Echo’s stealthy pursuit and calls out into the woods, encouraging his pursuer to come forth and reveal herself. Echo answers Narcissus; however, unable to generate her own language, she only repeats Narcissus’s words:

“ecquis adest?” et “adest” responderat Echo.
hic stupet, utque aciem partes dimittit in omnis,
voce “veni!” magna clamat: vocat illa vocantem.
respicit et rursus nullo veniente “quid” inquit
“me fugis?” et totidem, quot dixit, verba recepit.
perstat et alternae deceptus imagine vocis
“huc coeamus” ait, nullique libentius umquam
responsura sono “coeamus” rettulit Echo
et verbis favet ipsa suis egressaque silva
ibat, ut iniceret sperato bracchia collo;
ille fugit fugiensque “manus complexibus aufer!
ante” ait “emoriar, quam sit tibi copia nostril”;
rettulit illa nihil nisi “sit tibi copia nostri!” (ll. 380-92)

(“Is anyone here?” [Narcissus says] and “Here” Echo answers / Amazed, Narcissus looks around in every direction and, / loudly cries out “Come!,” to which she calls to his calling [returns his call]. / Narcissus looks behind him and sees no one coming. “Why,” he says / “follow me?” To which he hears, again, his own words. / He stands still, deceived by what the voice means. / “Here let us meet,” he says, and none are ever more willing to / answer his request. Echo replies, “Let us meet” / and adding to the words, bounds forth from the woods / so that she may throw her arms around Narcissus’s neck; / [Repulsed] he flees [from her grasp], crying, “Hands off!” / Further saying, “Let me not live, before I give you power over me!” / To which Echo says nothing but, “I give you power over me!”)

Echo is not restricted only to repeating. She “*vocat illa vocantem* (calls to his calling),” certainly utilizing Narcissus’s language, and yet bends that language to reflect her longing. Echo repeats only selections of Narcissus’s words. She does not duplicate any portion of his “*manus complexibus aufer!* (take your hands off of me/embrace me not [with your hands]!)” Thus, while she is doomed to repeat others’ words, she is not beholden to respond to every utterance by another. Instead, Echo *chooses* the words that she repeats.

Echo’s dialectal disability and desire reframes the question “*quid me fugis* (why [do you] quicken towards/flee [follow] me)?” Ovid restricts for his readers Echo’s direct language, thereby allowing for multiple interpretations of her imagined response. The double meaning of “*me fugis*,” which could also mean “*marry me*,” highlights Echo’s desirous intentions; through these words, readers might imagine that Echo reveals to Narcissus her desire for him. However, envisioning the response “*fugis*,” the possessive, “*me*,” dropped, we understand Echo as betraying either a shift in her identity long before her disembodiment or attempting to command Narcissus toward her. “*Follow*,” she might say to him, hoping to turn his movement toward her; and even if she cannot successfully command Narcissus to follow her, Echo redirects onto Narcissus the mesmeric power that Narcissus has over those who come into contact with him. Additionally, she may demand that he “*flee*,” and thus relieve her desire for him through his absence. This blurred meaning has at least one effect: Echo’s words have the power to stop Narcissus and render him still (“*perstat et alternae*”).

In the absence of Echo’s directly quoted response, we understand the shifting meanings available within her repetition. We also witness a parallel between Ovid’s linguistic choices and Echo’s as each opens the way to interpretation: Ovid restricts Echo’s language and thereby the potential for any number of responses; Echo reconfigures Narcissus’s command of the situation,

revealing his vulnerability as she exposes her desire. Despite this moment of tension that undermines the dynamic that holds Narcissus as the desired object, Echo will eventually become overwhelmed by her desire. She will cease to corporally exist, transforming her bones into stone and leaving only her repeating voice as her response to her unrequited desire. I liken this response to Niobe's for her children, which also hardens Niobe's body, leaving only a trace of the person who previously existed.

Because Narcissus withholds himself from those who desire him, he leaves in his path a trail of heartbroken and embittered would-be-lovers. As punishment for his own experience of unrequited love, one young man called up to the gods, asking that Narcissus be punished for his selfishness. Nemesis answered the call, and cursed Narcissus. Perhaps an example of the overly adored and spoiled child, Narcissus's inability to love anyone other than himself began long before Nemesis cursed him. Extending his mother's inability to avoid being taken over by Cephisus, Narcissus's presence results in nearly mesmerizing those around him. His cold pride, however, kept all others at bay, leaving him untouched by any image other than his own. The intensity of his self-love fits into his lifelong narrative, as we see through Echo that seeing Narcissus inspires an all-consuming desire. Who else but himself could he be in love with?

VI. Ray's Speaking Echo, Cherishment, and Desire

The Tiresias, Echo and Narcissus episodes articulate a variety of power shifts, the word "power" rearticulated in as many ways as the power between characters slips. Tiresias has the power of second sight. Liriope has no power to stop her rape. Juno dramatically reduces Echo's linguistic power. Narcissus refused to relent his power to echo, while Echo willingly gives her power to an unreceptive Narcissus. While it might seem that Echo's lack of linguistic power has

already transformed her identity, her desire for Narcissus and movements through the woods prove that she has an internal dialogue and will. Her linguistic agency, therefore, is not fully taken away by Juno, but rather is, as Juno curses ““huius” ait “linguae, qua sum delusa, potestas / parva tibi dabitur vocisque brevissimus usus (That tongue, by which I have been tricked, will have power enough only for the briefest use)” (ll. 366-67). Thereby, Echo is cursed with brevity as an attempt to reduce her linguistic power: the power that she used to distract Juno when Juno tried to break up Jupiter’s visits with Echo’s sister-nymphs.

In Ovid, Echo manages to rearticulate another power, her desire, with the language given to her by Narcissus. Ray reconsiders the source of Echo’s language in her poem, “Niobe.” Eight of the nine stanzas of Ray’s poem unfold as a first-person monologue from Echo’s optic. In this, Ray articulates Echo’s desire in language unavailable to her in the Ovidian story. The monologue obscures Echo’s curse and undermines the limits of language in the Ovidian story. Through this depiction of Echo, Ray takes up the task that literary critic Hortense J. Spillers identifies as the task of psychoanalytic literature in her essay ““All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother””: Psychoanalysis and Race’:

Psychoanalytic literature might suggest the word *desire* here to designate the slit through which consciousness fall according to the laws of unpredictability. In that sense, the subject lives with desire as intrusive, as the estranged, irrational, burdensome illfit that alights between where she “is at” and would/wanna be. On this level of the everyday, the professional discourser, if we could say so, and the women commandeering the butcher’s stand at the A&P have in common a mutually scandalous secret about which they feel they must remain silent, but which speaking, more emphatically, *talking*, about appeases, compensates, deflects, disguises, and translates into usable, recognizable social energy. [...] It is not, then, the task of a psychoanalytic protocol to effect a translation from the

muteness of desire/wish-that which shames and baffles the subject, even if its origins are dim, not especially known—into an *articulated* syntactic particularity?” (399-400)

Because of her desire, Echo defies the laws of the echo—the very “unpredictability” of consciousness Spillers identifies, above. Additionally, through Ray’s poem, Echo creates a community of readers who, by reading a first person account, identify with Echo’s previously unspoken desire for Narcissus. Ray’s readers, predominantly middle class African American and women, then fold into a discourse of translating unspeakable desire. Ray thereby brings to the growing fin-de-siècle African American intellectual community in America transformed and rearticulated classical literatures and themes, reflecting an antidote to tensions previously articulated by Wheatley. As does Ovid’s Echo, Ray absorbs and reconstructs the literary language that comes before. By rewriting Echo as able to express herself outside of the order of *the echo*, Ray calls her audience members to voice their desires.

If, as Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, “it is desire which creates the desirable” (10), Narcissus’s identity relies as much upon Echo’s desire as her own identity does. In her Ovidian form and through her adoration of Narcissus, Echo supports the conditions of narcissism that drive her state of unrequited love and, therefore, her physical ruin. Echo’s focus upon Narcissus mirrors Narcissus’s desire for himself. Narcissus reflects the longing that Echo felt for him as he addresses the woods, and cries out his own disillusionment:

“ecquis, io silvae, crudelius” inquit “amavit?
scitis enim et multis latebra opportuna fuistis.
ecquem, cum vestrae tot agantur saecula vitae,
qui sic tabuerit, longo meministis in aevo?
et placet et video; sed quod videoque placetque,
non tamen invenio” (ll. 442-47)

“Did anyone, O Woods, ever experience a more cruel love than this?” he said. / “You [Woods] know the convenient haunts of many. / Having seen so much, did you, in ages past / remember anyone who has pined away in this way? / It is that which I see that charms me / and that which I can not find.”

However, unlike Narcissus, Echo knows who she desires and sacrifices herself for that desire. Ray creates an Echo who uses her own voice to fully articulate her motivation, adoration, and then demise as a result of Narcissus's inability to return her affection. She cannot fathom herself outside of her attachment and attraction to Narcissus. In other words, her identity relies entirely upon him, and she marks the shift between her past, before knowing Narcissus, and the present space of desire that motivates her "complaint":

'Mid sylvan haunts I dwelt of yore,
Where morning mists shone wondrously,
And fountains flung their diadems
Of liquid rainbows. Unto me
Each day was gladness; grottoes cool
With trickling rills and murm'rous leaves,
Lured me to seek their spacious shades;
But not for these my spirit grieves.

When Dawn in rose-decked chariot strewed
Pale gold down Twilight's violet aisles,
I first beheld thee: ah! how fair!
I trembled 'neath the radiant smiles.
Thou pensive, glidest through the groves,
While I, unthought of, with the breeze
In lightness vying, --followed near.
Did not some spell thy spirit seize? (ll. 9-24)

Echo identifies the time before she knew Narcissus as nearly ideal. She spent days gladly wandering the forest, content and welcomed by her environment and experiencing a variety of sensations provided by, particularly, bodies of water. The enjambment following "Unto me" suggests that the "liquid rainbows" and other watery expressions of the forest covered and therefore sexually fulfilled Echo. Before Narcissus, Echo was not plagued by unfulfilled desire. The forest desires Echo. The "grottoes" and plant life "lure" her into their space with murmurs much like the ones that Echo whispers into Narcissus's ear. Thus and through Echo's desire of Narcissus, Ray equates Echo with the forest and gestures toward Echo's future transformation from the human into the non-corporeal. As paradigmatic and satisfying as the forest was for

Echo, it is also in this forest that Echo exists without her original and full linguistic range. Ray, therefore, considers Echo troubled more by Narcissus's rejection than by any loss of speech.

That Echo compares her current state to her time in the edenic pre-Narcissian forest foreshadows the fall into desire that she expresses throughout Ray's poem. As Eve becomes distracted from her idyllic existence in Eden by the desire for knowledge, Echo wishes to know Narcissus. Echo's gaze upon Narcissus eclipses and transforms any previous identity and, also, undermines the very desire that she feels for Narcissus. As Julia Kristeva argues in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*: "The desire of a subject that ties him to the signifier obtains through this signifier an objective, extraindividual value, void-in-itself, other, without, for all that, ceasing (as it does in science) to be the desire of a subject" (Kristeva 117). For Kristeva, desire changes the instant that it translates into an "objective" for she-who-desires. So, that while Echo may initially desire Narcissus, her desire shifts into catching him and becoming the object of his desire.

In Ray's version of the story, Echo's pursuit of Narcissus takes on an evolution of sorts. Initially, Echo wants Narcissus to simply cast his "magic gaze" upon her (l. 6). She then wants him to hear the "soul's complaint" that she whispers into his ear (l. 45). Echo wishes her eyes to be the "mirror" replacing the "sunlit stream" in which Narcissus sees his own reflection (l. 52, 49). Finally, she wants permission to kiss Narcissus and to receive his embrace, such that her sighs will transform into "joy-notes" (64). Echo's desire of Narcissus, therefore, moves from her own sexual yearning for him to an urgent need to relieve herself of the burden of experiencing Narcissus's rejection and repressing that original desire. Mirroring her shifting desire, Echo also suffers multiple transformations: first her verbal mutation, then her desire-driven shift in identity, and then, finally, the complete splitting of her self into discreet parts (wind and voice).

Echo's adoration of Narcissus is already an echo of Narcissus's attraction to himself—through her desire for him, she does transform into the “mirror” of his self-desire, as Ray describes. Therefore, Echo is already Narcissus's ideal, except that Narcissus cannot identify himself in her eyes, whispers, or the kisses that never fall upon his hair and brow. However, his inability to see past himself (much like her inability to imagine herself outside of her attraction for him) makes it impossible for her to be heard or seen by him. Narcissus's self-attraction blinds and deafens him to Echo's existence, situating Echo's desire as pathological. Simultaneously, her attraction to him blinds her to herself, making way for her disembodiment.

Ray identifies Echo's passivity not in her limited command of language but, instead, in her inability to garner Narcissus's attention. For Narcissus, Echo's desire is no more effective than the wind that carries her unheard sighs past his ears. This lens also makes clear Niobe's grief as a type of maternal desire for her cherished children and for her identity as “mother.” Echo represses any aspect of herself outside of her desire for Narcissus and instead cherishes only him and her desire for him. She desires to be desired by Narcissus, to receive from Narcissus that which she'd previously only experienced from the forest:

Told to thine ear my soul's complaint.
Thou didst not heed my spirit's moan;
Then pity now, O peerless one!
Oh! leave me not unloved and lone. (ll. 45-48)

Echo suffers from a condition of simultaneous longing to love and be loved. Elisabeth Young-Bruel and Faith Bethelard in their *Cherishment: A Psychology of the Heart*, analyze this concept of longing through the Japanese term *amae*, which they translate as “cherishment.” As quoted by Young-Bruel and Bethelard, Michael Balint reflected upon the ways that his friend and colleague, psychologist Takeo Doi, utilized *amae*: ‘According to [Doi], there exists in Japanese a very simple, everyday word, *amaeru*, an intransitive verb, denoting "to wish or to expect to be

loved" in the sense of primary love. *Amae* is the noun derived from it, while the adjective *amai* means "sweet." Young-Bruel and Bethelard struggle against the limitations of English and their inability to find a word that quite encompasses *amaeru*; however, their study argues that at the very foundation of child psychology, and as they read through Anna Freud, exists this desire not just to love but to *be loved*.

Faith said: "Be the scholar and tell me, Elisabeth, is it true that there is no word in the West for wishing or expecting to be loved in this way? I never found it — the experience had to go on through dream language in my analysis. And is Balint right that psychoanalysis does not speak about *amae*?" I couldn't answer. But I had an uncanny feeling that we were standing by a great silence. The silence is a condition, expectant baby loving, which is wordless because it is preverbal. But the silence is also a condition in the listeners to childhood, the psychoanalysts, of being wordless because of a story of repression. (8)

"Echo's Complaint" translates Echo's potentially pre-verbal motivations and anticipates Echo's desire as *amaeru*. While Echo certainly wants Narcissus for herself, her longing is as much dependent upon her desire to be adored and loved by him. So then, as Echo is as much in the project of loving Narcissus as Narcissus is, she reflects Narcissus's desire to be loved by the reflection that he cannot initially identify as himself. This is, obviously, a strong and potentially pathological centering of Narcissus—one that drives the transformation of both Narcissus and Echo's identities and their corporeal forms.

Thus, unrequited desire, what I identify as a type of repression of the same desire (in this case, to love and be loved by Narcissus) transforms. Echo, relegated to the status of forest (that which desires) through her unrequited desire hearkens Simone de Beauvoir's (*The Second Sex*) examination of the "maternal body," the body of the pregnant woman, which "is [both] plant and

animal.” In de Beauvoir’s words: “ensnared by nature, the pregnant woman is plant and animal [...] a conscious and free individual, who has become life’s passive instrument” (513). While it may seem a stretch to liken Echo’s overwhelming case of desire to a type of pregnancy, there are, at least, the gender considerations that surround her pursuit of Narcissus. As the pregnant body is often identified as the “natural” evolution of the feminine self, de Beauvoir argues that the conditions of the maternal body anchors the conscious individual to roles determined from outside of herself. To be pregnant, then, is to experience a shift or splitting of one’s identity—to experience a type of double-consciousness in much the same way as Echo suffers the shift in her identity as satisfied woodland nymph to the disembodied manifestation of pure desire.

Echo, however and through Ray, articulates her initial manifestation of double-consciousness when she claims that: “What in my soul is mirrored: may / Not eyes of love thy mirror be?” (ll. 51-52). While she does not become the stream that reflects Narcissus’s greatest desire, Echo already exists as a verbal mirror in Ovid. Ray’s Echo does not suffer the confines of Juno’s curse, as she “utters sad complaint,” “sighed: naught save the wanton wind / returned [her] plaint,” and “Told to [Narcissus’s] ear [her] soul’s complaint” (ll. 7, 25-26, 45). However, and as in Ovid’s version of the story, Echo’s words inevitably fail. This failure translates into Echo’s ultimate self-repression, her desire turned inside out as she makes herself permanently unseen and unseeable. One of the many lessons from Echo, both in Ray and in Ovid, is that through the practice of deep concentration upon someone outside of the self, as also demonstrated by Narcissus’s death and transformation into a flower, one ends up ultimately unrecognizable. Practiced attention, pathological cherishing someone else, may end up with you scattered to the winds. As Echo’s self-identity dissolves, so does her body; and even in Ray’s version of the story, Echo is left as only words of someone else.

The image of Echo does double-work as a critique of race at the turn of the twentieth century. First, it provides a framework for identity politics that relies upon a central figure, Narcissus, as exemplar humanity with the full privileges of personhood. At the very least, I want to propose that the Echo moment provides a framework to read the Race Movement's treatment of women. Because "Blackness" is defined as masculine, it immediately marginalizes the women who also hold this racial identity. None of this understanding is new—in fact, I would argue that late twentieth century black feminism emerges because of this very framework. And, as foremothers to what we identify in the 1970s as "black feminism," Ray and her Black New Women contingent put forth these critiques that do not find a voice, en masse, until nearly 100 years later. At the turn of the century, black women framed their discussions of race oftentimes within the masculine discourse spearheaded by the most privileged figures in the Movement. It stands to reason that race concerns would remain in the hands of those with the most power and therefore ability to change the conditions that supported slavery and Jim Crow. The gender disparity within white American society makes logical the idea that black men would serve as the leaders of the movement.

I am not interested in debunking the efforts of black men for racial freedom and rights. Many scholars have come before me to point out the ways that race movements have utilized black women's labor but largely denied them as representative of the very subjects supposedly central to those movements. Instead, however, I do want to point out the very critiques of feminine marginalization coming from the women writers and movement laborers who, while perhaps not staging protests or overt counter-movements to "black rights as masculine rights," still reminded readers of both their presences and their marginalization. Just as I argued in the first chapter of this study that black letters in America have always engaged in gender

discussions—particularly by considering Phillis Wheatley as the beginning of those letters—I want to now consider that America’s race movements have always also considered issues of gender. It feels almost too obvious to point out that “masculinity” is gender. So, the clearer way to frame my argument is this: through the work of black women, critiques of gender remain inextricable from race movements. Thus, and as I discuss in the Introduction, while black women certainly rolled up their sleeves willingly and in the effort for racial equality, they remained quite conscious and critical of gendered disparities framing those efforts. These conditions extend to our present moment as the women writing, and particularly Ray, remain underrepresented in library collections, in the classroom, and in the greater American imagination. In gatekeeping academia, presses, libraries, and university administrations hold out to these racial and gender defaults (white and male as invisible to itself, however also always the goal position for all of those who cannot identify with this form of narcissism). I am arguing that Ray posits Narcissus as the model for racial and gender modalities in her contemporary moment—but I also want to point out the lack of movement we have experienced since then.

VII. Conclusion: White Masculine Desire as Ovidian Narcissism

Narcissus’s initial inability to identify himself in the water, to recognize his own reflection, in part feeds the growing pathology that keeps him fixated upon the watery image. Narcissus’s desire increases as he struggles against his lack of knowledge: the more that Narcissus looks into the pool without knowing the identity of the reflection, the greater his obsession with the image. Narcissus, then, embodies and defines the parameters of Ovidian desire. Ovid demonstrates that desire remains always an unfulfilled fixation on an object of desire. Moreover, Ovid suggests that by withholding of the object of desire, desire increases.

This argument finds its logical end through the physical dissolution of Echo—her eventual demise as a result of Narcissus’s unrequited love. In *Subjects of Desire: Human Reflections in 20th Century France* (2013) and particularly in a discussion intersecting Georg Hegel, Alexandre Kojève, and Jean Hyppolite, Judith Butler reminds her readers that:

Because desire is in part a desire for self-reflection, and because desire also seeks to sustain itself as desire, it is necessary to understand self-reflection as a form of desire, and desire as a cognitive effort to thematize identity. Desire and reflection are not mutually exclusive terms, for reflection forms one of the intentional aims of desire, and desire itself may be understood as the ambiguous project of life and reflection. To comprehend the conditions of thought, to become a fully existing being through the reflection on the life that has produced the reflecting posture, is the highest aim of the *Phenomenology*, the all-inclusive aim of desire. Deception emerges as a function of perspective, of the insurpassable fact that human consciousness can never fully grasp the conditions of its own emergence, that even the act of “grasping” consciousness is also in the process of becoming. (89)

Narcissus’s identity transforms once he gazes into the pool and sees his reflection. All other aspects of his life fall away, and there is only him as the seer, the image being seen, and his desire to possess the body attached to the image. For Butler, “self-reflection” is implicitly desire, as the “self” remains always out of reach. Considering Stuart Hall’s definition of identity, as I quote in the “Introduction” of this study, self-reflection is a process much like “becoming.” Narcissus “discovers” his own identity after some time of staring, moving, and analyzing the image in the water—and it is upon this knowledge that he can no longer exist. His self-discovery interrupts the process of “becoming” and transforms him from the identity he discovers to a wholly new identity. Thus, it stands that one cannot “become” oneself until one knows who one

is. And yet, if it is impossible to know oneself, then one's identity is tied to the process of exploring the self. This extends the Socratic paradox of knowledge, or as put by Cicero in *Academica*: "ipse se nihil scire id unum sciat (I know only one thing: that I do not know)" (Book I, Section 15). As Narcissus moves from desiring an unknown beloved into the knowledge of himself-as-the-beloved, his story argues for a desire of unattainable self-reflection. Narcissus finds no peace when he surmises the identity of his reflection. Instead, his desire transforms into mourning.

Therefore, imbedded and implicit in Narcissus's love of himself is also his denial of this love—the inability for him to recognize that he is actually in love with himself. This misrecognition also serves as the framework contributing to Narcissus's sense of unrequited love. He desires the love of the seemingly unattainable through his inability to identify himself.

quid videat, nescit; sed quod videt, uritur illo,
atque oculos idem, qui decipit, incitat error.
credule, quid frustra simulacra fugacia captas?
quod petis, est nusquam; quod amas, avertere, perdes!
ista repercussae, quam cernis, imaginis umbra est:
nil habet ista sui; tecum venitque manetque;
tecum discedet, si tu discedere possis! (ll. 430-36)

(What he sees, he knows not; but that which he sees he burns for, / he deludes himself into error [misidentification] / Foolish one, why do you try to grab at ghosts? / What you seek is nowhere; If you turn away, you will lose that which you love! / The reflection that you see is merely a shadow of an image: / it has nothing of its own; with you it comes and stays; / and with you it will leave, if you can leave!)

I suggest that, then, "narcissism" depends on the inability to see one's participation in self-directed desire. Thus, I offer a different reading from Sigmund Freud's famous definition from "On Narcissism, An Introduction":

The term narcissism is derived from clinical description and was chosen by Paul Näcke⁸² in 1899 to denote the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated—who looks at it, that is to say, strokes it and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction through these activities. Developed to this degree, narcissism has the significance of a perversion that has absorbed the whole of the subject's sexual life, and it will consequently exhibit the characteristics which [sic] we expect to meet with in the study of all perversions. (73)

On the surface, Freud's definition seems about an obsession with masturbation. And while there is some truth in that assessment, what seems most important is that the narcissist is unable to gain sexual satisfaction except through self-love. Likewise, and through Ovid's rendition of the myth, narcissism relies upon a disconnection with or lack of knowing the self—for if Narcissus knew that the reflection was his own, if he possessed self-consciousness, he'd be able to fulfill his desire (assuming that self-directed desire can be fulfilled, at all).

Once Narcissus recognizes himself, “*iste ego sum: sensi, nec me mea fallit imago* (I know: I feel [recognize] that it is my own image)” (l. 463), he immediately wishes for his own transformation: “*o utinam a nostro secedere corpore possem! votum in amante novum, vellem, quod amamus, abesset* (Oh, I wish I could be separated from my body! / I would pray that my lover be absent from me)” (ll. 467-68). His self-knowledge perpetuates his destruction, because with this realization Narcissus finds death. But, before dying, Narcissus wishes for his own disassociation, a spontaneous doubling, that would allow him to fulfill his self-desire. But, as the source of the desire, Narcissus cannot also occupy the space of the desired object. Thinking of

⁸² It becomes quite important to my discussion to point out that Näcke argued for the forced sterilization of “unwanted” people in society, particularly focusing on and defining “habitual criminals” as “degenerate,” and also perpetuated racist attitudes (Wetzle 51). However, and perhaps as a foil to Freud's classification of “homosexuals” as “perverts,” Näcke held somewhat sympathetic leanings towards the stories of gay men and women and argued for a “homosexual center” in the brain as well as “asexual” literature as a reparative for gay oppression (Ordovery 88, Rosario 114).

Narcissus as “whiteness,” not as an extension of the Greek and Roman myth but rather within the context of nineteenth century America, a paradox of white masculinity emerges. The white masculine hegemonic relies always upon invisibility and the unrecognizable/unidentifiable self, for the only way that it can only sustain itself by denying its particularity. Thus, by rejecting Echo, causing her pain that leads to her decorporalization, Narcissus also reinscribes his own masculinity.

CHAPTER 3:

Ovidian Reanimation and Racial Re-identification in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*

I. Introduction

[I]mitation is congenial to men from childhood. And in this they differ from other animals, that they are most imitative, and acquire the first disciplines through imitation; and that all men delight in imitations. But an indication of this is that which happens in the works [of artists.] For we are delighted on surveying very accurate images, the realities of which are painful to the view; such as the forms of very savage animals, and dead bodies.

Aristotle, *The Poetic*, Chapter IV (291)

“Dianthe Lusk.”

“Great name. I hope she comes up to I, --the flower of Jove.”

“Flower of Jove, indeed! You’ll say so when you see her,” cried Charlie with his usual enthusiasm.

“What! again, my son? ‘Like Dian’s kiss, unmasked, unsought, Love gives itself’” [stet] quoted Livingston, with a smile on his handsome face.

Pauline Hopkins, *Of One Blood* (451-52)

Then Lips to Lips he [Pygmalion] join’d; now freed from Fear
He found the Savour of the Kiss sincere:
At this the waken’d Image op’d her Eyes,
And view’d at once the Light, and the Lover with Surprise.

John Dryden, *Ovid’s Metamorphoses*, “Book X” (346)

In his 2010 volume, *Playing Gods: Ovid’s Metamorphoses and the Politics of Fiction*, critic Andrew Feldherr argues that the Pygmalion episode hinges on the moment when the sculptor’s ivory statue sees for the first time—the statue transforms from “being seen to seeing” (265). As Ovid reported in “Book X” of *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion refused to marry because he equated the actions of the Propeotides,⁸³ women he considered vice-filled, representative of all

⁸³ The Propeotides are often identified as the first prostitutes, punished by Athena because they did not worship her: “Sunt tamen obscenae Venerem Propoetides ausae /esse negare deam; pro quo sua numinis ira /corpora cum fama primae vulgasse feruntur, / utque pudor cessit, sanguisque induruit oris, / in rigidum parvo silicem discrimine versae (There are, however obscene Propoetides who dared / to deny the existence of Athena; for this denial, / they are said to have been first prostituted bodies, / their shame resulted in blood that hardened in their mouths, / indiscriminately, they were turned to flint)” (Book X, ll. 238-42)

women. As no living women were worthy of marriage, Pygmalion sculpted his ideal woman out of ivory—he creates an unanimated woman imitation that has neither the history nor tendency for amoral behavior. After completing the statue, sleeping with it, and handling it in a somewhat rough fashion, Pygmalion gave tribute to Venus but continued to deny that he wished for a living wife. Despite his denials and in the midst of his kissing his creation, Venus interprets his desire and transforms the statue into a woman. “ore suo non falsa premit, dataque oscula virgo / sensit et erubuit timidumque ad lumina lumen / attollens pariter cum caelo vidit amantem” (ll. 292-94, “he kissed her virginal mouth, and she shyly blushed in the light, seeing together her lover with the sky”). The live statue and Pygmalion each register shock, and the statue’s first and perhaps only action is to see light, Pygmalion, and Pygmalion’s reaction to her awakening. Through her vision, she “lifts up” (“attollens partier”) Pygmalion to the level of the “sky” (“cum caelo”). The statue’s act of seeing also acts upon Pygmalion—through the statue’s eyes, Pygmalion’s status raises to the status of a near-god. Pygmalion’s role as creator, husband, and father, and therefore also man, relies upon the statue’s singular act and her becoming/identity vis-à-vis Pygmalion. The movement from passive and literally lifeless to witnessing light and being light-filled redoubles the position of the voyeuristic audience who, through Ovid’s story, watches Pygmalion’s statue come to life. The complicated relationship between the audience and art, therefore, becomes illuminated by light in the statue’s eyes—the art looks back at the audience.

In her 1903 magazine novel, *Of One Blood*, Pauline Hopkins uses Ovid’s model of the ivory statue: her art, the novel, speaks back to (sees) the reading audience and the mainstream white definitions of blackness that surround and confine her literary production. Hopkins reconsiders the Pygmalion myth and Pygmalion’s lineage in order to re-inscribe for her audience notions of racialized desire and racial threat by identifying white masculinity as reliant upon the

black feminine body. At the time that Hopkins wrote, “racial threat,” coded as black male aggression, the threat of the violation miscegenation laws through violent acts by black men against white women, inspired an ever increasing number of incidents of lynching. *Of One Blood* subverts popular notions of black male aggression towards white women and, instead, argues that the most consistent and formative racial threat manifested as white male violent desire for black women—a pattern of behavior enabled by American chattel slavery. Taking that argument one step further, Hopkins blurs the racial lines separating white and black men, and implicates black men in this history of violence, or at least black men living through a code of masculinity as forged by white male slavers.

Hopkins utilizes the mimetic classical form—the formal practice of narrative retelling—to explore the complex relationship that emerges through the intersections of classicism, the classics, and American national narratives. Specifically, Hopkins recasts Ovid’s “Book X” of *Metamorphoses* as a story of American slavery and its social aftermath, and interrogates Ovid’s story of the founding of the Roman Republic—a classical narrative that helped buttress American nation-building efforts and the formal chattel slave system.⁸⁴ Simultaneously, and as if one novel could do any more work, Hopkins criticizes American literary projects that claim a classical literary genealogy. By choosing Ovid’s work over that of Vergil or Homer, authors most revered by eighteenth and nineteenth century American literary communities, Hopkins challenges her peers and her readers to consider the motivations inspiring American national narratives through an alternative, non-canonical literary foundation. Through *Of One Blood*, Hopkins argues that the classical lends itself to stories that undermine categories of citizenship and trouble the racial boundaries established during slavery. In short, *Of One Blood* uses Ovid’s

⁸⁴ For an in-depth analysis concerning classicism in early America, see Caroline Winterer’s *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910*.

“Book X” to redefine who is American; what is racial threat; and, what are the classical narratives that circulate around Americanness and race.

II. Hopkins’s Black New Woman Novel

Born in 1859 to free parents, Northrop and Sarah (Allen) Hopkins, in Portland, Maine, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins is best known as the editor of *Colored American Magazine*, an essayist and novelist, and also a singer and actress. She lived and wrote at the same time as the other Black New Women in this study, participating in the Club Movement and working diligently for the Race Movement. Like other Black New Women’s fiction, including the novellas by Alice Dunbar-Nelson that I discuss further in Chapter 4, Hopkins’s novel shifts through a variety of genres and provides a surprising literary criticism of the very work that it seems to laud. The storyline, which I describe in detail in Section III of this chapter, is difficult to parse out as it takes a variety of twists and turns, mapping slavery onto the landscapes of the American urban North, the plantation South, and a hidden African civilization. *Of One Blood*, especially in conjunction with Dunbar-Nelson’s *A Modern Undine*, demonstrates Black New Women fiction—a collage of genres in a single work that explores the intersections of race, gender, and class at the turn of the twentieth century. *Of One Blood* is a mix of any number of genres, but is wholly and undeniably “speculative,” as it challenges the ideas of time and space. I argue that the fiction of Black New Women *is* speculative—it must redefine and reorder notions of “reality” as it grapples with the liminal space that emerges when the slave past confronts an unknown intellectual and industrial future.

Around the central character, Reuel, incidents remain unexplained, characters move in and out of physical space and time, and defy mainstream ideas of “reality”. The novel

appropriates a variety of gothic features, including a ghost, visions, disturbing Poe-esque interior design, acts deemed “supernatural,” and seemingly random circumstances. Like a classic Shakespearean tragedy, the beautiful feminine protagonist meets a heartbreaking end. The “mulatto” characters are born through violence and in a plantation setting. And most importantly to my project, through *Of One Blood*, Hopkins rewrote the *Metamorphoses* stories of Orpheus, Pygmalion, and Myrrha, with a cursory glance at Adonis and Venus. This remarkable combination of storyline, mixed genres, and literary methodologies comes together and explodes in social, canonical, and political criticisms that correspond to the complexities of the novel, itself. It is Hopkins’s magnum opus. Furthermore, it gives contemporary critics, like myself, a chance to reflect on the issues of race, gender, and class that still unfold within the American academy and the nation, writ large.

As I’ve written this project, I understand that my motivations and readings reflect not only my personal experiences of education, but also the critical and worrisome political moment in my American society. We are in a critical moment where our rape and lynching culture(s) are no longer haunting us but have been made manifest. Violence in this country seems, again, at a high—much like the turn of the twentieth century. The cries of white paranoia and horror echo throughout our media, both fictional and nonfictional, in the very same way that Hopkins’s magazine novels sat side-by-side with reports of instances of racial violence and terrifying shifts in American culture. The more I have read and studied these works, the more I have my own sense of history repeating. More than any other work in my study, *Of One Blood* depicts and interrogates such tensions.

It bears mentioning that this chapter tackles a variety of issues in Hopkins’s novel, largely because the novel demands that the audience wrestle with the intersections of race,

gender, and class, and particularly with how fictions in America have obscured these intersections. To summarize: I interrogate the ways that *Of One Blood* uses Ovid's stories of Orpheus, Pygmalion, and Myrrha to demonstrate the tensions extending beyond the confines of chattel slavery and that particularly leave black women vulnerable to misuse. Hopkins butted against American stereotypes of racial threat that gave rise to Jim Crow law and fueled mounting violence against black men and women during her contemporary moment. She argued that criminality existed not in racial mixing, or the desire represented therein, but the inherent violence that the language of miscegenation obscures and enables. She undermined the popular violence narratives fueling historical lynching and racial cleansing efforts throughout the country.

Hopkins wrote *Of One Blood* at the turn of the twentieth century, after the recent Plessy v. Ferguson ruling, and when concerns about racial blood mixing and racial contamination were at an all time high in America. The Plessy case came about when Homer Plessy, an "octoroon," refused to vacate the first-class railroad car on a Louisiana train. After being removed from the train and jailed in New Orleans, Plessy, who purposely defied the law so that he might bring suit, attempted to sue and change the segregation law that mandated that the conductor of the train remove him for the violation. "That petitioner was a citizen of the United States and a resident of the State of Louisiana, of mixed descent, in the proportion of seven eighths Caucasian and one eighth African blood; that the mixture of colored blood was not discernible in him." Fear of miscegenation and of disrupting race-based class boundaries inspired the segregation and the "separate but equal" laws. Upholding these laws through this case proved ironic, particularly, because Plessy's blackness "was not discernible." The transgression of race began at least three generations before Plessy was even born, as he had (only, if you will) "one eighth African blood." Moreover, that initial miscegenation offense was ostensibly repeated multiple times. The laws

were too late. The desire to uphold segregation several generations post these transgressions, then, obscures the history of black slaves growing lighter through generations. Legal segregation functioned as nationally sanctioned denials of interracial sexual desire and sexual violence in slavery.

While critics often tout the novel, and Hopkins' corpus, overall, as argument for "interracial love," *Of One Blood* reconfigures miscegenation discourse in terms of threat to both blacks and whites. If the sin of the chattel slave system (and the violence enacted upon enslaved women through that system) obscured origins, the issue plaguing the country was not racial mixing but the mixing that had already happened and remained undetectable. In other words, Hopkins's novel suggests that by the time her audience is reading her fourth novel, racial mixing had already occurred for generations, and that the crimes within American society had less to do with interracial desire than it did the motivations to deny those desires. *Of One Blood* presumes preexisting desire, as it recasts the unrelenting desire of Ovid's Myrrha for her father as white [not only male] desire for the black female body that emerges during a Fisk Jubilee concert.

III. The Story of One Blood

Of One Blood tells the story of a trinity of siblings, and centrally focuses on the life of Reuel Briggs, a Harvard medical student who grapples with questions of philosophical convention, racial passing, and corporeal reanimation. Reuel accesses Harvard through his racial passing—his hidden race mirrored by his hidden lines of medical inquiry, and particularly his attempt to bring back to life seemingly dead animals with the hope of one day applying his methods to human beings. Reuel is one of three central characters: siblings, one generation out of slavery and raised separately through largely unexplained circumstances, who together enact a

variety of potential racial identities available to mixed-raced Americans who phenotypically look white. Reuel chooses to pass as a white man and keeps his head relatively low in his Harvard medical school community as a means of securing his racial identity. Aubrey Livingston⁸⁵ is Reuel's brother; although at the beginning of the novel, neither man knows this and instead they understand one another as colleagues and friends at Harvard. The boys' mother Mira was conceived through her mother's rape by Old Man Livingston, her slave master. Mira figures as a ghost throughout the novel, appearing at significant times of reflection or danger for the characters. One of ten children and the only one not sold away from her mother, Mira remains on her father's plantation and suffers the same fate as her mother. Mira's half-brother, the legitimate son of her father, reenacts his father's treachery by repeatedly raping Mira, through which Reuel, Aubrey, and the third sibling, Dianthe Lusk, result.

The three siblings circulate around one another in a variety of complicated and classically romantic circumstances. As already mentioned, Reuel and Aubrey find one another at Harvard, where Aubrey deduces Reuel's race, despite Reuel's attempt to hide his black roots. Aubrey's vision, however, does not extend to himself, and he does not know that he is also a result of violence and miscegenation. Aubrey was born at the same time as his father's legitimate, white son. When the legitimate son dies, Aubrey's maternal grandmother, Aunt Hester, switched the baby. Throughout the novel, Aubrey never learns that he has black blood, let alone that he is the biological son of a slave. While Reuel demonstrates the deliberately passing black body, Aubrey serves as an example of blackness that remains undetectable, even to the subject, himself. I will

⁸⁵ Aubrey identifies himself as the son of a white Southern plantation owner and the child of his father's legal wife. Unbeknownst to Aubrey throughout the novel, he and Reuel share the same mother. Switched at birth by Aunt Hester, the boys' grandmother, Aubrey takes the place of the dead baby Livingston and never knows of his mistaken identity.

later argue that despite their genealogies, Reuel and Aubrey perform whiteness in such a way that they *become* white, and particularly so because of their relationship with their sister Dianthe.

The boys meet their sister through fantastic circumstance: Reuel has a “vision” of Dianthe the night before the brothers first see Dianthe perform with The Fisk Jubilee Singers on a Boston concert tour. They then re-meet Dianthe months later, when she suffers a near-death accident that lands her in the Harvard hospital attended by Reuel and Aubrey. Between the concert and the accident, Dianthe performed in a mesmeric act—where a woman, a “traveling magnetic physician,” repeatedly hypnotized Dianthe for a paying audience (38). Dianthe’s participation in the traveling act echoes her enslaved mother, Mira’s, involuntary participation in mesmeric trances performed by her slaver and father, Old Man Livingston, while Mira was alive. From the outset of the novel, as she sings for white audiences as a Fisk performer and through her exposure to mesmerism, Dianthe follows in her mother’s footsteps. In this, Dianthe’s tragic end starts with her introduction in the novel. Primed by her previous mesmeric experience, Dianthe comes back to life when Reuel extends to her his animal experiments. Reuel reanimates Dianthe with the help of Aubrey and for a Harvard medical school audience. Dianthe awakens with no memory of her identity, “like a child” and in “a *dual* mesmeric trance” (34, 35).

The brothers come together and agree to tell Dianthe that she is a white woman by the name of Felice Adams. Dianthe, as Felice, comes into the boys’ company, and is taken in by Molly, the sister of their friend Charlie Vance and Aubrey’s initial love interest. The siblings’ mother, Mira, haunts them throughout the novel, failing to communicate with her children the dangers that they face because they do not know their identities. Never understanding Mira’s warnings, both brothers fall in love with Dianthe: Reuel eventually marries Dianthe while Aubrey secretly lusts for her behind Molly’s and his siblings’ backs. Reuel, having become a

lauded physician through his reanimation of Dianthe, seeks out adventure with his friend Charlie Vance, and leaves Boston for Egypt. While abroad, Reuel receives a letter from Aubrey that reports that Dianthe has died, devastating him, but also priming him for his real adventure in Egypt—his discovery of the lost city of Telassar, the capital of Meroe. Reuel is kidnapped while he explores the Great Pyramid and experiences a forced catabasis when his kidnappers ferret him down a secret set of pathways. Reuel arrives in the land of his forgotten forefathers. His kidnapper and guide, Ai, reveals that Reuel is a long lost son of the lost Ethiopian civilization of Meroe and the land's rightful (blood) ruler. With some persuasion, Reuel eventually accepts the throne as his own and agrees to stay in Telassar and sheds his previous American identity, which includes adopting a new name, Ergamenes,⁸⁶ and healing from news of Dianthe's death. As the recovered son of Ethiopia and while in Meroe, Reuel falls in love with and agrees to marry "Candace," the title given to the intended betrothed of the rightful heir. While this new identity gives Reuel a way out of the incestuous love triangle with Aubrey and Dianthe, his trip also leaves Dianthe vulnerable to Aubrey's manipulations.

Meanwhile, back in Boston, Aubrey thickens his plot to take Reuel's place as Dianthe's husband. After sending Reuel the letter falsely announcing Dianthe's death, Aubrey also tells Dianthe that he's received word that Reuel has perished in Africa. Despite thinking herself widowed, Dianthe resists the romantic advances Aubrey makes as she mourns. Through extortion and because he knows Dianthe's racial identity, the rebuffed Aubrey extorts Dianthe into a sexual relationship. Aubrey then orchestrates the death of Molly Vance with the hopes of

⁸⁶ Ergamenes was the name of a historic king in Nubia from 295-275 BCE. Robert Bianchi writes: "Ergamenes, as he is called in the Classical [sic] texts, has been equated with the Merotic king, Arkamani I, the traditional founder of the Meroitic Dynasty. It is difficult to separate fact from fiction regarding his biography, but the assertion that Ergamenes received a Greek education and was well versed in Greek philosophy is significant" (224). Hopkins may have chosen Meroe, therefore, because Arkamani was educated outside of Nubia and then returned home to rule, as Reuel does in the novel.

securing Dianthe as his wife. In the end, Dianthe, pregnant and “ruined” by Aubrey, learns the “true” identities of her siblings through her still-living grandmother, Aunt Hester, but must die with this knowledge and before giving birth. Reuel’s new position as the heir to Meroe saves him; meanwhile, Aubrey’s treachery against Dianthe and one other woman brands him a villain.

Of One Blood does not exactly map onto Ovid’s text; however, Hopkins’s provides for her readers a host of clues and verbal echoes alluding to the novel as a re-envisioned *Metamorphoses*.⁸⁷ *Of One Blood* contains a host of Ovid’s characters and conventions: Mira (Myrrha), Adonis, two Venuses, Erebus, a character named Ai, the flower of Jove, animation of the inanimate, reanimation, and deanimation, a descent into a hidden world, a double death, and incest. Without the additional context, the use of “Adonis” as the nickname for the character Charlie Vance might be a throwaway. Charlie’s physical beauty earns him the nickname “Adonis,” and he perhaps suffers a figurative castration when he transforms in Ethiopia from a recreational playboy to the model of conventional social masculinity. Upon facing the dangers in Ethiopia, Charlie reevaluates his frivolous behavior and vows to settle down and marry. Aubrey calls Reuel the “son of Erebus” – the son of primordial darkness and the husband of Nyx, or “night,” whom Orpheus must pass on his way to retrieve Eurydice from Hades. The name suggests that Reuel slips dangerously past the gatekeepers as he passes for white. “Son of Erebus” marks Reuel with race, but also as a first son whose heritage stretches back to the beginning of time. As the lost king of the first civilization in Ethiopia, the name begins the novel’s Ethiopianist

⁸⁷ Genre concerns remain imbedded in this chapter and throughout my project. Hopkins, like Alice Dunbar-Nelson (the next chapter in the dissertation), uses a variety of genres in their individual works. For instance, *Of One Blood* not only writes against and through the classical heroic epic, but also gothic romance, adventure, travel, horror, and fairy tale. Hopkins provides a map through literary forms exploring the tensions of identity and desire and as discussed throughout this chapter as that of race and gender. That Hopkins would rewrite Ovid, specifically, paired with additional genres suggests that her uniquely American, raced plotline exceeds any single genre.

argument, capitalizing on the myth of American slaves as kidnapped and subjugated African royalty.

IV. Ovid's Orpheus Sings the Pygmalion Line

“Book X” of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* begins with the marriage of Orpheus and Eurydice, cursed by the presence of Hymen. On the day of the wedding, a snake bites Eurydice and, she descends to Hades, lost to Orpheus. The “heaven-descended bard”⁸⁸ first mourns and then follows behind his lost love via catabasis, or decent, into Hades. Appealing to Pluto and Persephone with a song that cites Persephone’s “ravishment” as evidence for the love shared and cherished by the underworld couple, Orpheus convinces the king and queen of Hades to release Eurydice. Pluto agrees to give Eurydice another chance at earth-bound love, but with strict conditions. Orpheus must ascend to earth with Eurydice following him, and without Orpheus looking back at Eurydice. To reverse the order of Eurydice’s death, Orpheus must trust Pluto’s new instructions completely as a condition of faithful ascent. Orpheus has an opportunity to not only recover his wife but to essentially reverse the story of Persephone’s kidnapping—the very story that he uses to convince Pluto and Persephone to release Eurydice in the name of “love.” Yet, and similarly to the Biblical Lot’s wife, Eurydice never receives her full reinstatement to life on earth. Orpheus, perhaps worried about the limp that Eurydice still manifests from her snakebite, looks back at her right before reaching the surface. His compassion or insecurity seals Eurydice’s return to Hades. Upon looking back, Orpheus witnesses Eurydice disappear and

⁸⁸ As Eurydice experiences “double-death,” by traveling to Hades, Orpheus becomes doubly-descended. While I have yet to parse this completely it seems connected to Hopkins’s Reuel contemplating death, in the beginning of the novel, as it connects to his abandoning his black identity. He first descends into a space of hidden racial identity when he chooses to pass. However, upon traveling to Ethiopia, and descending into the hidden city Tellasar, Reuel discovers his royal Ethiopian heritage and “place” as the throne heir. Like Orpheus’s second descent, Reuel’s affords him recovery of that which he has lost. And, also, like Orpheus, Reuel will experience loosing his wife Dianthe twice.

return to Hades, her farewell never quite leaving her lips and reaching his ears. Evaporating before Orpheus's eyes and permanently muting her voice, Eurydice experiences a "double death" and becomes, this time, irrecoverable to her husband and forever silent.

After Orpheus fails to restore Eurydice, he sits by the river Styx with the hopes of changing Pluto's mind through his own sacrifice of sleep and food. Eurydice remains in Hades, and Orpheus leaves the banks of Styx to travel in his mourning. He swears off the affections of women and, instead, keeps the company of boys. The text claims that Orpheus is the first Thracian man to "transfer" his sexual attention to other men. Finding himself unrelieved of his mourning, he eventually leaves the city and isolates himself on Mount Rhodope.⁸⁹ He ventures into a clearing in a wood and begins to sing songs of love. He begins by laying, essentially, his poetic talent and the product thereof at the feet of Jove. As he sings, the trees surrounding the clearing begin to move toward him. The narrator tells the audience that many of the trees were once humans, transformed for any number of reasons, but most often for some offense against a god or goddess. Orpheus's first tale tells of Jupiter's love for Ganymede. In classic Jupiter fashion, the god transformed himself into an eagle and carried Ganymede off to be a cupbearer to the gods. After two additional fables of transformation,⁹⁰ Orpheus sings of Pygmalion who, as discussed in the beginning of this chapter, creates an ivory statue that Athena brings to life. The statue and Pygmalion create a line of offspring that include King Cinyras, Cinyras's daughter Myrrha, and their son, the beautiful Adonis—stories of tragic love from which Hopkins derives *Of One Blood*.

Myrrha, despite a variety of choices for lovers, only desires her father, Cinyras. As an extension of sculptor Pygmalion's rejection of biologically born women and, instead, marriage to

⁸⁹ Present day southern Bulgaria.

⁹⁰ Hyacinth transformed into a flower by Apollo, and the population of Cyprus turned into bulls by Venus.

his own statue animated by Venus, it seems fitting that Myrrha would reject the mass of male suitors outside of her own family. In the tradition of her great-grandfather, Pygmalion, Myrrha's sexual desire for her father extends the reinscribed order of kinship. Myrrha can only imagine life with her father's requited love, and secures the return of his sexual attention by disguising herself. When Cinyras discovers Myrrha's true identity, he casts her out of his kingdom. Myrrha leaves, already pregnant with her father's child, and wanders aimlessly until her grief transforms her into a tree. By orchestrating sexual union with father, Myrrha loses the humanity gifted to her great-grandmother, the ivory statue carved by Pygmalion and animated by Venus in answer to Pygmalion's prayers. The end of Pygmalion's line, Myrrha and Cinyras's baby, Adonis, and his beauty call into question the mark of incest. Adonis' end, gorged by the tusks of a boar, renders him castrated and physically marked in a way that parallels the taboo of his conception.

Otherwise, he is beautiful—so beautiful that the goddess who enabled his existence by giving Pygmalion a bride, falls in love with him. And while the Adonis of Hopkins's story, Charlie Vance, friend of the three main characters, has no part in the incest plot of the story, he serves to further punctuate Hopkins's text as Ovidian. Hopkins's central characters, Reuel, Aubrey, and Dianthe, are, also, all described as remarkably beautiful and therefore betraying, corporeally, no sign of their "unnatural" origins. And yet, Ovid's Adonis forecasts the tragedy of Hopkins's trinity.

Dianthe suffers multiple deaths and Reuel experiences his own resurrection, just as Eurydice finds herself venturing into Hades two times. Dianthe experiences two physical deaths, one after a train accident and then, later, as she languishes on her deathbed and hears the voices of Ethiopia calling her home. During her second death, Dianthe metaphorically returns to Reuel, her brother and husband who have been lost to her after he finds himself alive in the lost city of

their forgotten noble past. She also temporarily loses her identity through amnesia, and is resurrected by Reuel after her accident. Dianthe, then, suffers death at least three times, and finds herself resurrected twice: first, at the hands of Reuel and his mesmeric practices and then when her memory returns and she finds her singing voice in the Vance parlor.

V. The Endymion Effect: White Desire and Deanimating Effect of the Black Feminine

Early in the novel, two of the main characters, Reuel and Aubrey, attend a Fisk Jubilee Singers Concert with their friend Charlie Vance. The men sit amongst other Boston elite, readying themselves for a musical experience by a group of young black singers whose concert serves to raise money for Fisk University, in Nashville, Tennessee.⁹¹ Charlie begins to describe one Fisk singer, in particular: Dianthe Lusk.⁹² Charlie challenges his friends to deny the singer's exceptional voice. He predicts that his friends will be shocked that the "pretty" Negro women in the singing troupe are, in Charlie's words, "as white as we" (12). Reuel, in defense of his own racial passing and play-acting the white masculine subject position that he has adopted, argues

⁹¹ Historically, The Jubilee Singers participated in the 1872 World's Peace Jubilee and International Musical Festival in Boston, a performance for which they garnered the attention of President Ulysses S. Grant who subsequently invited them to the White House (Shenbeck 263, Ward). The Jubilee Singers' participation in the Festival marked the first big-city performance by the group, and the largest American musical audience for any black group, at that time. It remains unclear if Hopkins was referencing the 1872 concert, specifically, in the novel, as the audience is not seated in the huge coliseum created for the World's Peace festival. This concert does mark the history of the Jubilee Singers in Boston, and additionally the history of black performance and spectacle in the United States. The concert also introduces Hopkins's audience to the character, Dianthe Lusk, a central figure to the novel and the woman around whom desire circulates throughout the novel.

⁹² The historical Dianthe Lusk married the famous John Brown in June, 1820. While courting Lusk, known for her singing voice, Brown wrote to her, remembering the first time that he met her. Having employed Lusk's widowed mother as a housekeeper, he happened upon Lusk working in his cabin and singing his favorite hymn, Charles Wesley's "Blow Ye the Trumpet, Blow!" Of the correspondence, Brown's biographer, Louis A. DeCaro writes: "[Brown] loved this hymn above all others, and hearing it sung in the angelic tones of Dianthe's golden voice seemed to beautify her, grace more than glamor drawing him to her side. Wesley's hymn celebrated the Old Testament theme of jubilee in Leviticus 25, in which trumpets signal the liberation of slaves and the forgiveness of debts at the fiftieth year, or jubilee. In the years to come, 'Blow ye the trumpet' [sic] became John Brown's personal anthem, a song he carried with him into battle, and one which he sang aloud as he bounced children and grandchildren on his knee or tucked them into bed" (67).

against Charlie's categorizations of beauty and talent: "If this is to be the result of emancipation, I for one vote that we ask Congress to annul the Proclamation" (13).

Charlie's introduction constructs the singer, Dianthe, off stage, as the novel's Pygmalionesque statue, and in the imaginations of Charlie, Reuel, and Aubrey. Initially, Dianthe has no human form and cannot intervene in her own narrative. Her whiteness mirrors the ivory of Pygmalion's statue, and her beauty remains a frozen, abstract notion for the listeners of Charlie's testimony of her beauty. Hopkins gently jabs her audience in the ribs and foreshadows the central mystery of the novel: although unknown to Charlie, both Reuel and Aubrey have black heritages and are also Dianthe's brothers. Charlie's misreading of Reuel and Aubrey's races betrays a larger argument Hopkins asserts concerning potential misreading by white people in America. Ironically, as Reuel and Aubrey sit in the audience in Boston and prepare to watch a choir of black singers with various skin tones, they too demonstrate the unreliability of sight for determining race. Simply: white people may not see black people among them. Additionally, the prohibitions created during American slavery around miscegenation and as an attempt to mediate white desire for black people, break down as these three "white" men anticipate desire for the nearly white Dianthe.

In response to Charlie, Aubrey misquotes Henry Wordworth Longfellow's "Endymion," anticipating the desire that the men will feel for Dianthe along with the rest of their Boston peers in the theater. In "Endymion," Longfellow rewrote the Greek myth of a boy so beautiful, that the goddess Diana, as the moon, could not resist her desire for the boy, kissing Endymion in his sleep.

Like Dian's kiss, unasked, unsought,
Love gives itself, but is not bought;
Nor voice, nor sound betrays
Its deep, impassioned gaze. (ll. 13-16)

Diana's love is unrequited, silent, and bound to her vision. Diana, as the moon, keeps her love hidden and steals a moment of affection, without Endymion's consent. Dianthe's body and performance emerge as the moon from the clouds, as the "love giv[ing] itself"—the object of desire not only for the three friends, but also for the entire Boston audience. There is no evidence that Dianthe wishes for desirous attention, and the audience indulges in desire for her without her express consent. Reuel particularly succumbs to the "intoxication" of perfume and anticipation filling the venue (13). Desire fills the space as Dianthe sings "Go Down Moses" with the "anguish" of slavery, collapsing the space between sexuality and bondage. The scene's disquieting tension betrays the novel's implicit implication that white American desire for the black [feminine] body remains inextricable from and perhaps exists *because* of the history of US bondage. Lust and slavery meet in Dianthe's performance, extending her tragic birthright: the collision of race and sex and violence that her grandmother and mother lived during slavery and that resulted in her own birth and the nearly white hue of her skin.

Aubrey Livingston recites part of the Longfellow passage in response to Charlie Vance's praises of Dianthe's beauty. Dian's "unasked" kiss becomes "unmasked" in Aubrey's version. Foreshadowing the various versions of unveiling throughout the text, this initial "unmasking" accounts for Charlie's impression of Dianthe's beauty and the audience's reaction to Dianthe's performance of "Go Down Moses." In this moment, the novel promises to "unmask" the mechanisms giving rise to the tension built during the Fisk Jubilee concert—the conditions during slavery that allow two black men to sit in a white audience undetected and lust for a self-identifying black woman who they do not know is their sister.

Singing a classically arranged "Go Down Moses," Dianthe's performance revises Orpheus's poetic lament on Mount Rhodope and her mother's mesmeric performances in the

parlor of the Livingston plantation. The classical arrangements of slave songs, for which the Fisk Jubilee Singers were famous, mirrors Hopkins's novel's reliance upon the intersections of European form and African American content. The choir infuses classical music form with black content, moving the audience to experience the pain and suffering of slavery in a new way. Dianthe's version of "Go Down Moses" renders the entire audience powerless and enthralled with their own notions of slave suffering—the audience cease movement and thereby, however momentarily, experience suspended animation through Dianthe's performance. Jove's name and, as I will discuss a bit further, the momentary *deanimation*⁹³ of the audience mark Dianthe's singing as an Orphic artistic expression.

Racial and sexual violence reaches out from Dianthe's voice, enraptures the audience, and inspires Livingston to call out Jove's name in response. Heard by Reuel, Livingston calls out the Roman father god's name, collapsing the familial space between the three siblings:

"By Jove," Reuel heard Livingston exclaim. For himself he was dazed, thrilled; never save among the great artists of the earth, was such a voice heard alive with the divine fire.

Some of the women in the audience wept; there was the distinct echo of a sob in the deathly quiet which gave tribute to the power of genius. Spell-bound they sat beneath the outpoured anguish of a suffering soul. All the horror, the degradation from which a race had been delivered were in the pleading strains of the singer's voice. It strained the senses almost beyond endurance. (14-15)

Dianthe channels her mother's "degradation" and "horror," and foreshadows her own participation in her family's legacy of sexual vulnerability. Her outpouring of emotion, of a pain

⁹³ Reuel defines Dianthe's state in the hospital, "suspended animation," although all of the other doctors rule Dianthe dead. As Reuel's reanimation experiments on animals work also on Dianthe, I propose that the terminology "suspended animation" and "deanimation" apply to the same states. While I do not argue that Dianthe kills the audience with her performance, the state of enthrallment is a type of deanimation and suspended animation, simultaneously.

that exceeds language, alone, and cannot be communicated by the ghost of her dead mother, holds the audience in the grip of sexual, gendered, and racial tension. Dianthe's song begs the audience to feel what Mira and Aunt Hannah felt—their rapes, the loss of their children, their own voices seized in their throats. Aunt Hannah remains living outside of the Livingston plantation and therefore physically unable to reach her grandchildren through the majority of the novel; the ghost Mira presents herself to her children but has no ability to speak.

Dianthe drives the women in the audience to weep the tears never allowed to her mother, undermining the “entertainment” value of Mira's performance in the Livingston parlor and collapsing the boundaries between black “entertainment” and slavery. Dianthe, the “Venus” of Reuel's vision prior to concert, alludes to the most famous black Venus performer, Saartjie Baartman, and sideshow and circus performances.⁹⁴ In her 2008 article, “Venus in Two Acts,” literary critic Saidiya Hartman identifies “the black Venus” as a trope of black feminine performance rooted in the history of Saartjie Baartman.

What are the kinds of stories to be told by those and about those who live in such an intimate relationship with death? Romances? Tragedies? Shrieks that find their way into

⁹⁴ Conjuring Saartjie Baartman, Hopkins connects Dianthe to the racial history of sideshow and circus performance. Saartjie Baartman was forced to tour European courts, where she endured gawking audiences, pointing fingers, and horrified reactions to the mere (natural) configuration of her body, and particularly her buttocks and genitals. She has since died, and her body medically examined, cast and put on display for a wider audience to consume. Her body remaining captured for over one hundred years after her spirit finally found freedom, much of that time locked in the closet of a French museum before finally being laid to rest, back in South Africa. Conjoined twins and other extraordinary bodies have always been in public consciousness for hundreds of years—Chang and Eng Bunker being the most famous and transforming our language and understanding of this physical anomaly known since as Siamese Twinning. Tattooed men from the South Pacific have been “accidentally” and, more often, intentionally stolen from their homes by sailing “gentlemen” who profited socially and economically from their display to a variety of audiences in both Europe and America. They have entered literature in the forms of *Typee* and other literatures both promoting and critiquing Manifest Destiny. P.T. Barnum has established the funhouse, sideshow, and circus tradition—building his entire career upon the body of one elderly, paralyzed, blind enslaved black woman: Joice Heth, who Barnum bought for \$1,000 but, packaged as George Washington's nurse and the oldest living human being. On a weekly basis, Barnum collected \$1,500 or more through his marketing and display of Heth. From its inception, and as specifically discussed in Robert Bogdan's *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, the sideshow phenomenon was born from a capitalist agenda. As a natural extension of the tradition created through the slave auction block, putting extraordinary bodies on display for profit became a very American pastime, fueling the public's imagination and presumptions about bodies and cultures unlike their own.

speech and song? What are the protocols and limits that shape the narratives written as counterhistory, an aspiration that isn't a prophylactic against the risks posed by reiterating violent speech and depicting again rituals of torture? (Hartman 6)

“The black Venus,” like Naomi Zach’s weeping woman,⁹⁵ expresses her pain through pathos in excess of language. She expresses her pain not only in words but in music and screaming, and her pain infuses her music with emotion that affects the listener down to the cellular level—bringing to the surface shared and physically coded histories of trauma that remain, even now, largely denied. We recognize her pain because of the memories etched in our beings, the collective history that we share and that also ekes out despite laws that would bind us and build walls to shield us from that very history. Her scream results from a specifically gendered version of “double consciousness,” one that bears the burden of violated and forcibly emptied wombs, the pinching felt as a result of children’s unrelenting cries, and the vulnerability to this pain that she cannot forget. Her art, therefore, relies upon her pain as a result of rape, the absence of stolen children, and the inability to protect her children from her own experiences manifest as memory or direct experience. It is the mourning that draws the trees to Orpheus in a barren field, as he cries for his lost Eurydice and the lost loves of Myrrha and the goddess Venus.

Extra-lingual feminine expression delineates the boundaries of gender in the Boston theatre. The collective history of black grief, and particularly the trauma of rape and forced incest, “echoes” in the voices of sobbing white women in the audience. There is room, here, to extend what we know from Chapter 2: while the sobbing in the audience “echoes” the “suffering”

⁹⁵ From “The American Sexualization of Race” (1997) by Naomi Zack from *Race/Sex: Their Sameness, Difference & Interplay*: “The texts of our individual bodies are formed not merely by the external culture but by the patterns of the sexual lives of our parents and grandparents. These forms of erotic life are socially reproduced in families from generation to generation, even though they may resist clear and direct reading by those who have learned how to reproduce them, and who know how to teach them to their children without knowing what they are doing. When we are able to read these forms clearly and directly, as they have molded us personally, it may be that the best thing we can possibly do is weep—because personal insights may not be sufficient to change private forms of behavior that are still shaped by public social conditions beyond individual influence.”

and “anguish” in Dianthe’s song, it cannot actually replicate the initial trauma of slavery. Like an echo, the crying of the women in the audience is related to the initial trauma—in this case, the anguish experienced by the enslaved, and more specifically, Dianthe’s direct connection to that pain. Furthermore, the originary trauma experienced by Aunt Hester and Mira remain unvoiced until Dianthe sings. In this, Dianthe’s song is also implicated in the genealogy of trauma, echoes of injury that remain, always, gendered and sexual. Dianthe will not suffer the *same* trauma as her mother, just as Mira did not suffer the exact trauma that her mother did. Instead, Hopkins’s novel uses the notion of the ever-changing but interconnected histories of these echoes to illustrate a moment of shared gendered trauma. Rape, while particular to the history of black feminine enslavement, does not exclusively belong to black women. White women sob with shared gendered empathy. The “self-possessed” “Boston elite” trade places with Mira, forced into a mesmeric trance (“spell-bound”). And yet, it is only Dianthe’s voice that fills the space, “straining the senses,” and challenging the naturalized social conditions that gave way to slavery and to the history of black female performance as an extension of slavery. Even while Dianthe performs for the audience who lusts for her, she holds the room under the spell of her voice—witnesses to the pain that was previously unspeakable and undermining the very power dynamic which gives rise to her “art.” Returning to this chapter’s opening, Dianthe’s “Go Down Moses” not only “sees” the audience, as Pygmalion’s statue does to Ovid’s reading audience, but undermines the power structures that allow Dianthe to be an object of desire for those in the Boston theater.

The white audience falls under the spell of the singers “that range at home from alabaster to ebony,” allowing the music to audibly mirror their desires for the people’s bodies on stage. They are as captured by the Jubilee performance as Reuel was by his vision of Dianthe, earlier

that afternoon. Reuel hears Aubrey's "by Jove!" and, in the first moments of Dianthe's performance Reuel's desire collapses into Livingston's, and the brothers fall in silent rapture with the rest of the audience. The scene narrows the distance between the siblings, marking the incest plot and simultaneously further marking the inextricability of race and desire within the text. In a tense moment at the intersection of racial performance and entertainment, Dianthe's song inspires in the audience what Saidiya Hartman calls "the pleasure of terror" (32). In her discussion of the history of slave auction block performances and nineteenth-century black theater performance, Hartman identifies the very tension that Dianthe exposes in her Boston audience:

The terror of pleasure—the violence that undergirded the comic moment in minstrelsy—and the pleasure of terror—the force of evil that propelled the plot of melodrama and fascinated the spectator—filiated the coffle, the auction block, the popular stage, and plantation recreations in a scandalous equality. At each of these sites of performance, suffering was transformed into wholesome pleasures. (Ibid.)

Dianthe's performance of "Go Down Moses" provides a vicarious terror experience for her audience that also heightens their attraction for her. I am reminded of the various visual artistic depictions of enslaved black women, suffering at the hands of cruel owners and relentlessly pursuing slave catchers, their clothing falling off and exposing their vulnerable flesh (see Fig. 1, below).



Fig. 2 Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave by William Blake c.1791

These images—illustrations, Dianthe’s performance, and auction block performances—conflate and make inextricable torture, entertainment, and sexuality. The spectacle of pain generates a sense of authenticity for the audience’s entertainment—a complex and troubling version of the sublime that, at least for Dianthe’s Boston audience, arrests attention and emotional control.

As Orpheus begins his song with an invocation to Jove, Dianthe’s singing inspires Livingston to spontaneously call out Jove’s name. In Book X of *Metamorphoses* and as the dedication of his songs in the meadow, Orpheus calls out:

ab Iove, Musa parens, (cedunt Iovis Omnia regno,
carmina nostra move! Iovis est mihi saepe potestas
dicta prius

“From Jove, O Muse, my mother—for all things yield to the sway of Jove—inspire my song! Oft have I sung the power of Jove before” (ll. 147-149).

Orpheus calls out to Jove and his mother Calliope, the muse of epic poetry. When calling the name of Jove, Aubrey links Dianthe’s performance to Orpheus’s, and also to the mother connecting Livingston and Reuel to Dianthe. If Mira is Calliope, then Aunt Hannah is Calliope’s

mother, Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory and the mother of all of the muses. Aunt Hannah, who would be better called “Grandmother Hannah,” bears witness to all of the violence upon her lineage, and functions as the family’s collective memory.⁹⁶ Dianthe’s voice expresses the “power” that enabled her grandmother’s and mother’s enslavements and experiences with sexual violence. The “fire”⁹⁷ that inspires lust and punishment in the women populating Orpheus’s songs infuses Dianthe’s voice with “life” and the “divinity” of old gods and a distant past.

Silence marks mounting desire and the inextricable connection between sexual desire and spirituality. The choir breaks the “painful” silence in the room left after the prelude and before any voice begins to sing:

The opening number was “The Lords Prayer.” Stealing, rising, swelling, gathering, as it thrilled the ear, all the delights of harmony in a grand minor cadence that told of deliverance from bondage and homage to God for his wonderful aid, sweeping the awed heart with an ecstasy that was almost pain; breathing, hovering, soaring, they held the vast multitude in speechless wonder. (453)

The Fisk Jubilee Singers’ performance transforms for the audience the Lord’s Prayer into something “thrilling.” The “ecstasy” experienced by the audience of the “stealing, rising, swelling, gathering” performance leaves the citizens of the once-Puritan New England city frozen, waiting, and on the edge of bursting. The narrator’s omniscient optic slips into Reuel’s interiority only one page later in the text, suggesting that while the agency of performance may remain in the Jubilee Singers’ hands, the sexual frisson is produced by the onlookers. In “The

⁹⁶ I am loathe to map too strictly, Ovid’s text onto Hopkins’s, for a number of reasons. As I mentioned, before, I do not believe that Hopkins’s novel is exactly mappable. However, following the Ovidian structure through Hopkins text in this way, follows through to the logical end (Reuel/Orpheus, Mira/Calliope, Aunt Hannah/Mnemosyne). However, as *Of One Blood* remains so strongly invested in Ethiopianism, it is unlikely that Hopkins equates Old Man Livingston, Aunt Hannah’s rapist, with Zeus, except as a false god. I want to resist this correlation because of the political implications, although Zeus was a rapist, surely.

⁹⁷ “inconcessisque puellas / ignibus attonitas” translated by Miller as “maidens inflamed by unnatural love” (153-54). See Footnote #13.

Lord's Prayer" Hopkins re-envisions the scene previously articulated by Frederick Douglass in his narration of his Aunt Hester's abuse and the discussion of slave songs by both Douglass and Hopkins's fellow classicist and philosophical ally, W.E.B. Du Bois. Hopkins argues that instead of mediating interracial desire, white sexual desire increased after Emancipation and with the dissolution of racial boundaries that were created through the formal chattel slave system. Highlighting the tension born through defining and legally regulating miscegenation, the scene indicts whites in this paranoia—suggesting that the white origins of cross-racial lust and transgression. As an answer to the rising instances of American lynchings at the turn of the twentieth century, *Of One Blood* posits that the mixing of blood originates from white desire and transgression, not the threat of black men as predators. Complexly, however, black women remain the irresistible temptation that arrests white logic and power—existing in the American mythos as both the agent-architects of sexual desire and the unwitting objects of racialized and gendered power dynamics.

VI. Dianthe Reanimated: Reinscription of Black Feminine Identity and the White Masculine

Reuel symbolizes the Pygmalionesque desire for the constructed feminine other and particularly connects this desire to a white masculine identity or code of behavior. Incestuous desire figures as paternal and directly connected to the history of sexual violence committed by white men upon black women during slavery. Hopkins recreates the Pygmalion statue animation scene two chapters after Reuel and Aubrey attend the Jubilee concert. Summoned to the hospital when a train is derailed because he is a promising Harvard medical student, Reuel finds his faculty and colleagues surrounding the seemingly dead body of Dianthe. Struck by the pathos of her beauty and memory of her performance, Reuel decides to extend his animal-based

reanimation experiments and attempts to revive Dianthe. Mirroring the white patriarchal slave past that haunts the central sibling characters in the novel, Reuel's propriety over Dianthe's body begins with his decision to revive her. Reuel claims Dianthe for his own and not only holds sway over her life, but the way that she will identify after she is revived. By successfully reanimating Dianthe, Reuel secures his place in the Harvard medical community where he passes as a white man and finally receives acclaim and respect from his colleagues. Because no one in the medical community recognizes Dianthe as the Jubilee singer, Reuel is able to reinscribe her identity. This blindness of Reuel's colleagues highlights their inability to identify Dianthe and Reuel's racial identities. Moreover, this racial blindness gestures toward white ignorance concerning black genius. Reuel's colleagues are blinded further by Reuel's success at reanimating Dianthe—the white Harvard medical community, as representative of white America, cannot fathom that a black man would demonstrate genius.

Ovidian reanimation troubles identity in much the same way as Hopkinsian reanimation: failure inevitably pairs with rebirth and reorders the identities of one or more of those involved in the attempt. When Reuel brings Dianthe back to life, she can no longer access her memory and therefore her identity. The gap in Dianthe's memory allows Reuel to exact his control over her life—an extension of the very act of reanimating—by reassigning Dianthe's race as white and renaming her Felice Adams. Reuel rewrites Dianthe's history as an augmentation of his own, misappropriated white identity. Dianthe, in effect, becomes a part of Reuel's quest for whiteness. As Pygmalion's wife has no name and never speaks, Dianthe's lack of consciousness, her amnesia, and particularly the loss of her singing voice suggest that reanimation destroys her previous racial identity. Having visited death, she cannot immediately bring her previous experiences into her new existence in the same way that Eurydice remains destined to Hades

despite Orpheus's efforts to free her. As Eurydice's final words to Orpheus disappear with her visage before Orpheus's eyes and as the direct result of Orpheus's inability to follow Pluto's instructions, Dianthe's identity slips away from her along with her singing voice at the hands of Reuel. Because Dianthe's memory returns with the recovery of her voice, the narrative makes inextricable her singing, and particularly her singing "Go Down Moses," with her black identity. Her voice and identity remain inextricably linked; her art, therefore, is her identity.

Reuel is Ovid's Orpheus who descends into Hades to challenge death and reanimate his wife. After a train accident appears to have killed Dianthe, Reuel not only literally brings Dianthe back to life but also conspires with his best friend, Aubrey, to recreate Dianthe's identity. Also, Reuel's desire for occult practices, demonstrated in his reanimation of Dianthe and then substituted by his sexual desire for Dianthe, mirrors Orpheus singing stories of unusual desire. Upon losing Eurydice for a second time, and after also finding no satisfaction in sex with virgin boys, Orpheus casts himself outside of human society and into a treeless field. There he sings songs of sexual desire of gods for boys, men for the inanimate, a sculptor for one's own creation, one lustful girl's for her own father—sexual desires which, through their disruption of order, mirror his own love of the now again inanimate Eurydice. Orpheus sings enough to reanimate trees that had once been human, the evidence of his passion and his temporary reanimation of Eurydice. Like Reuel, who integrates his occult studies with his position as a doctor to practice mesmerism and raise the dead, *Of One Blood* reanimates the myth of Orpheus through a transfusion of the black blood fueling American paranoia and racial violence, raising into view the histories of racial violence that American popular sensibilities would consider long since over. Hopkins rewrites Ovid's text by challenging American popular narratives around coveted

whiteness, and particularly black male desire for white women, and instead illustrates the intersections of power and race that remain unchallenged and as white desire for the black body.

The reanimation scene occurs in the novel only two chapters after Reuel and Aubrey attend the Jubilee concert. As the white male Livingstons owned Aunt Hannah and Mira, Reuel claims Dianthe for his own and solicits the help of Aubrey in this claim. Aubrey believes himself to be white and representative of white Southern masculinity, particularly as constructed by antebellum white men who surveiled and controlled the movement of black Southern bodies. Reuel reverses this racial power dynamic at the beginning of the reanimation scene, when he positions Aubrey as his gofer and nurse, and orders Aubrey to fetch the necessary medicines and equipment from his room. Standing over Dianthe's body, which he has diagnosed as being in a state of "suspended animation," Reuel surprises Aubrey when he says "abruptly": "Dr. Livingston, will you go over to my room and bring me the case of vials in my medicine cabinet? I cannot leave the patient at this point" (30). Thus, before beginning the procedure on Dianthe, Reuel already begins performing his new identity, and one that legitimates him as "white" (and therefore able to command Aubrey about). Reuel's colleagues, like Dianthe's audience, freeze, enraptured by Reuel as he brings Dianthe back to life. As Reuel performs the procedure on Dianthe: "Physicians and students, now eager listeners, gazed spell-bound upon him, straining their ears to catch every tone of the low voice and every change of the luminous eyes; they press forward" (33). The experiment's success transforms Reuel from a largely unnoticed medical student, to a super star. To the Harvard medical community, Reuel's value immediately increases; fellow medical students begin vying for Reuel's time. Reuel's days of feeling ostracized evaporate.

Dianthe's forced passing and the loss of her identity—the circumstances subverting her subjectivity, represented in the loss of the voice that finally speaks for her mother and grandmother, and consequently all of black womankind subjugated through slavery and its aftermath—is essential to Reuel creating his own white identity. If Reuel can get away with misidentifying Dianthe, then he might continue to pass, himself. By subjecting Dianthe to an identity of his construction, Reuel becomes a white man. He places himself within the legacy of white men enforcing their racial subject positions through the inscription of identity upon the feminine “other,” and thereby guaranteeing (or creating) their own power and presumption of superiority. Reuel repeats the legacy of his grandfather, who forces his mother Mira into mesmeric trances and possession. Following her mother's model, Dianthe not only suffers from the evacuation of her identity, making her vulnerable, but also Dianthe must die. She is Eurydice who must evaporate, and twice.

Philosopher Maurice Blanchot argues that Orpheus's art relies upon the loss of Eurydice. Unlike the pre-animated and singing Dianthe, however, Eurydice cannot voice her own pain and loss. Instead, upon her disappearance, through her absence only, Orpheus finds song:

Not to look would be infidelity to the measureless, imprudent force of his movement, which does not want Eurydice in her daytime truth and her everyday appeal, but wants her in her nocturnal obscurity, in her distance, with her closed body and sealed face—wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible, not as the intimacy of a familiar life, but as the foreignness of what excludes all intimacy, and wants, not to make her live, but to have living in her the plenitude of her death. (173)

Blanchot accuses Orpheus of sacrificing Eurydice, of desiring her only in her death and absence. The Jubilee concert venue replicates the distance between Orpheus and Eurydice. Sitting far away from the stage and in the public sphere, not unlike the auction block, Dianthe sings of the

death and mourning of women before her, casting the shadow upon her future and succumbing to a painful legacy of black womanhood. Unlike Orpheus, however, Dianthe, *Of One Blood*'s black Venus, freezes her audience. She inspires rapture, reversing animation. Her art, her pain, provoke the very desire that brought her into being.

Her double-voiced music manifests as two voices in the Vance parlor and during her spontaneous encore performance of "Go Down Moses." As Felice Adams, after marrying Reuel, and after Reuel has left Egypt, Dianthe spends her social time with Reuel's friends. In what begins as a banal evening of conversation and entertainment, Felice/Dianthe begins singing the song that first introduced her in the novel. In this parlor scene, what seems to be an additional voice rides Dianthe's as she sings "Go Down Moses": "A weird contralto, veiled as it were, rising and falling upon every wave of the great soprano, and reaching the ear as if from some strange distance. The singer sang on, her voice dropping sweet and low, the echo following it" (67). The song somewhat revives Dianthe from her amnesiac state, and the gaps of her story are filled in by Aubrey who tells "Felice" the story of Dianthe Lusk, the Fisk Jubilee Singer. The scene links Dianthe directly to the performances by her mother, Mira, in the Livingston parlor.

Additionally, Dianthe's performance in the Vance parlor reveals Hopkins's Du Boisian philosophical leanings, but suggests that "double consciousness" can move beyond the idea of simultaneous object/subject political optic, and move into the psycho-spiritual, ontological conditions of black collective memory and trauma. The "veiled" second voice that emerges along with "Felice's," brings with it Dianthe's true identity. However, the second voice, the contralto, does not belong to Dianthe before this moment. During Dianthe's earliest performance in the book, her singing is introduced by the narrator as: "a voice [that fell] upon the listening ear, in celestial showers of silver that passed all conceptions, all comparisons, all dreams; a voice

beyond belief—a great soprano of unimaginable beauty, soaring heavenward in mighty intervals” (14). When Dianthe recovers her voice through her second performance of “Go Down Moses,” the additional voice pairs with hers to create a duet beyond her control. The contralto voice, that of Mira, rides Dianthe’s soprano voice and rescues Dianthe from misidentity. In the Vance parlor, Dianthe and Mira’s voices and experiences of mesmerism and living beyond death merge and simultaneously articulate themselves separately. The voices weave in and out of one another and create a third version of the song, one that does nothing to relieve either singer from the pain she endures at the hands of the men who mesmerize her.

Hopkins’s text challenges queer theorist Heather Love’s reading of Orpheus as an inevitable failure. In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Love argues that:

...we cannot help wanting to save the figures from the past, but this mission is doomed to fail. In part, this is because the dead are gone for good; in part because the queer past is even more remote, more deeply marked by power’s claw; and in part because this rescue is an emotional rescue, and in that sense, we are sure to botch it. (50-51)

To this twentieth century queer reading⁹⁸ and within the world of black politics and history, *Of One Blood* would answer “yes and no.” Dianthe’s eventual death and Mira’s inability to warn her children of their incestuous paths suggest a clear failure. On the other hand, Reuel is rescued by his position in Meroe. I read Mira’s and Dianthe’s voices finding one another in the Vance parlor as the conflation of each character’s pain. However, I also see the potential for healing in this moment. Hopkins reminds us that the past exists, always, within any present moment. If Mira’s voice can ride Dianthe’s, then we carry with us the collective memories and histories of

⁹⁸ There is significant room to make queer readings in Hopkins’s work, in part because of the connection between black feminist and queer politics emerging in the twentieth century, but also because of Hopkins’s continual undermining of gender politics across her texts. In particular, see the characters Sappho and Venus from *Contending Forces* and *Hagar’s Daughter*.

those who come before us. When I write, I also write with my mother's voice. When Hopkins writes, she writes along with Ovid. To heal ourselves, then, means to heal from the traumas we directly endure as well as those that we carry with us from the past.

There is failure in attempting to bring back the past and change it—that which has happened cannot be undone. However, within the present lies pure potential. I can see my mother's voice in my writing and also wrap my words around hers to change the effect of both of our voices. Hopkins can harmonize with Ovid's work to reveal a story that her own, individual voice may not otherwise access. Orpheus's failure to restore Eurydice to the earth results in him animating the trees, including reanimating those trees that were once human beings and were transformed through punishment or as a result of trauma. Through his pain and poetry, Orpheus brings back to trees a once lost animation. So, while he may not fully rescue Eurydice from Hades, that failure, his grief turned to song, manifests as movement in those previously rooted and rendered static, suffering from their own traumas. The restorative, reanimating potential, then, lies within creative production.

As a writer, for Hopkins, and as a singer, for Dianthe, the work for the artist as critic, therefore, may not be as Blanchot or Love suggests: to attempt to rescue that which has been lost. To restate this point, I agree that the artist's work relies upon his failure, for Orpheus would have no songs in the field had he not failed to rescue Eurydice. I want to shift the focus from the attempt to rescue and then the reliance of the artist upon his or her failure, as these critics have suggested. Instead, the artist as critic's work is to aptly and effectively *communicate* that failure. Dianthe's song communicates the "sorrow" of slavery—the inevitable and unshakable results of America's most organized violent past that follows all American citizens into the twentieth century.

The inevitable failure of the “emotional rescue,” as Love puts it, is not the central issue for Hopkins or for my reading of Hopkins and Ovid. One cannot rescue one’s self from a trauma, as the trauma has already happened. However, one can, as a mode of healing from that trauma, give voice to that trauma, to its legacy, and serve as a warning for others who tread closely to repeating that trauma. Orpheus’s love and loss of Eurydice drives him to Hades—a loss that he bears twice, just as she dies twice. Hopkins offers her reading audience the chance to consider how they, too, relive their traumas—and, more broadly, how American society puts itself in the positions to repeat its history. Dianthe’s critical power emerges when she reverses the audience-artist relationship, and reflects back to the audience the pain and anguish of enslavement—Dianthe momentarily becomes the anti-Orpheus, as she holds fast her audience as she sings. Hopkins considers Eurydice in a different manner, because the dead remain present in the figure of Mira who, as a ghost, haunts the entire novel. Mira emerges as both the unrelenting presence of loss, grief, and pain, the very emotions that Dianthe expresses in her singing voice. Combined, Dianthe and Mira, voice and visage, reconstitute and reanimate the trauma of slavery.

VII. History Repeating: Hopkins’s Cautionary Tale of Incest and Racial Threat

Certainly, one cannot consider Hopkins’s novel without confronting issues of incest and the implications therein—a profound and perhaps one of the most complicated connections the novel has to Ovid’s Book X. As argued by literary critic Shawn Salvant in “Pauline Hopkins and the End of Incest”: “The fundamental problem in Pauline Hopkins's novel *Of One Blood* (1902-03) is the problem of incest” (659). Salvant centralizes the incest plot and argues that Hopkins offers redemption for her characters; by extension, Salvant’s argument suggests that Hopkins also offers redemption for the American citizens existing under a constant threat of incest. The

genealogy of violence and incest for Hopkins's characters intertwines with Hopkins critique of miscegenation—and, just as she implicates white men as *the* American racial transgressors and predators, she also argues that vulnerability to accidental incest emerges as a direct result of that racial threat. Through Ovid's story of Myrrha, Hopkins explores the threat of incest enabled through American patterns of gendered oppression and violence. The great granddaughter of Pygmalion, Myrrha, sexually desires her father, becomes pregnant, and gives birth to her son, Adonis, after being transformed into a myrrh tree. In the American landscape, incest is not the result of a daughter's lust for her father, but rather, always, the father/brother's desire for the daughter/sister.

I agree with Salvant's argument that *Of One Blood* includes redemption; however, I locate it in a different place than he does. In Salvant's words, "As the force behind Reuel and Dianthe's sibling affinity, the occult 'voice of blood' provides an alternative scientific and narrative context for the moral framing of incestuous desire, redeeming Reuel's solitary psyche even as it facilitates his saving Dianthe's life" (665). Even in light of Hopkins's mostly black audience, the death of Dianthe, the villainy of Aubrey, and the historical context of racial violence suggest that the incest plot retains its sinister quality. Unlike Hopkins's other novels that feature bi-racial characters whose plots challenge the trope of the "tragic mulatta," Dianthe's end is nothing short of tragic. Subject to both men's gazes, desires, and wills, Dianthe represents the black feminine body that remains most at risk within American society, and particularly within the context of incest.

After being lied to and threatened by Aubrey, Dianthe agrees to be his bride. Aubrey promptly relocates them to his "home," the Livingston plantation, unknowingly bringing Dianthe also back to her birthplace. Dianthe finds several letters from Reuel that Aubrey kept from her,

and discovers Aubrey's lies about Reuel's death. Distraught that she has been made a "bigamist," she leaves the plantation house and wanders in the surrounding woods, where she eventually stumbles into the cabin of an old "Negro" woman. Aunt Hannah, the woman in the woods, recognizes Dianthe as Mira's daughter and reveals the horrible history that first linked the trio of siblings. Through Aunt Hannah's revelation, Dianthe adds to her own narrative of rape a legacy of sexual violence: her mother's and grandmother's rapes, violations from which she was born. Because Dianthe lives under a false identity, as "Felice," she cannot consent to sex. In other words, her amnesia means that "Felice" may make decisions that Dianthe would not. Moreover, as Reuel lied to Dianthe on so many levels, Felice/Dianthe cannot make informed decisions. Felice may agree to marry Reuel, but it is not initially clear whether or not the persona/personality known as Dianthe would also consent. Reuel deceives Dianthe as a means of achieving a romantic relationship her. Therefore, Reuel rapes Dianthe by marrying her and engaging with her sexually; simultaneously although unknowingly, he also makes her vulnerable to incest. Without her identity, the singing voice that communicates a history of racial and genealogical shame and degradation, she cannot fully consent. As Reuel created Dianthe's identity, he mirrored the slavery power dynamic, positioning himself as a white man and Dianthe as a black slave. The incest plot reinforces Reuel's place as the replication of his slave-owning father and grandfather. As if unable to escape the patterns laid before them, Reuel and Aubrey share their deceit and sexual violation of Dianthe in similar fashion. Aubrey, because he believes until the end that he is white, can only express his desire directly to Dianthe once she remembers her blackness. In other words, for Aubrey the parallel to his and Dianthe's slave past relies on Dianthe's blackness. He, too, withholds information, leading Dianthe to believe that her husband, Reuel, has died, therefore Aubrey opens a path to position himself as her lover. Dianthe moves

from general avoidance to absolute distaste for Aubrey, although she cannot see her way out of the relationship. Aubrey traps her and restricts her choice. So, in addition to the stripping of her identity and rape by her brothers, Aunt Hannah burdens Dianthe with the family history.

Dianthe becomes the vessel of her family's history—the pregnant black woman who must bear the shame of her sexual violation and the racial-gender legacy that American culture has perpetuated. Indeed, and here again I agree with Salvant, Aunt Hannah implicates herself in the plot, for she switches her daughter's live baby for the "legitimate" Livingston child who dies. That switched child, Aubrey, participates in the incest plot because of this change. However, had Aubrey been the legitimate son of Livingston, he still would have been Dianthe and Reuel's half-brother. Therefore, Aunt Hannah is not responsible, because in the novel, incest hinges upon the denial of paternity. Aunt Hannah's sorrow, the thing that the ghost of her daughter, Mira, cannot communicate to the three siblings, refutes any leveling of responsibility between herself and the white rapists and slavers that orchestrated and financially benefitted from the incest in her family. Aubrey embodies the shamelessness and villainy of the perpetrator of racial-sexual violence. Additionally, Aubrey exists as Hopkins's example of a misidentified black child who adopts, with abandon and to a fault, his white upbringing. Aubrey is the vulnerable black child who replicates the worst kind of white masculine behavior because of his racial invisibility. However, Dianthe's death forecloses redemption in a novel that troubles gender and leaves the men alive. The redemption of the novel lies in Reuel's return to Africa and his acceptance of his black heritage. The only way to avoid incest is through honest identification.

As they are the products of racial mixing, and thus following the "mulatto" trope, they are also considered astonishingly beautiful. Although and in contrast to the "mulatto as beautiful" model in the book, we also have "Adonis" – Charlie Vance – who is *the* most beautiful in the

story, and is white and male. Beauty is a convention that also breaks down in this story. By naming Charlie “Adonis,” Hopkins implicates even those people who may consider themselves “truly” white. He is wealth and privilege, the god reclining on cushions and surrounded by an adoring feminine court: “‘Adonis’ [...] was stretched full length on the sitting-room sofa, with a cigarette between his lips, his hands under his handsome head, surrounded by a bevy of pretty, chattering girls” (45). He exists in Hopkins’s text as exemplary white masculinity. However, as the great-great-grandson of Pygmalion, Adonis lives as much in the line of the “new race” created by Pygmalion and his ivory bride (Enterline 28). I borrow Enterline’s terminology here, and suggest that Charlie Vance, Hopkins’s “Adonis,” represents the “new race” of seemingly ideal white American men, those whose wealth, privilege, and racial status were created through the Atlantic slave trade. Yet, if Hopkins is interrogating the connection between race and phenotype, beauty is democratic in this novel. Reuel’s Ethiopian betrothed, Candace, has a type of beauty that challenges the American standard of whiteness-as-beauty and introduces to Hopkins’s audience the visually identifiable black feminine.⁹⁹ The narrator describes Candace: “Long, jet-black hair and totally free, covered her shoulders like a silken mantle; a broad, square forehead, a warm bronze complexion; thick black eyebrows, great black eyes ... a delicate nose with quivering nostrils, teeth of dazzling whiteness behind lips as red as a rose” (137). Candace redeems Reuel of his relationship with Dianthe.

⁹⁹ In her novel, *Hagar’s Daughter*, Hopkins challenges light-skinned standards of beauty through the character of Venus. In the novel, Hopkins also invokes the Roman goddess Venus, infusing an unambiguously black, educated, code-switching, and cross-dressing woman character with the “love and beauty” usually reserved for the “mulatta” heroine. Through the character Venus, Hopkins offered her readers an alternative black feminine hero who intervenes in the literary representations of black womanhood. The daughter of two former slaves, a warm “Auntie” figure and a scoundrel loyal only to the novel’s principal villain, Venus is the product of people at opposite moral poles. So, while she does not demonstrate racial mixing, she exemplifies the complexity of blackness and the agency—the ability to choose her behavior/codes/etc., as she has the spectrum modeled for her. Thus, it makes sense that she “switches” registers and refuses easy classification while, simultaneously, holding stable (in their instabilities) the categories of “woman” and “black.”

As considered by Hopkins, the mere *existence* of Myrrha's desire may be the most troubling aspect of the Ovidian story, not the object or form of her desire. Hopkins evacuates desire from Myrrha's hands and "creates" Dianthe and Candace—women who are only desired by those who look at them, and for Dianthe this particularly means white men—Hopkins does not refute the "unnaturalness"¹⁰⁰ or troubling aspects of desire, but rather that the incestuous desire that drove Myrrha remains alive and well in America. Hopkins refutes Orpheus's order of troubling sexual desire, and reconfigures it as white masculine sexual desire for black women. Hopkins argues that the Pygmalion line creates a legacy of disordered desire—desire that never settles into a space of normativity and certainly, when reconsidered in an American context, pushes against American models of heterosexual, homoracial coupling and sexuality at the turn of the century. She situates this disorder as a threatening desire that emerges through familial lines.

¹⁰⁰ I purposely deploy "unnatural," in part to indicate the taboo nature of incest, but also because Frank Justis Miller translated Orpheus's dedication to Jove, in part, as: "I would sing of boys beloved by gods, and maidens inflamed by *unnatural* love and paying the penalty of their lust" (75, italics mine). This brings to mind the notion of the "natural" in Hopkins's novel. By deploying intersections of the occult, science, and history, Hopkins always keeps in flux any notion of the "natural." In this, the position of incest remains, also in flux. I need to mention that I do not disagree with Salvant's argument, but I resist the idea that the incest plot, or in lieu of "incest" the idea of "sibling affinity," is redemptive. In Salvant's words: "The radical resolution to the problem of incest comes in the novel's ironic drive *toward* sibling affinity rather than away from it, a movement that culminates in a dramatic finale in which sibling affinity is categorized as redemptive rather than culturally degenerative and morally abhorrent. This is not to suggest that the novel advocates incest, but rather that it refuses the premises and implications of the universal application of the incest taboo, particularly those premises that naturalize the symbolic properties and cultural anxieties associated with the figure of 'blood'" (661). Instead, and for the purposes of my reading, incest remains a threat to the wellbeing of the women characters in *Of One Blood* as Dianthe dies after learning her history, Mira remains a silent ghost, and Hannah remains haunted by her own participation in the incest plot. But, there is a chance, following Salvant's argument and then also taking Hopkins's text as a warning, that *America* is not condemned by the threat of incest—that it can, possibly, continue despite or in spite of the ongoing ramifications of slavery. America and its citizens may persevere, even through "unnatural" circumstances.

VIII. Conclusion

For each of the three characters, racial identity manifests differently: Reuel knowingly passes; Aubrey lives under a mistaken identity; and, by accidental and mystical means Dianthe's black identity is temporarily arrested. Their characterizations follow therefrom: Reuel demonstrates the torture and tension of racial traitorship; Aubrey emerges the villain; and, Reuel and Aubrey's actions compromise Dianthe's agency. Reuel and Aubrey discover that Dianthe suffers from amnesia as a result of her death and reanimation, and conspire to withhold Dianthe's identity from her and the rest of the world. Reuel's motivation lies within the confines of the romantic plot,¹⁰¹ for he desires Dianthe and his love for her stays within racial boundaries. Driven by his emotions and desire for Dianthe, Reuel asks Aubrey if he should withhold Dianthe's identity and seek her for his wife. Aubrey sanctions Reuel's plan and reveals that he knows Reuel's racial identity. The men, then, collude to steal Dianthe away from her identity, not unlike Pluto's ravishment of Persephone. Furthermore, Dianthe serves as a buffer between Reuel and Aubrey, which hints also at Orpheus's sexual liaisons with young boys after losing Eurydice. I am suggesting that Dianthe serves as the go-between for the same-sex desire experienced between Reuel and Livingston.¹⁰² Reuel and Aubrey, while not knowing that they are brothers, bond together in this action that results in Dianthe's new identity and perpetuates

¹⁰¹ The romance genre countered the rationalist, pre-Romantic, neo-classicist traditions of the eighteenth century (see Footnote 88).

¹⁰² Besides completing the incest triangle, I believe there is a larger conversation about white male desire for the black male that has been mitigated historically through the black female body. This is a much larger discussion and one that is best expressed, perhaps, in another place, as I'm not sure that *Of One Blood* can fully sustain the argument. Still, the shared desire of the absent Dianthe, in the discussion between Reuel, Livingston, and Charlie Vance, before Dianthe sings at the Jubilee concert, demonstrates a homosocial sexual desire. At least, I shall say that here, I am thinking about Eve Sedgwick's discussion of "triangulation" and orchid-mating in *Epistemology of the Closet*. Sedgwick says: "Even while the pathos of the rarity and fragility of orchid-mating is let stand, however, the analogy opens gaping conceptual abysses when one tries [...] to compare any model of same-sex desire with the plight of the virginal orchid. [...] [T]he peculiarity [...] is that, being immobilized, they must employ a third party [...] as a go-between" (220).

her participation in incest. Hopkins thus paints the landscape of black racial inheritance with violence and incest, and raises for her primarily black audience concerns about historical miscegenation. In a moment of cross-racial gender solidarity, the novel presents black and white men as collaborating in the violation of a black woman. Along with Reuel's departure from formal medical training through his occult studies and practices, the greatest of which he demonstrates through Dianthe's reanimation, the romance plot rescues Hopkins's revised Ovidian tale from a neo-classical genre categorization.¹⁰³ The marriage between the classics and the American romance mirrors Reuel's occult-laden medicine. As Hopkins applies to the classical a black American storyline, Reuel becomes a successful doctor because he marries older forms and practices with modern medicine.

Reuel functions as both the architect and object of resurrection as he, too, emerges reborn and re-identified during his treasure expedition to Africa. More than half way through the novel, and while searching for gold in Egypt, Reuel is kidnapped and brought to the lost city of Telassar (Ethiopia), where he discovers his noble heritage that was lost through slavery. After hearing, falsely and as communicated by Aubrey, that Dianthe has died, Reuel returns to his thoughts of suicide—the state of mind that he is in when the audience first meets Reuel, at the beginning of the novel. “Why should he live? Of course not; better rejoin [Dianthe] where parting was no more. He would lose himself in the pyramid” (110). In his grief, he decides to dedicate himself to deeply exploring the pyramids and other Egyptian ruins at the center of his African expedition with Charlie. Their Egyptian tour and adventure guide, Professor Stone, shares an ancient

¹⁰³ In her 2004 paper, “Aspects of American Romanticism in Short Stories by Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne,” Sirinya Pakditawan argues that: “Romanticism challenged conventional ways of thinking and aesthetic traditions and championed the authority of the individual mind responding to the environment without regard to social conventions or moral prohibition. [...] Romanticism differs significantly from Classicism, the period Romanticism rejected. Romantic literature rebelled against the formalism of eighteenth-century reason, being more concerned with emotion than rationality.”

manuscript with Reuel and Charlie, outlining a secret set of passageways under the Sphinx and connected to the pyramids. Reuel resolves to die, to volunteer for his own tragic catabasis, unable to bear his loss of Dianthe. For a moment, the novel returns to its beginning, for Reuel.

As the novel opens with a storm growing outside, the main character, Reuel, sits in his rented room in a “third-rate lodging-house near Harvard square” and contemplates occult philosophies that both inspire his intellectual creativity and threaten the traditional medical career that he seeks (4). He contemplates figurative suicide—the inevitable end of his career in the face of the overwhelming temptation of mysticism. “To what use all this persistent hard work for a place in the world—clothes, food, a roof? Is suicide wrong?” (1). The medical student studies not only his courses at Harvard, but also throws himself into occult scholarship, searching for ways to animate the dead. Reuel’s dedication to scholarship and healing, by any means and particularly outside of his formal medical training, trumps any social mobility offered through a medical career. The “place in the world” that a traditional medical career creates, one of material gains and status as a limited healer, cannot satisfy Reuel. Unlike his colleagues at Harvard, Reuel pursues success not only in ways to heal human disease but ways to reanimate, to bring the dead back to life. His desire exceeds his formal training, as the world of American medicine cannot sustain theories born of occult philosophers: Reuel endures ostracism because of his dedication to his extracurricular studies. He debates and articulates both his desire for success outside of the definitions of western medicine and the social and racial dangers of the philosophies that influence him.

Reuel identifies with his philosophers, those whose books chronicle practices of raising the dead. He believes the occult texts’ accounts of “non-hysterical women,” and therefore believable feminine subjects, who experience mesmeric trances, channel other souls, and reveal

hidden truths to witnesses. He recognizes the “truth” in the observations and philosophies of occult doctors who witness the miraculous spiritual world subverting material rules. “I have the power. I know the truth of every word [...] I would astonish the world. O Poverty, Ostracism! Have I not drained the bitter cup to the dregs!” (3). He identifies in himself a spiritual and unnamed connection to philosophies and methodologies he reads. His own work to revive the dead would “astonish” witnesses, much like he presumes his occult studies will promote strong response in his medical school colleagues. Moreover, the potential for this work, for him to demonstrate his “power” would act as a mesmeric trance for those watching. He would “astonish” onlookers by disrupting the biological order accepted by American culture and articulated by the medical community. His spirituality interrupts the order understood by mainstream American scientific and popular culture. Additionally, because Reuel passes for white and because his mesmeric powers extend to him through his maternal, African ancestry, it is indeed blackness that intervenes in American culture. In other words, the novel opens by demonstrating a uniquely African-based power, one that defies popular scientific theories and would, indeed, stop Americans in their tracks, leaving them speechless and awe-struck.

Reuel soliloquizes the roots of this spirituality, the simultaneous source of ruin for his identity as an American doctor and source of his success as a spiritualist doctor. Reuel’s quest for power over death relegates him to the margins of his medical community; he already understands the margins, because he passes as a means of securing a successful career and economic future through matriculation at Harvard. In 1903, when *Of One Blood* is published, W.E.B. Du Bois, the sixth black person to enter Harvard’s doors, has held in his hands for eight years the first doctorate awarded by Harvard to any black man. Only 50 years before, Martin Delaney and two other students were the first blacks admitted and, upon the protests of white

Harvard students and faculty, expelled two weeks after enrolling. As the year 1869¹⁰⁴ marks the first African American Harvard Medical School degree granted, the fictional African American student Reuel held scant historical company (Sollors 29). Without passing, the likelihood of Reuel entering Harvard and earning the chance to “astonish” the Harvard medical community decrease remarkably. He possesses an extended, if not double, understanding of marginalization: first, his black subject position that, if he “looked” black, would restrict his educational opportunities, and then his spirituality and philosophical studies which threaten the medical career he accesses through passing. His racial identity already disrupts the Harvard social order and more broadly it undermines segregationist law denying blacks matriculation into all white educational institutions.

Upon the novel’s publication and a time when white paranoia concerning threatening black manhood results in ever-increasing instances of lynchings, Reuel infiltrates a Northern, privileged, white space and then, by successfully reanimating Dianthe, demonstrates to that community the superiority of distinctly, albeit hidden, African healing practices and talents. The growing thunderstorm above his boardinghouse, the threat of race hatred and violence that perpetually rages over Reuel’s head, paired with the philosophies clouding Reuel’s mind, position Reuel as a reorganizer of order as known by America at the end of the twentieth century. By writing a novel intervening in both conversations about American race relations and of literary production by rewriting Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Hopkins intervenes in both genre and expectations about black feminine literary production and, thus, positions herself as a reorganizer of American literature.

¹⁰⁴ Edwin Clarence Joseph Turpin Howard is documented as the first African American to receive a Harvard Medical degree—nearly twenty years after Delaney was initially admitted.

Equating his growing obsession with “mysticism” with career suicide, Reuel decides that he cannot deny the truth he finds in mystic philosophies and must press forward, hoping to “cut the Gordian knot and solve the riddle of whence and whither for all time” (442). Likening himself to Aristotle’s pupil, Alexander the Great, Reuel studies unusual philosophies that are summarily rejected by his North American scientific community. He argues to and with himself concerning the merits of his two avenues of study. His medical studies guarantee a life of conventional success, and particularly the financial means that will transport Reuel out of his current and impoverished circumstances. However, he also faces the strong draw of “occultism” and alternative modes of healing that will banish him forever to the worlds of “Poverty” and “Ostracism” (443). Discussions of “mysticism” remain not only marginal, but also laughable to Reuel’s Harvard colleagues. Reuel sees his scientific community as motivated by unnamed prejudice and monetary considerations, blinding it to mystic healing methods and therefore emerging as the “darkness” and “veil” that initially stopped him from accessing the works of his occult teachers.

The enlightening studies of the mystics open Reuel to his inherent (and genetically gifted) “second sight” and to a world of healing beyond the conceptions of conventional American medicine. He, despite the danger it puts his career in and while alone in his room, proclaims the validity of second sight: vision in excess of the material that can lead him toward sustaining and healing the human body, if not also the mind. The medical student not only sees these new pathways to healing, he understands the threat that they produce for his colleagues and thus his career. Moreover, he realizes that he will likely face the same rejection as the philosophies he studies. And to these questions he proposes another: “Is suicide wrong?”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ The opening mirrors Hamlet’s first soliloquy during which Hamlet ponders that he benefits from the murder of his father. Hopkins uses a direct quote from the *Hamlet* scene in her first short story, entitled “A Mystery Within Us,”

(441). Many critics interpret Reuel's question as a literal one of material dissolution. While, indeed, Reuel's philosophical musings include physical mortality, he obsessively searches to "reanimate" the dead or seeming dead. In short, Reuel looks for an antidote to suicide. The successful reanimation of Dianthe does, in fact, resuscitate his medical career. Furthermore, the very success of occult-inspired medical phenomena legitimizes the Africa-dependent practice that brings Dianthe back. Because of Reuel's African heritage, he can successfully return Dianthe to the world of the living. Simultaneously, Reuel garners the respect and attention of the Harvard medical community that previously marginalized him. So, Reuel considers more than mortality when he questions the wrongness of suicide. His occult studies will not kill his career, but instead sustain it. Thus, for Reuel, what seems to be suicide is actually salvation.

"Suicide" gestures not only towards the career choices one might face, but the racial implications made by Reuel's passing for white. By the time that readers meet Reuel, he has already begun a life denying his black parenthood. Aubrey Livingston, Reuel's best friend who is introduced in the first chapter when he intervenes in Reuel's isolated musings, hints to Reuel and to the audience that Reuel is other than he seems. Aubrey teases Reuel and his obsessive study habits, calling Reuel "the son of Erebus," the primordial god of darkness and consort of Nyx, the night (446). Labeled a "Greek god" by the narrator because of his beauty and as the son of the South, Aubrey's subject position and Southern racial experiences qualify him to recognize the son of Erebus.¹⁰⁶ Aubrey's Southern roots allow him to peek behind the "veil"; therefore, Aubrey recognizes Reuel as a passing black man. Aubrey supplements for Reuel the authentic

that was published by *Colored American Magazine*, and before she was editor (Gruseur 185). Reuel wonders how he benefits from the murder of his career, and perhaps of other people, as he searches for ways to bring people back from the dead. Also, please note that Hopkins's title may also refer to *The Hero as Poet* (1841) in which Thomas Carlyle said of Shakespeare: "From Paramatta, from New York, wheresoever, under what sort of Parish-Constable soever, English men and women are, they will say to one another, 'Yes, this Shakespeare is ours; we produced him, we speak and think by him; we are *of one blood* and kind with him'" (114, my italics).

¹⁰⁶ Orpheus must pass by Erebus during his descent into Hades.

insider view. Moneyed and carefree, Aubrey is a man of leisure and foil to our studious hero; he is the authentic insider, secure in his identity and subject position. Thus, Reuel's tentative relationship with the world of medicine echoes also his relationship with white identity. He masters the performance of each; however, until he can prove his exceptional ability, that he can reanimate the dead, Reuel remains an outsider.

The novel suggests that the road to assimilation is a denial of blackness—not the lifting of the veil, but instead the elimination of the cause of suffering. Reuel's maneuvering behind and in front of the Du Boisian veil, both professionally and personally, provides him with access to potential wealth and power unavailable to the average black man of his day. Reuel represents W.E.B. Du Bois's "talented tenth," exemplar both in his studies as well as his form, as "Mother Nature had blessed Reuel Briggs with superior physical endowments" marred only by his "broad nostrils" and the slight tint of "olive" in his skin. As a critique of the troubling politics embedded in the light-skinned, upwardly mobile black society seeking assimilation, Reuel not only challenges white readers to confront their worries about the woodpile, but also black readers who underestimate the threat of assimilation politics to an ancient and noble African past. As a Du Boisian racial critic, Hopkins was known throughout her time as editor of *Colored American Magazine* as "radical" and pro-black. Booker T. Washington, the other side of the political scale, desired assimilation into white society, and encouraged black people to demonstrate their value through white standards and distance themselves from black behavior outside of mainstream convention. Reuel looks to mysticism as a means of lifting the veil of darkness shrouded by his Western (read: white) medical methodologies. Without specific racial labels, the texts and experiences that Reuel studies remain, at least, marginal and marginalized—relegated to the "unfortunate" space where Reuel already resides. Despite Reuel's intentions, *Of One Blood* also

suggests that passing, as assimilation, is doomed to fail. The pull of mysticism holds fast Reuel's racial mobility. His connection to the mystical world serves as the key to his medical talents and his Africanness. His psychic abilities, the key to his mesmeric power, come from his "true" identity as a lost and magical prince of Meroe. Not only does Reuel already sneak into Harvard, infiltrating the space that would have only six black graduates by the time of the novel's publication, but he also demonstrates for the Harvard medical community a skill set largely unavailable to it because of its whiteness. Hopkins upholds notions of exceptionalism and plays on narratives of African nobility, made popular to the survivors of slavery and their progeny.¹⁰⁷

Along with tensions built through slavery and marked by desire for the black woman, this chapter considers how *Of One Blood* posits and answers the question, "What is classical?" by interrupting the novel's Pygmalion retelling with an Ethiopianist plot turn. Dianthe's "Go Down Moses" betrays an Afrocentric revelation for the character Reuel that simultaneously interrupts his participation in the novel's incest plot and the novel's investment in Roman classicism. Nearly three quarters through the novel, Reuel descends into Ethiopia in order to find out who he is. As a reversal of Orpheus's decent into Hades, Reuel's climb down into Telassar reveals more of an African utopia than the harrowing journey into a hellish underworld: "Not Telassar of Eden, but so like to Eden's beauties did our ancestors find the city that thus did they call it" (115). He emerges renamed Ergamenes, reborn the king of the first civilization, redeemed from the villainy of stealing Dianthe's identity from her, and cleansed of the shame of race that leads him to pass for white at Harvard. As the doctor and occult practitioner that reanimates Dianthe, Reuel mirrors Orpheus's rescue of Eurydice from Hades and also Orpheus as the bard who inspires trees to gather around him when he sings.

¹⁰⁷ These narratives are taken up by Garveyism and the Back to Africa movement of the early twentieth century and then, again, by the Black Power Movement of the 1950s through 70s, and remain prevalent in some contemporary Afrocentric philosophies.

As part of his inheritance, Reuel will marry Candace awaiting his arrival in Tassar, and thereby be saved from his relationship with Dianthe. The woman who holds the title “Candace” sits in wait for the emergence of Meroe’s rightful ruler. Reuel’s guide in Tassar and chief adviser as the king of Meroe explains: “Queen Candace is a virgin queen who waits the coming of Ergamenes to inaugurate a dynasty of kings. Our virgins live within the inner city, and from them Candace chooses her successor at intervals of fifteen years” (130). The idea of an endless replenishment of presumably young women held in their virgin status for the missing king paints a picture of disconcerting old world patriarchy and a model of questionable gender-based agency. However, the queen always chooses the next queen, creating a matrilineal genealogy of brides. In response to Reuel’s racial passing, “the symbolic implications of the plot are clear enough: African ancestry should be regarded with pride and acknowledged with enthusiasm, not hidden in shame” (Japtok 560). Hopkins challenges her audience to consider a civilization older than ancient Greece while asserting an early Afrocentric ideology of black royal blood marred by American slavery. Ethiopia undermines canonical assertions of the “classical” by saving Reuel from the danger of his American history. Her literary project intervenes within the racio-political landscape of fin de siècle America and also categorizations of classical literature and classicist literary production.

CHAPTER 4

“I am become”: Gendered Convention and Creative Production in

Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s *A Modern Undine*

I. Introduction

“A Lazy Woman!—I use the capitals advisedly—what a joy it is to be one! For if one has the reputation of being industrious one must live up to it or have to encounter raised eyebrows and polite inquiries as to one’s health with an indescribable inflection in the voice which may mean anything, and some mean something, generally unflattering. If one has not the reputation for being industrious, one is generally striving for it or else striving not to be considered lazy. It must be an awful strain to be neither fish, flesh, fowl nor good red herring, and then to have to work to maintain such an anomalous position. But to be frankly lazy—to be recognized as such among one’s enemies, friends, and relatives;—it is a condition of which angels dream and poets sing, or should if they do not. You have a reputation to live up to, and there is no effort in the living. You have a position to maintain, and you maintain it by sheer inertia. You have a thing to do and it is done by your merely holding your peace. Could any condition nearer approach the ideal?”

“Behold, I am become a word painter.”

—Alice Dunbar-Nelson, *Confessions of a Lazy Woman*

As both a rejection of a value system of domestic management labor and a means of executing her will and personalized value system, the narrator of Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s 1899 novel *Confessions of a Lazy Woman* elects and cultivates “laziness” (Hull 4 xliii). The unnamed narrator records one year of her life, during which she strives to live a life free of the gendered labors associated with her station. She rejects the value of housekeeping—not the true labor of housekeeping, which never enters into her journal records, but the management of the household. She leaves the labor and management to her maiden cousin. The narrator, categorized by critic Gloria Hull as “an uninvolved female,” has no taste for women’s clubs, sewing, cooking, or any of the other popular activities and hobbies of the women with whom she interacts (Hull 4 xlv). These women, including cousin Fanella, act as mirrors and critics of the journaling narrator.

Fanella compares the narrator to a “model” neighbor, the exemplar housekeeper.¹⁰⁸ The text pushes back against the expectations that the narrator faces concerning “polite” society and the traces of “the cult of true womanhood” raised by other New Women writers. Gloria Hull called *Confessions* “silly,” and suggested that the novel had never been fully realized by Dunbar-Nelson (Ibid.). The narrator writes in her diary and plans to have it published as a novel. The narrator’s desire for publication betrays the meta-narrative aspects in the novel, as Dunbar-Nelson also kept diaries.¹⁰⁹

The *Confessions* narrator sharply criticizes gendered social convention when she considers her present moment as it intersects with nostalgia for “ancient times.” At several moments in the text, the narrator suggests that a gendered history binds her and that the past offers no models of social movement available to her at the end of the nineteenth century: “It seems that one must do things that are no earthly use because away back in prehistoric times, ancient housewives did them, and they were accounted good,” she argues at one point in the text (17). While previously she writes that, “when Pan piped [...] the nymphs laughed and played ring games—they always look like ring games in the pictures—it must have been joy just to feel

¹⁰⁸ As additional examples: The “Matron” cannot understand why the narrator would not want to “improve her mind” and reshape her “identity,” although the narrator insists that her mind needs no improvement and that she’s “never had an identity.” A friend of the narrator interrupts the narrator’s summer “Eden,” and thus becomes the “Serpent,” inspiring “hysterics” and a host of dramatic outbursts over issues of romance and child rearing—concerns far removed from the narrator, as she has a happy marriage and no children.

¹⁰⁹ Dunbar-Nelson’s diaries were published, posthumously and edited by Gloria T. Hull while Hull was a professor at University of Delaware. I do not suggest that Dunbar-Nelson intended to publish her own diaries; however, her narrator’s conspicuous plans to publish her own diary along with the way that Dunbar-Nelson kept all of her papers (as if she knew they would be archived), suggests that Dunbar-Nelson predicted that her diary would go public, at some point. More than this, *Confessions* then undermines the “truth” value of Dunbar-Nelson’s diaries and asks readers to consider how authorial control and the potential for public consumption informs diary composition. A local Club Woman, whom the narrator calls “the Matron,” confronts the narrator about her lack of participation in club activities, and argues that clubs benefit women who seek autonomous identities. The Matron attempts to appeal to the narrator’s sense of individualism—that “I” that also lives at the center of diary-writing. The Matron argues that, “Some men like to have their wives merge their identities in them and never realize that a woman might object” (87). This argument falls dead when the narrator insists that she “never had any identity to merge” (ibid). Ironically, the entire novel begins with the narrator insisting that she is “A Lazy Woman,” a self-identity that she insists upon preserving.

one's limbs free, one's head bare to the breeze, one's throat full to the brim with unsuppressed song" (9). The "prehistoric" times have locked women into chores and habits based in values that she cannot comprehend. Marked later in the text as a time before the written work of Homer, that same "prehistoric" history gave rise to nymphs with boundless voices. She identifies herself more with nymphs, who also tripped through the woods perhaps in little clothing with any variety of men. The narrator, subject to a series of gendered codes of behavior, cannot access such "unsuppressed" vocality, except when isolated from larger society and in the form of her diary-novel. She utilizes writing to critique societal constraints, and fills many of her pages with complaints of feminine domestic labor and "things that are no earthly use" as opposed particularly to divinely inspired expression. The narrator, instead of offering a neat version of criticism, "confesses" her own complicated relationship with her resistance narrative. Just as she moves back and forth between her criticisms of gender history, she also battles with her dedication to "laziness" and the identity therein that she attempts to establish for herself.

This "laziness" serves as an anti- or resistance-identity, a self-defined formation that counters any culturally-imposed identity.¹¹⁰ Her identity or self-defined expectations inform her relationship with her husband while simultaneously undermining any notion of "laziness," in the denotative sense of the word. She and husband Ned exchange ideas, argue, travel, and spend the balance of their time with one another. Their intellectual lives compliment one another,

¹¹⁰ The *Confessions* narrator rebels against mainstream society, engaging in many naturalist and modern activities including, while somewhat scantily clad, traveling "up and down the woods and streams, 'Comrading it'" (67) with three men, only one of whom is her husband. During a fight with her husband, in which she grows silent in protest to his harshness, she "decide[s] rashly to go and live in the Fiji Islands and never wear clothes or do anything civilized again as long as [she] live[s]" (19). This narrator has her moments of silliness, "rashness," but she remains steadfast in her chosen methods of resistance. She resists "civilization" in any variety of forms. And like the passive aggression turned fully aggressive by Herman Melville's *Bartelby*, Dunbar-Nelson's narrator simply refuses to engage in the world in the way society expects. Of course, here, I reference *Bartleby's* simple, "I prefer not to," which seems passive, at the beginning of the story, but grows to be an aggressive form of inaction. Instead, the narrator creates her own world and records it, offering that record as a New Woman model of reconstructing one's present.

resituating and redefining her role as “wife.” Through her husband, Ned, the narrator redefines her gendered subject position. Ned, unlike his wife, participates in the Club Movement, even giving speeches at “Mother’s Club” meetings and reporting the club activities to his wife. It seems, if anyone, Ned is the Club Woman of the family.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson couldn’t get *Confessions* published. Although in 1902 it appeared that A. S. Barnes & Co. from New York planned to publish the novel, even signing a contract with Dunbar-Nelson in October of that year,¹¹¹ the novel never reached press. In a hand-written letter from the publisher on February 18, 1903, Barnes & Co. returned the manuscript because “certain changes in the firm” resulted in “the present members not deeming the book of sufficient value to publish.”¹¹² After the experience with Barnes & Co., Dunbar-Nelson sent the manuscript out to several other publishers, all who rejected the novel because they felt that *Confessions* was underdeveloped or there was no market for a novel written in diary form. True to Hull’s criticism, the novel contains no overt story arc and would have benefitted from the editorial process had it been fully accepted by a publisher. However, despite its shortcomings, *Confessions* sets up the gender tensions that Dunbar-Nelson will more fully articulate through the character Marion and plotline of her novella, *A Modern Undine*.

A Modern Undine, another of Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s unpublished works written somewhere between 1901 and 1903,¹¹³ explores late nineteenth century economic and social

¹¹¹ University of Delaware, “Alice Dunbar-Nelson Papers.” Letter from A. S. Barnes & Co. to Mrs. Alice Moore Dunbar, October 2, 1902.

¹¹² While this anemic explanation leaves much room for conjecture concerning the press’s decision, it is true that in 1903, the son of the sole owner of the company, Mr. Courtland Dixon Barnes, joined the publisher as a “junior partner” (Barnes and Co.). Thus, perhaps the publisher’s change of heart reflected the change in leadership within the company. But it was also in 1902 that Dunbar-Nelson separated from Paul Laurence Dunbar, her very famous husband. As she left under the cloud of abuse, and therefore scandal, it may not have reached the publisher’s ears until after they signed the agreement with her. University of Delaware, “Alice Dunbar-Nelson Papers.”

¹¹³ As cited by Gloria Hull in both *Give Us Each Day* and the Schomburg Collection’s *The Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson*. Hull surmises this through a 1903 letter from a publisher rejecting submission of *A Modern Undine*, for publication.

tensions born from increasing industrialization, a shifting century, and American modernity. In fusions of genres, characterizations, and classical literary allusions, Dunbar-Nelson recasts the previously European Undine myth, the combination of sea nymph stories by Ovid and Nordic folk tales made into a French novella by Friedrich Heinrich Karl de la Motte Fouqué in 1811, onto American soil. Like Ovid's nymphs, Dunbar-Nelson's modern Undine experiences a monstrous transformation through a complicated and failing romantic relationship.

In the vein of Fouqué's water spirit in search of her humanity, Dunbar-Nelson's Marion demonstrates her soulelessness through her disconnection with the world around her. *A Modern Undine* imagines the precarious position of an earthbound mythical and feminine being—the subject who finds herself constrained by cultural and gendered conventions with which she feels no sympathy. Dunbar-Nelson created an aloof Southern American heroine who sits not only on the edge of the sea in her New Orleans home, but on the edge of a new century. The novella moves through a variety of genres, such as the fairy tale and American gothic romance, genres attributed to and largely marketed to women and women readers. As the story develops the genre shifts as if the story grows out of and beyond the very genres in which it is written. Culminating in a scene of stark realism, the novella argues that the *fin de siècle*, modern woman need not attach herself to convention, the gendered fictions of the women who've come before her. Instead, she is responsible for her own creative production and self-representations, tied to the cultural and literary histories from which she is born.

In this chapter I argue that the character Marion, developed by Dunbar-Nelson around the same time as the narrator of *Confessions*, inhabits a “lazy woman,” an “uninvolved female” identity that both actively and passively undermines Victorian American gender expectations. Marion, much like the narrator of *Confessions*, refuses to actively participate in society in terms

considered normative or mainstream. While the *Confessions* narrator deliberately criticizes the expectations of domesticity assigned to her and writes those criticisms for a presumed audience, Marion practices a less assertive strategy by remaining aloof and therefore untouchable by the people circulating around her. Each woman holds precious the results of her particular, gendered experiences: the *Confessions* narrator desires to publish her criticism, with full knowledge of her work's subversive tendencies, and Marion gives birth to and cherishes a child as evidence of personal and gendered crimes against her. I analyze *A Modern Undine* through the lens provided by *Confessions*, and examine Dunbar-Nelson's argument concerning the mainstream resistance to her Black New Woman creative production—a resistance that influenced the publication histories of these novels.

II. Alice Ruth Moore: A Personal and Literary History of Dunbar-Nelson

Born Alice Ruth Moore on July 19, 1875, Dunbar-Nelson hailed from New Orleans. Her mother, a former slave, raised Dunbar-Nelson and her sister in an upwardly-mobile family that valued their daughters' education and training. The Moore's family included both of Dunbar-Nelson's parents, Joseph and Patricia (Patsy nee Wright) Moore, her grandmother, Mary Wright, and her older sister Mary Leila known as Leila (Mather 96, Alexander 46). Both of her parents worked, although it is not clear if Joseph Moore contributed to the family's income. Her father, presumably away from the home much of the time if not fully absent, was a merchant marine, and her mother, a seamstress (Dunbar-Nelson 3 14, Alexander 46).¹¹⁴ Still, Dunbar-Nelson and her sister received not only formal schooling, but musical and artist educations, as well.

¹¹⁴ I find no evidence that Dunbar-Nelson's father lived with the family. All accounts list the household occupants as the family women, only. This is a curious absence in the Dunbar-Nelson archive.

Dunbar-Nelson trained as a musician, artist, and actress as a young woman, and ventured into a variety of career paths. While still in New Orleans, she acted in several plays – a love for the theatre that she would articulate in the form of play writing, later in her life. She matriculated at both the University of Pennsylvania and Cornell, at the latter writing a thesis exploring Milton’s influence on Wordsworth. Dunbar-Nelson’s biographer and critic, Gloria Hull, reports that Dunbar-Nelson graduated from Cornell in 1907.¹¹⁵ On April 19, 1911, *The Cornell Daily Sun* reported that Dunbar-Nelson entered an essay in a prize “for the best competitive essay on a subject in French literature or philology” concerning “A Comparison of Racine’s Phaedra with Euripides’ Hippolytus and Seneca’s Phaedra” (7). She taught literature classes and even headed English departments in schools in New Orleans, Brooklyn, Washington, D.C., and Delaware. In at least two of her schools, she not only oversaw the entire English curriculum, which included both “classics,” “rhetoric,” and “poetry to be memorized,”¹¹⁶ but she organized and produced student plays and oratory competitions. Students recited works by black speakers and activists such as Frederick Douglass and Frances E.W. Harper. Dunbar-Nelson included works by these famous figures in her volume *Masterpieces in Negro Eloquence* (1914), a collection of oratory intended for both pedagogical edification and rhetorical practice. The Hornell High School¹¹⁷ 1910 “Class Day” program included students impersonating famous figures and thinkers, including Socrates, Diogenes, and Xanthippe.¹¹⁸

Throughout her teaching career, Dunbar-Nelson also wrote poetry, fiction, and pieces of journalism, through which she pursued a variety of publishing opportunities. She acted as her

¹¹⁵ The January 10, 1935 *Cornell Alumni News* listed Dunbar-Nelson as a 1908 graduate: ‘08 Grad; ‘05 AB—Alice Dunbar Nelson and Jessie Redmond Fauset are included among the “hundred negro poets since Wheatley” in a booklet, *Singers in the Dawn*, published by the Conference on Education and Race Relations of Atlanta, Ga’ (13).

¹¹⁶ Curriculum notes from the Alice Dunbar-Nelson Papers, University of Delaware (Box 28, F. 478 - F. 479)

¹¹⁷ Hornell, NY

¹¹⁸ Program included in Alice Dunbar-Nelson Papers and dated June 21, 1910. Not only does Dunbar-Nelson make certain that the students know these Greek philosophers, but she includes Xanthippe (spelled in the program “Xanthippi”), the wife of Socrates.

own agent, sending articles and manuscripts directly to publishing houses. The University of Delaware archive includes many of the responses, both acceptances and rejections, particularly from the years after her first marriage. She published two books of short stories, *Violets and Other Tales* and *The Goodness of St. Rocque*¹¹⁹ in 1895 and 1899, respectively. Her own write-up concerning her work on Wordsworth appeared in *Modern Language Notes* in 1909. She published the anthology, *Masterpieces of Negro Eloquence*, a volume edited by her (then) future husband Robert John Nelson, in 1914. Additionally, she held the position of editor for the *A.M.E. Review*, wrote columns for the *Washington Eagle* and *Pittsburgh Courier* newspapers, and published articles and poems in popular magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Crisis*, and *Opportunity*. She later mobilized her writing and club activities into a speaking career, circulating as an activist and advocates for “colored troops” during World War I and the women’s vote.

While maintaining such an active and successful set of careers, Dunbar-Nelson married three times and had many affairs with both men and women. Her first marriage was to the “first Negro poet laureate,” Paul Lawrence Dunbar in March 1898. That first marriage lasted only a short while, although Dunbar-Nelson and Dunbar never official divorced. She became an estranged widow, if you will, in 1906, upon Dunbar’s death from either tuberculosis or tuberculosis-treatment related alcoholism. In 1910 Dunbar-Nelson married Arthur Callis, a man

¹¹⁹ Recently, scholars have reopened the discussion concerning race and particularly New Orleans Creole identity in Dunbar-Nelson’s short fiction. See these discussions: *Race and Culture in New Orleans Stories: Kate Chopin, Grace King, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and George Washington Cable* (2014) by James Nagel; “At the Corner of Bourbon and Toulouse Street: The Historical Context of Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s ‘M’sieu Fortier’s Violin’” (2009, *American Literary Realism* 41:2) by Robert C. Clark; “Inventing a ‘Negro Literature’: Race, Dialect, and Gender in the Early Work of Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson” (2009) by Caroline Gebhard; “Religion, Race, and Gender in the ‘Race-less’ Fiction of Alice Dunbar-Nelson” (2009; *Black Magnolias Literary Journal*) by Elizabeth J. West; “Strategies of Self-Representation in ‘Natalie’ by Alice Dunbar-Nelson” (2008) by Margot Sempreora; “‘You...could never be mistaken’: reading Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s rhetorical diversions in *The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories*” (2008, *Studies in American Fiction* 36:1) by Thomas Strychacz; “American Heteroglossia: Open-Cell Regionalism and the New Orleans Short Fiction of Alice Dunbar-Nelson” (2007; *Discourse* 29:1) by Judith Irwin-Mulcahy.

many years Dunbar-Nelson's junior and who taught with Dunbar-Nelson at Howard High School in Delaware. Callis and Dunbar-Nelson attended Cornell at the same time, when Callis was as an undergraduate and Dunbar-Nelson engaged in graduate studies under Prof. Lane Cooper. Callis was 12 years her junior and the marriage remained a short-lived secret. Finally, Dunbar-Nelson married the Harrisburg, PA, editor and publisher, Robert Nelson in 1916.

Dunbar-Nelson wrote *A Modern Undine* some time before 1904,¹²⁰ after publishing two collections of short stories as well as a variety of poems and essays appearing in magazines and newspapers, and after relocating to the North from the home of her birth in New Orleans. She was, along with her fictional modern Undine, part of the post-Reconstruction migration that led thousands of African American people out of the South and northward in search of financial opportunities. As the country transformed from an agrarian-fueled fiscal power to a place of mechanized industry, working people followed the currents of job opportunities. And while I am loathe to read too much into Dunbar-Nelson's biography as a means of understanding the novella, the story of Marion who is whisked away by her husband to her New York home has a clear parallel to Dunbar-Nelson's own migration story and the stories of her fellow relocated Southerners—her neighbors, fellow church members, and members of her social and intellectual circles, who relocated to Boston and New York from various points in the South.

As a precursor to The Great Migration, while the South suffered the fiscal failures of Reconstruction, and during the late nineteenth century, many black Southerners traveled northward as a means of seeking out economic opportunity. Dunbar-Nelson and her family migrated during this first wave, her sister's family to Boston with Dunbar-Nelson soon following as a means of securing middle-class working conditions. The Great Migration, beginning after

¹²⁰ While *A Modern Undine* has been reprinted in The Schomburg Center's Nineteenth-Century Black Women series (1988), I take all quotes and readings from the typed manuscript held in the Dunbar-Nelson Papers at the University of Delaware.

1915, has historically been credited with similar economic causes. Yet according to both Farah Jasmine Griffin (1995) and Isabel Wilkerson (2010) among other scholars, The Great Migration is also inextricably tied to the sharp rise in racial violence during the turn of the twentieth century. In short, the blight of the South and the stress it produced paired with the history of black torture and murder resulted in some Southern whites attempting to resolve feelings of powerlessness and the threat of black labor through lynching and racial cleansing. In *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*, critic Jacqueline Goldsby argues that the pressures of “modernity” also fueled the lynching “movement” at the turn of the century. Neither Dunbar-Nelson’s historical or Marion’s fictional story includes this particular type of violence, and yet *A Modern Undine* provides a predictive model of violence occurring as a result of moving away from home. Without discounting the mounting tension in the South during the late 1800s, I argue that Dunbar-Nelson leaves the South as a means more of fulfilling gender and class expectations than of the racial violence that steadily increased during the time of her exodus.

While there is no evidence that *A Modern Undine* mirrors Dunbar-Nelson’s own sentiments about love, marriage, and moving from the South, the story does explore a uniquely gendered and classed notion of migration. The heroine of *A Modern Undine* leaves her ancestral, New Orleans home when she marries to a Northern businessman. Dunbar-Nelson, on the other hand, left the South to spend time with her sister, who had already relocated to Boston from New Orleans. A married woman, Dunbar-Nelson’s sister (Mary) Leila Young may have followed the path of the married Southern woman, relocated to the North as a result of her husband’s endeavors. Yet, Dunbar-Nelson’s motivations seemed in part a yearning for adventure, and part

the desire to be closer to her sister's growing family. Suffice to say that Dunbar-Nelson left the New Orleans to see about her sister in 1896 and never returned.

Before leaving New Orleans, the already-published author received a fan letter (my language) from Paul Laurence Dunbar. This letter served as Dunbar-Nelson's introduction to her future husband and the inauguration of the couple's letter-based courtship. Dunbar-Nelson's migration out of the South and into the northeast, while inspired by the promise of time with her sister and with no indication of permanent migration, resulted in the author never returning to the South but rather making several moves through the northeast corridor.

Dunbar-Nelson moved from Massachusetts to New York in 1897 and began her career as a teacher in Brooklyn. Her relocation and reinvention as a northern schoolteacher occurred before meeting and marrying Dunbar and taking up married residence in Washington, D.C. Alice and Paul Laurence were married in 1898, nearly three years after their first correspondence. Married for less than four years, Dunbar-Nelson left Dunbar after Dunbar nearly beat her to death. The abuse in their marriage has historically been blamed on Dunbar's addiction to alcohol, the result of treating his chronic tuberculosis and at the behest of his physicians. With this knowledge, one cannot help but be struck by the devolution of Dunbar's handwriting in some of the letters he wrote to Dunbar-Nelson during their courtship and marriage. The earliest letters are formally written in a very clear hand. Many of the letters from subsequent months and year begin with clear script and dissolved into tight scrawls, betraying if not inebriation, at least fatigue or changes in mood. Several of them berate Dunbar-Nelson's writing and subject matter, a sharp contrast to the initial letters that shower praise upon Dunbar-Nelson and offer complementary critical engagement with her work. Without the matches to the letters, as many of Dunbar-Nelson's letters were missing from the University of Delaware collection, it becomes difficult to

surmise how much was rough word play between the couple and what may have been early echoes of future abuse. On November 19, 1897, Dunbar wrote an apology letter to Dunbar-Nelson, asking her forgiveness for a bout of drunkenness. In his first attempt to apologize, he wrote: “My course has been weak and brutal. I have dishonoured [sic] you and cannot forgive myself for it.” According to Eugene W. Metcalf, whose 1972 dissertation entitled “The Letters of Paul and Alice Dunbar: A Private History” annotated all extant correspondence between the couple, this letter references: “During a recent stay in New York, probably between the 16th and 19th of November, Dunbar had become inebriated and, in a drunken state, had intercourse with Alice and injured her internally” (243). A second letter betrays his self-conscious struggle with alcohol. The second letter, dated also November 19, 1897, Dunbar pledged reformation: “I hope and pray to be able to win your respect as well as your love. I have tried to compromise with love and share her dominion with liquor. From now on, there must be no compromise. Love must rule and rule alone.” While I could not find the letter from Dunbar-Nelson that responded to this incident, Dunbar did not realize that he hurt Dunbar-Nelson until November 22, when he received a letter from her telling him of her injury and for the delay in her correspondence with him. Because of a glut of missing responses, it is not clear from what kind of injury Dunbar-Nelson suffered. However, from Dunbar’s letters, Dunbar-Nelson had to cease working to recover from the damage caused by her fiancé.

I include this bit of the story not only because it is a rich and telling moment in Dunbar-Nelson’s romantic history, but also because the record of the Dunbar-Nelson/Dunbar relationship demonstrates tensions (and crimes) that eventually destroyed the relationship and seemed to eek into Dunbar-Nelson’s writing. There is a frankness in the correspondence—for instance, in the fact that Dunbar-Nelson reports her injuries and then also keeps the letters accounting for her

pre-marital sexual relationship with Dunbar. This latter point becomes important because Dunbar-Nelson's niece held a position as a librarian. Dunbar-Nelson deliberately preservation her records and likely understood that Pauline A. Young would, one day, see to officially archiving them. I say again: Dunbar-Nelson knew that others would read her records. More than that, much of what we know of Dunbar-Nelson comes in the form of her own accounting and her direct communication with the people in her life—most notably, Dunbar.

III. The Value of Bibliographic Readings of Dunbar-Nelson's Work

Generally, I lean toward the sentiments of critic Betty Hart, who remarked that “emphasizing her [Dunbar-Nelson's] marriage to Dunbar obscures the tremendous contributions she made to the social causes of her time and her rightful status as a writer” (77).¹²¹ Critics generally categorize the Dunbar-Nelson/Dunbar courtship as fairy-tale romance. For all who read the correspondence, the relationship unfolds in their letters. And for all intents and purposes, the letters read like a Victorian epistolary novel. Dunbar passionately pursues Dunbar-Nelson. His early letters suggest that she was properly aloof and resistant, however eventually becomes unloosed by his brilliance and artistic production. The act of reading these letters, while also knowing how their relationship ended, undermines any sentimentality I might have shared with other critics. For me, the archive reads more like the early letters of Jonathan Hawker to Mina Murray from Dracula's Transylvania castle—something sinister lies under even the most mundane correspondence and transforms Dunbar's teasing and chastising of Dunbar-Nelson into

¹²¹ I also would like to point out that the violence that Marion experiences in *A Modern Undine*, her feeling the “blow” of Howard's alleged infidelity, could be mistakenly correlated to the violence in Dunbar-Nelson's relationship with Dunbar. Not only does this comparison refuse the authorial control Dunbar-Nelson displays in her writing, and contributes to a long line of “women write their own lives only” stereotyping, but loses some foothold because Dunbar-Nelson wrote about domestic abuse before meeting Dunbar.

threats and efforts to undermine Dunbar-Nelson, both personally and professionally. It is difficult to enter the archive and not look for hints of the abuse that Dunbar-Nelson will face and Dunbar's alcoholism that is blamed for that same abuse. It is even more shocking to find out that Dunbar physically hurt Dunbar-Nelson before they were married.

It would be unfair to consider Dunbar-Nelson's marriage as the center of *A Modern Undine*, however I cannot help but consider that she wrote it as her marriage was dissolving or soon after it had dissolved. I am struck by the climax of the novella as a fight between the central couple. And yet, it must also be noted that Dunbar-Nelson explored tensions and abuse between married couples in short stories in her collections that were published before even communicating with Dunbar, such as "Tony's Wife," which appears in *The Goodness of St. Rocque*.¹²² Instead of considering how Dunbar-Nelson's life may have inspired her writing, I am more inclined to consider how her writing attracted Dunbar.

Dunbar approached Dunbar-Nelson as a writer, first. While he positioned himself as the more expert and experienced professional, evidenced in the many bits of "advice" that he offered Dunbar-Nelson, Dunbar also engaged in serious critique of Dunbar-Nelson's work. In Dunbar's April 17, 1895 letter to Dunbar-Nelson (then Alice Ruth Moore), Dunbar begins with a somewhat vague compliment concerning her work and then engages her on the question of black writing.

You will pardon my boldness in addressing you, I hope, and let my interest in your work be my excuse. I sometimes wonder if in the rare world of art, earthly conventions need always be headed. I am drawn to write you because we are both working along the same lines and a sketch of yours in the Monthly Review so interested me that I was anxious to know more of you and your work.

¹²² In "Tony's Wife," a woman is beaten and cast out of her home by her husband as a result of his being "charmed" by another woman.

[...] I should like to exchange opinions and work with you if you will agree. The counsel and encouragement of one who is striving toward the same end that I am would, I know greatly help.

Dunbar first approaches Dunbar-Nelson through a formal letter of introduction, including a list of his literary publications and professional achievements. By 1895, Dunbar is already quite famous, and it seems likely that Dunbar-Nelson already knew his work. Her own publication history and involvement in education and the intellectual communities of both Boston and New York make it difficult to believe that Dunbar-Nelson did not know Dunbar by reputation and literary production. Thus, it becomes more interesting to consider that along with his published work, Dunbar announced also two forthcoming publications. Dunbar effectively reveals somewhat confidential information to Dunbar-Nelson, while also presenting himself as a rising literary star who will, one day, be able to support a family with his earnings from writing

The letter appeals to Dunbar-Nelson's professional self; and Dunbar introduces intimacy by way of revealing his immediate success and thereby foreshadows, or betrays, his romantic overtures. While subtly reinforcing his more famous position, he treated Dunbar-Nelson's work with some seriousness and even suggested that they collaborate on work at some future date. Later, after they married, Dunbar-Nelson worked as Dunbar's literary agent. This professional connection extended beyond their courtship and marriage, as Dunbar-Nelson acted on Dunbar's professional behalf even after Dunbar died. Dunbar-Nelson's career was a composite of professional writer, teacher, activist and speaker, and agent for both her and Dunbar's work. By June 6 of that same year, Dunbar sent Dunbar-Nelson a romantic poem, "A Song," with the opening line: "My lady-love lives far away." And thus began Dunbar's overt romantic advances. In many ways, Dunbar-Nelson's romance with Dunbar was a type of "fairytale."¹²³

¹²³ In her book, *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow: The Tragic Courtship and Marriage of Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore*, Eleanor Alexander calls the Dunbar-Nelson/Dunbar relationship "storybook" on two occasions (4,

IV. Marion's Mothers: Literarily Contextualizing *A Modern Undine*

A Modern Undine utilizes both images and plotlines from stories of Scylla and Galatea, from *Metamorphoses*, Books XIII and XIV. In Book XIII, while Scylla attends to the nereid Galatea and combs Galatea's hair, Galatea confesses her greatest grief: the loss of her lover, the river god Acis. After Galatea and Acis became lovers, the Cyclops, Polyphemus, attempted to woo Galatea from the arms of Acis and with a song. Through the song, which takes up 80 lines of text, Polyphemus makes a case for himself as a superior match and promises Galatea all of the riches and power of his vast kingdom. Still, Galatea rejects the Cyclops' overtures for Acis. Out of jealousy, Polyphemus kills Acis with a boulder, crushing him and causing Acis' blood to trickle from under the rock. As an act of dedication and keeping Acis alive, Galatea turns Acis' blood into a river: "sed sic quoque erat tamen Acis, in amnem / versus, et antiquum tenerunt flumina nomen" (ll. 896-97). By transforming her wounded lover, Galatea rewrites the verses ("versus") as well as the ancient waters ("antiquum... flumina") through which Acis' name ("nomen") and body flow. Through the Acis' transformation, Galatea expresses her grief and keeps Acis alive. The flowing waters that Galatea writes connect her beloved with her own flowing tears—binding the lovers materially. Ovid argues that writing may reinscribe identity. Writers, particularly through poetry, intervene in the historical record and keep present the figures that would otherwise be lost. Galatea, overwhelmed with retelling her story, says nothing

53) and uses "fairy-tale" on three occasions (3, 10, 141), but the latter with a variety of complicated meanings. Alexander maps out the various moments of tenderness and abuse between Dunbar-Nelson and Dunbar, and both supports the notion of their relationship as "fairy-tale," but then also undermines that notion at other points in her text. Overall, I believe that Alexander critiques the notions of this coupling as romance, although many critics have historically situated it as such. I contend that the motivation for this is, in part, the historic difficulty that critics have with hurting the reputations of lauded and important figures in history—it falls suspiciously into categories of airing dirty laundry. However, through my research in both University of Delaware's and The Schomburg Center's archives, it is apparent that Dunbar's abuse of Dunbar-Nelson was well known within the black intellectual community of the time. For instance, I ran across a letter from

more and dives back into the sea, leaving Scylla to interpret and contemplate that which she heard.

Scylla experiences her own version of the Polyphemus story soon after parting with Galatea. Upon hearing this story, Scylla contemplatively wanders along the beach, worried that her feelings (inspired by Galatea's story) make swimming in the open ocean too risky for her ("neque enim medio se credere ponto / audit..." ll. 900-901). After Scylla finds a cool pool to recuperate, the sea god Glaucus sees her and falls in love with her. He explains his shocking appearance, a mirror to the monstrous appearance of the Cyclops to Galatea.¹²⁴ Glaucus explains that upon eating a magic herb, his once human body was transformed into that which swam before Scylla. His dark green beard, watery hair, blue arms, and legs twisted into the form of legs changed into fish's tail with a fin ("cruaque pinnigero curvata novissima pisce" l. 963), repulse Scylla and she flees the sea god, despite his explanation. In grief, Glaucus seeks out the help of Circe.

In the beginning of Book VIX, Glaucus asks Circe for help changing Scylla's mind, and instead Circe falls in love with Glaucus. When Glaucus communicates his desire for Scylla, Circe becomes "indignant" that he would desire one who rejects him ("indignata dea est et laedere quatenus ipsum / non poterat (nec vellet amans), irascitur illi, / quae sibi praelata est" ll. 40-42).

Out of jealousy, again mirroring Polyphemus' violence against Acis, Circe transforms the virgin

¹²⁴ Polyphemus appeals to Galatea's physical rejection of him through his song to her, arguing that his hairy, giant body makes him more beautiful rather than less. His appeal, as we know, fails:

...coma plurima torvos
prominet in vultus, umerosque, ut lucus, obumbrat;
nec mea quod rigidis horrent densissima saetis
corpora, turpe puta: turpis sine frondibus arbor,
turpis equus, nisi colla iubae flaventia velent;
pluma tegit volucres, ovibus sua lana decori est:
barba viros hirtaeque decent in corpore saetae. (ll. 844-50)

("My many hairs poke / and stand out on my face, and shoulders, and covers me as a grove / I shudder to think [that you consider] the thick and stiff hair / that covers my body as disgraceful: for the tree is ugly without its leaves, / the horse is ugly unless its neck [is covered by] a golden mane; / [my hair is like] feathers that cover the birds, and sheep with wool: / a beard and long [luxurious] hair benefits my body [makes me more beautiful]")

Scylla into the monster that, eventually, Ulysses will face. Scylla develops a skirt of wild dogs; her sexual organs, and thus her sexuality, forever made dangerous. Glaucus' already transformed body demands Scylla's conversion. Glaucus insists that his body, his legs and "groins" turned into a fish's tail, is not monstrous, but is, instead, pleasing to the gods ("quid tamen haec species, quid dis placuisse marinis, / quid iuvat esse deum, si tu non tangeris istis?" l. 964-65). Scylla's rejection of Glaucus, particularly for his displeasing body, foreshadows Scylla's transformation into a monster.

In the 1818 *Undine: A Romance* by Friedrich Heinrich Karl La Motte-Fouqué, an older couple finds the title character living in the woods. The French Undine remains childlike and unsophisticated until she meets and falls in love with a soldier whom she eventually marries. Undine's uncle, a water spirit who shifts between the forms a white bubbling stream and a pale ghost-like man, haunts the woods surrounding Undine's adopted home. This uncle and Undine's spirit kin, while friendly to Undine, simultaneously traps and threatens the soldier, motivating the soldier to stay with Undine and her family. While the plot relies on the "uncle's" intervention, the spirit continues to haunt the soldier, a persistent threat to the soldier, and calls into question whether the non-human world sanctions the young couple's love and betrothal. Undine's fleshless uncle ultimately endangers the union between the soldier and Undine and thus Undine's ability to gain a "soul."

Undine, much like the Ovidian nymph stories from which it is partially derived, ends in tragedy. After the couple marries and moves from the woods to the soldier's home town, the soldier falls in love with a mortal woman, and eventually rejects Undine. Undine falls into a great depression, not only because of the loss of this great love but because she also loses the chance to become a mortal woman. Furthermore, as a result and as a means of exacting revenge

for the rebuke, Undine's uncle begins terrorizing the town through the town's central fountain. The question of Undine's humanity remains unanswered, however she sacrifices her happiness and any bitterness that she could develop toward the soldier and his mistress. Undine supports the affair, remaining friends with her husband's mistress, and eventually sacrifices her physical self to her uncle as a means of ceasing the terror for the town and protecting her husband's extra-marital relationship.

Hans Christen Andersen revised Fouqué's *Undine* in 1836 and in the form of the short story, "The Little Mermaid." The Little Mermaid longs for an immortal soul and to leave her sea home and join humans on dry land. She falls in love with a mortal man who she also sees as the key to her own mortality, and makes a deal with the Sea Hag so that she can permanently roam the earth. Despite the Sea Hag's warnings that the mermaid will never be able to return and that walking will remain, forever, painful—as if she is walking on knives—the mermaid chooses to transform into a human girl. She, like 's Undine, falls in love with a mortal and marries him, although his love remains, ultimately, unrequited. As a result of the failed love, the little mermaid never receives her soul and returns to the water home in the form of sea spray.¹²⁵

V. The "Lazy" Marion: Feminine Desire in *A Modern Undine*

A Modern Undine functions as a survey of literary genre and particularly considers the history of "feminine" literary form unto which Dunbar-Nelson writes. The black feminine fiction

¹²⁵ This is the original ending of story, which Andersen revised to appeal to a child audience. In the revised version, the little mermaid still has a chance to become mortal, if all of the children upon whose faces she, as sea spray, touches remain good children.

writing tradition, beginning during the Civil War,¹²⁶ was for Dunbar-Nelson a burgeoning black women's literary movement that confronted the complexities and material consequences of outwardly defined raced and gendered identities. *A Modern Undine* enters a lineage of sea nymph writing beginning with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and including the philosophies of fifteenth-century German occultist Paracelsus, the novella *Undine* written by Brandenburg-born Fouqué, and "The Little Mermaid" by Hans Christian Andersen.¹²⁷ Dunbar-Nelson's work follows Andersen but engages most with the Ovidian beginnings and 's novella.¹²⁸

Dunbar-Nelson answers a variety of feminine conventions and issues arising from this complex series of pre-texts. She reconsiders the transforming body and the result of that transformation by rewriting, particularly, the monstrous conversion of Ovid's Scylla by Circe. She undermines the very nature of "the monstrous," by considering a fierce motherhood in lieu of the dangerous sexuality that emerges when Ovid's and 's texts intersect. Dunbar-Nelson denatures the unruly and wild feminine desire as presented in the works of and Anderson, providing, instead, a distant and seemingly passionless "lazy woman" identity for her Marion-Undine.

¹²⁶ At this point, it is difficult to confidently situate the emergence of black women's fiction. I am particularly resistant to this, in that I believe that the storytelling tradition obscures this. What is more, I'm not really sure that the "when" matters, but rather it remains important that the project of writing and its tradition for black American women has begun by, at least, 1865. At the time that I am writing this, however, the debate concerning the "first" novel written by a black woman remains open. Even the New York Times got involved in this conversation, upon the re-publication of Julia C. Collins's *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride*. In "A Slave Story Is Rediscovered, and a Dispute Begins" (28-Oct-2006), the dispute between the William L. Andrews, the editor of Collins's novel, and Henry Louis Gates, the publisher of *A Bondswoman's Narrative* became public. I will only say that I'm not quite sure the merit of this discussion apart from notions of propriety—which, as we are discussing the works of potentially enslaved women, remains fraught, at least. For the sake of my work, I am most interested in noting the obscurity of black women's fiction until the later nineteenth century. It is most important, to me, that the authors I discuss are writing a new tradition. These women are creating the very thing I call "black women's fiction."

¹²⁷ 1837

¹²⁸ Perhaps as part of a revival of the myth, Dunbar-Nelson's contemporary, Edith Wharton, creates her own Undine character in her 1913 *The Custom of the Country*, published soon after Dunbar-Nelson writes *A Modern Undine*. According to Dunbar-Nelson's reading diaries, held in the University of Delaware archive, Dunbar-Nelson followed Wharton's career. Dunbar-Nelson kept records of her reading goals in the same bound notebooks containing her diaries.

Apart from the connection by name, Dunbar-Nelson's novella resembles 's *Undine* in that Howard, like 's knight, seeks out and woos Marion, taking her away from her home and parents. Andersen's Little Mermaid seeks shores away from her underwater birthplace and blatantly defies her parents and sisters, and makes a deal with the Sea Hag to shed her tail and take a human form, regardless of the painful cost. If engaging with "The Little Mermaid," Dunbar-Nelson rescues her Undine from the onus of her landlocked punishment. Readers meet Marion who is already aloof and displaced on the earth. Particularly, Dunbar-Nelson engages with Ovid's stories of the sea nymphs Galatea¹²⁹ and Scylla who suffer physical transformation as a result of interactions with failed romance. Dunbar-Nelson also writes back to Fouqué's story of the childlike Undine who loses her freedom and gains a soul when she marries a mortal man.

It becomes difficult to initially surmise Marion's motivations because she seems to have no wishes or desires. Dunbar-Nelson links her literary predecessors' discussions of "soullessness" with Marion's lack of desire, limited moments of speech, and seeming emotionlessness. Marion expresses very little. She hides herself from everyone in the story—highlighting the emotional expression of those around her. In comparison to her, her sister and Howard seem to over-emote. She passively resists and then acquiesces to Howard's desires, and offers little reasoning for her initial opposition. In the end, Howard gets his way, and the couple marries. While it would seem that Marion finally lets go of her resistance, what in fact happens is that she passively mutes Howard's expressions. Marion changes Howard through her passive resistance to his expectations for their relationship.

After marrying Howard moving to New York, Marion becomes more isolated than she ever was in New Orleans. While living at home and despite her rejection of the parties and

¹²⁹ Please note that in *Metamorphoses*, Galatea is not the name of Pygmalion's statue, but instead a neriad (sea nymph) connected to Acis and the Cyclops, Polyphemus. In Ovid's original, Pygmalion's statue had no name. For further discussion of Pygmalion and Book X of *Metamorphoses*, see Chapter 3.

socializing valued by upper class New Orleans society, Marion had the company of her mother and sister. After migrating to the North, Marion suffers newfound isolation. Howard commutes to the city, and Marion spends most of her days in her marital home with only the house staff. The few times that she ventures out, Marion awkwardly interacts with local Club Women, inspiring their resentment and eventual rejection of her.

During Marion and Howard's marriage, Marion cannot, on her own, develop emotionally intimacy with Howard. While it becomes clear that the couple develops some sort of sexual relationship, Howard begins to complain about Marion's inattention. Growing bored with the nearly unrequited situation at home, Howard's attention turns toward a young, poor woman in town. Although initially sexually attracted to the woman, Grace, Howard shifts his intentions and instead pursues Grace as a patron. Despite Howard's innocent relationship with Grace, Marion hears that Howard has taken up with Grace and collapses in response to the news. Marion collapses while pregnant, and gives birth to a "deformed" child—one whose legs are mangled and, therefore, suggest the body of a mermaid.

Marion blames the baby's deformity on Howard's affair, and fiercely protects the baby from its nurses and from Howard. Her new passions as a mother transform Marion from an aloof and careless woman into a fierce protector of both herself and her child. After hoarding the information about the baby's physical state for weeks, the story reaches its climax when Marion reveals the baby's body to Howard. As Howard reels from the news of the child, Marion confronts Howard with the rumor of his affair. The couple eventually fights, giving rise to the first gleam of hope in the story. Each expresses their grief and vulnerability, and opens the door to a more communicative and open relationship. The baby does not survive, and Marion asks her

mother to bury the child by the sea, returning the baby to his ancestral home. The couple decides to honor their transformed relationship and stay married.

Unlike her French predecessor, Marion finds no cure for her “soullessness” through her reluctant and then troubled marriage to Howard. Instead, like Ovid’s Polyphemus and Glaucus rebuked by Galatea and Scylla, Howard pursues Marion although she initially thwarts his efforts.¹³⁰ Unlike the lost and soulless feminine that finds her way toward humanity through the heteronormative gender role (marriage) in and Andersen, Dunbar-Nelson revises Scylla’s fate but by undermining the marriage resolution. Dunbar-Nelson has Marion relent to Howard’s courting but remain aloof during the marriage. While Howard won’t be fulfilled by Marion and won’t be able to “save” Marion from her aloofness, he provides Marion the framework to find herself.

Howard pursues Marion with all of the fervor of a prince rescuing his imprisoned love. Instead of Marion jumping at the chance to be with Howard, who offers her all of the amenities her class station suggests she should want, Marion remains disinterested and agrees to marry Howard with reluctance. Marion is, thus, the anti-romantic heroine, who does not garner her identity through the promise of middle-class heteronormativity that Howard offers. Marion offers no polar emotion, balancing Howard’s enthusiasm for their courtship. Marion does not adhere to social convention and react with shyness in response to Howard’s bold proposal of marriage after

¹³⁰ Marion betrays no impassioned interest in any stage of courtship with Howard, although he consistently pursues her. Marion’s lack of enthusiasm extends beyond her relationship with Howard, as her sister, also, twins Howard’s liveliness, particularly in the face of Marion. The novella adopts a Victorian or Southern romance plot when Marion’s sister plots with Howard to secure Marion and Howard’s betrothal. In a short scene, Emmie, Marion’s sister, feigns romance between herself and Howard as a means of inciting Marion’s jealousy. Emmie and Howard’s collusion is a success, and yet Marion never arises as passionately jealous, but rather more confused and hurt. And yet, unlike jealous Circe who wanted Glaucus for herself, Marion’s sister Emmie paves Howard’s way, inciting Marion’s mild jealousy by suggesting that she will happily marry Howard. The text offers no evidence that he recognizes Marion as loving him, and his pursuit of her underscores lack of consent within marriage conventions. In the midst of suffrage, Marion’s apathy, her “aloofness,” also suggests her break with gender norms, and gestures towards late nineteenth century “maiden” women writers and activists.

knowing her for such a short time. Instead, Marion *opens*, bodily, upon hearing Howard's proposal.

When Howard asks Marion to marry him, she pauses at his question. As if ravaged, Marion bodily concedes to Howard's proposal before language emerges: "Her hands locked and unlocked themselves nervously; her head dropped forward slowly, slowly, her lips parted, but framed no words, though there was acquiescence in every line of her slender figure" (14). Desire disassembles Marion. Her body cast in a list of independently moving parts, Marion's submission to Howard and to the world of marriage dismembers her and betrays the monstrous inside her, foreshadowing her deformed child. Finally, upon kissing Marion as celebration of and to seal their betrothal, Howard feels "a sudden shrinking of [Marion's] whole being, as if already her soul were closing in upon itself after brief surrender" (14). Desire, the state of longing, ends once Howard kisses Marion. Reduced to the parts gathered together in Howard's arms, heterosexuality and romantic convention inspire Marion's retreat back into herself. Symbolically represented through being bound to land, Marion's inability to remain open, her aloofness and lack of emotion, suggests a preexisting wounding, some need to protect herself from suffering again an unnamed injury.

Marion, an earth-bound and twentieth-century Undine, expresses few emotions because of her disconnection from the sea. She cannot access the "gems" of her spirit, her emotions, and her desires. She sits on the sea edge, no longer *of* the sea. The sea and night sky stretch beyond Howard and Marion, literally, and Marion more figuratively: distant and inaccessible treasure. "The heavens, a deep blue bowl, glistening with white points of gems, bent over the earth in an embrace of enfolding tenderness. The night was full of a thousand sounds and a thousand silences" (Ibid.). Despite being on the edge of the surging sea, the night takes over and makes the

scene quiet, an empty canvas upon which Marion and Howard will write a new type of romance. Marion's "quiet" blankets Howard's loudness, highlighting the tendencies of each.

Marion's detachment positions her as both marginal to "mankind" and relegated a "vessel" unto which the divine may communicate and which Howard seeks to fill in his own way. Thus, Marion is not only detached but "blank" and waiting to be filled. In this, she embodies the soulless nymph of Fouqué and Andersen. However, she is particularly awaiting the "voices" that she cannot express—her "soullessness," thus attached the divine as well as to language and the power of utterance. Unlike Fouqué's Undine, Marion remains silent and removed from her desires, unable to articulate them until after she becomes a mother.

When Howard visits Marion's home for the first time, with the intention of winning her betrothal, he is met, first, by Emmie who has enough enthusiasm for both Emmie and Marion, combined. Marion's baby sister and polar opposite, Emmie's boisterous behavior mirrors her body. Emmie "was a big, healthy girl, brown-haired, brown-eyed, rose cheeked, hoyendish" (8). Not the typically delicate and fragile heroine, Emmie bounces around the room, brashly flirts with Howard, and then teases Marion and exploits Marion's aloof prudishness. "Emmie prattled along unceasingly, like a gust little summer rain pattering on tin roofs." Energy and emotion likened to rain, Dunbar-Nelson transfers the "childish" behavior attributed to Fouqué's Undine to Emmie. Emmie is playful and teasing to the point of potentially hurting her sister. In short, her "prattling" underscore's Marion's silence. Emmie remains unbound, although also governed by the social conventions of feminine socialite, and will later successfully marry and take on the traditional role of mother, the very roles that Marion awkwardly adopts. Emmie's "rain" of emotion juxtaposes her sister's inability to access the water. Desire remains connected to water and to Fouqué's soulless nymph.

Fouqué's Undine remains close to the sea, guarded by her water-spirit Uncle, Kuhleborn, and may therefore remain connected to and communicate her desire. Fouqué's text begins with the knight whose marriage proposal to Undine transforms Undine into a soul-bearing mortal.

But Undine, in a state of high excitement, sprang up from her little stool and cried, placing herself directly before the fisherman: "He shall NOT tell his story, father? he shall not? But it is my will:—he shall!—stop him who may!"

Thus speaking, she stamped her little foot vehemently on the floor, but all with an air of such comic and good-humoured simplicity, that Huldbrand now found it quite as hard to withdraw his gaze from her wild emotion as he had before from her gentleness and beauty. (Fouqué 7)

The bursts of energy in Howard and Emmie's conversation highlight the banal entrance of Marion, who seems more confused than anything about Howard's visit. And, while as part of a feminist project, it would seem that Dunbar-Nelson would write Marion's interior position as a means of explicating her aloofness, readers stay in the mystery of Howard's optic. In Howard's eyes, "More than ever, in her curious detachment from her surroundings, did she remind him of a vessel set apart from the rest of mankind, awaiting mysterious voices from heaven" (8).

Next to Marion, Howard comes alive. Marion inspires Howard's passion and tempts him away from his businessman qualities. In her presence, "he talked recklessly, like a man whose brain is loosed from its everyday thrall of commonplace into a realm of fancy and poesy" (5). In a set of reversals, standing next to Marion, Howard takes on the characteristics of Fouqué's Undine—unrestrained and childlike. Unable to keep his language in check, Howard succumbs to Marion's effect upon him, and he "fancies" being in love with her. Gender on its head, Howard's attraction to Marion challenges the notions of masculine stoicism and rationale. Furthermore, Howard's "loosed" brain allows him no access to rational decision, perhaps making room for

forgiving his pressuring Marion against her will (at worst) and without her matched enthusiasm (at least) into marriage.

Marion inspires the poetry and emotion that she cannot access, as she has not the “poetic soul” that Howard assumes she shares with her fellow Southerners. She represents but does not embody the muse that inspires Howard to dance and ramble. Instead, Marion is the nymph that unearths his passionate and “cyclonic” nature—the Cyclops she cannot love but to whom she will agree to marry and whose presumed infidelity will result in her womb turning in on their unborn child. Like Polyphemus sings his case to Galatea, Howard makes a strong but problematic appeal for Marion’s hand in marriage: “I need you more than [your sister and mother] do; and they have had you all their lives. It is my turn now, and I am going to insist that my claim is recognized” (12). Howard asserts his propriety over Marion, much to Marion’s initial rebuff. Extending Polyphemus’ herd counting to justify his worth as a partner for Galatea, Howard insists that Marion already belongs to him. He counters Marion’s rejection by claiming that his “own love is so overpowering that it must compel a return” (Ibid.), sounding much like Polyphemus’s “burning...frenzy” for Galatea: “uror enim, laesusque exaestuat acrius ignis, / cumque suis videor translata viribus Aetnam” (“I am on fire and, wounded, overflowing, / and filled with Aetna’s strength,” ll. 867-68).¹³¹ Marion does accept Howard’s offer, marking his fervor as “cyclonic” and giving her no ample time for thought, but continues to withhold herself

¹³¹ Filled with a fiery passion, near to the point of eruption, Ovid’s Cyclops acts out of his own claim of Galatea by killing Acis after finding Galatea in Acis’s arms. This discussion of the Cyclops’ sense of ownership reminds me of classicist Justine McConnell’s discussion of the “totalitarian” Cyclops in Derrick Walcott’s *The Odyssey: A Stage Version*. McConnell treats carefully Walcott’s line “there is no I after eye” as a central Cyclopean society tenet (Walcott 60, McConnell 145). McConnell asserts that “When Walcott’s Cyclops banishes the ‘I,’ he simultaneously contravenes the Homeric Odysseus’s assertion that the Cyclopes are all about the individual and at the same time endorses Odysseus’s claim that they have no sense of community” (146). While I engage with the Ovidian Cyclops, I recognize parallels in both Howard and Polyphemus’ singular claims of Marion and Galatea. Howard separates Marion from her community, but in order to create a nuclear family of his own. Both Howard and Polyphemus wish to relocate their objects of desire into a space of their own material wealth and as a means of reinforcing the identities that are attached to that materiality.

from him, emotionally, as a continual passive protest against the ownership that Howard would claim.

Howard and Polyphemus share a state of blindness in the face of their beloveds. Howard's passion positions him as the hero of the story, yet his blindness—to Marion's disinterest in him, their relationship, and the world around them—retards his ability to see clearly Marion's unearthly existence. When the seer Telemus met Polyphemus, he predicted that Ulysses would steal the Cyclops's only eye. To Telemus, Polyphemus replied: "risit et 'o vatum stolidissime, falleris,' inquit, / 'altera iam rapuit.'..." ("Oh, you stupid seer' he responded / 'my eye is already taken [by Galatea]," ll. 774-75). Yet even though both Cyclopes share a lack of sight, Howard only temporarily embodies the story's villain. Although Marion believes that Howard is a villain and has cheated on her, the readers know that he has, instead, only befriended the young woman who tempted him, sexually. Howard retains his honor and becomes more heroic through his benevolence and charity—because he takes care of a poor girl and her family without crossing the boundaries of fidelity to his marriage. Howard, never actually violating the sanctity of his marriage, remains the male hero of the story although, for many months, remains Marion's villain as Marion believes in his affair. Furthermore, like Poseidon's passionate behavior incites Medusa's transformation, Howard's "loosed" behavior, the emotional life unavailable or rejected by Marion, converts Marion to a monster.

VI. Monstrous Motherhood: Black Feminine Creative Production

During her May 4th keynote address at the *Rethinking Prisons* conference at Vanderbilt University, Joy James addressed the history of trauma in the United States. Specifically, she stated that "to be traumatized here [the U.S.], is to be normal." She insisted that the bondage and

incarceration (and torture and murder) in the United States built a culture of normalized and inescapable trauma. For James, the body most often held as the example of this trauma, and more of the “monstrous” results of American trauma, is the black female body. She accused American culture of insisting upon and perpetuating that the black woman remains to blame for the monstrous, as the progenitor of the criminal and corrupting. In America, the black “monstrous womb” is the corporeal seat of American corruption. Her discussion of the black female body in American history and within the context of prison abolition discourse called to the fore the “blame” or origin of the slave body as localized within the black woman. In short, she talked along lines that reminded me not only of Spillers’s most often read, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” but also the works of Helene Cixous¹³² and Naomi Zack.¹³³ The intersections of sexuality, race, and criminalization culminate in the figure of the black feminine body. Not only does mainstream American cultural production locate black womanhood only within terms of sexualization and consumption, but also James reminds us that the black woman’s body is criminalized along with the children that it bears.

¹³² I think about the troubling ways that Cixous explored the word “black” and the subject positions therein in her *Stigmata* (2005, translated by Eric Prenowitz). Cixous links blackness and desire (or the inability to desire, but to also be in the place of the object of desire): “I received my first stigmata at the age of three exactly in the garden. Here is the scene... Crouching near the swings I watch [the other children] soar very high, I am below, they are blond I am black. There must be a key, a password, a code, a shibboleth. Until the day I hear these hard angels speaking amongst themselves of an object of desire” (XII). Additionally, of the many “black” references in *Stigmata*, this also conspicuously: “I was with a couple who had a big black dog, the dog began to lick me. I wanted to push it away, but they told me it didn’t bite at all: I let it happen. The enormous black creature wrapped itself around me, and licked me, my neck, my ears, gently, I let it do it. Under the creature’s tongue, I ‘thought’ without thought about my mother. I was in a trance, it was a question of burying her tomorrow...” (60).

¹³³ After locating the sexualization of race in slavery (and “breeding”), but before she writes that “The white racist construction of black male sexuality can... be read as a direct result of the monetary sexualization of black female race by white slave owners” (153) Zack argues in “The American Sexualization of Race” (1997) that: “The difference in the sexualization of black and white female reproduction persists to this day in common views of black and white maternity. White women with more than two or three children are viewed as nurturing, self-sacrificing, and perhaps asexual in motherly ways, as well as not very smart. But, holding social class constant, black women who have more than two or three children are popularly stereotyped as irresponsible, selfish, over-sexed, and scheming. Thus, for black women, but not for white women, maternity is read as proof of strong female sexuality. Motherhood is somehow able to spiritualize white women while at the same time it reveals what *whores* black women really are (as though prostitutes always took sexual pleasure in their work)” (151).

Specifically, James's argument targeted the history of the "monstrous" black womb, like the 2010 anti-abortion add campaign that asserted in Austin, Soho, Jacksonville, and St. Louis that "The most dangerous place for an African American is in the womb" (Gane-McCalla, Papa, Reynolds, Ossad, Kumeh, Missouri RTL). I suggest that Alice Dunbar-Nelson takes up this very notion, also in "A Modern Undine." Marion gives birth to a "deformed" baby, presumably one that betrays Marion's mermaid-ness:

She had known the child was maimed, but how much, how little, or in what way she had not dreamed. No one had told her; she had divined it and confirmed it by their silences at her bedside. She laid the child on her lap again and stroked his little deformed legs, moaning over him inarticulately, as an animal might moan over its wounded offspring.
(51-52)

The "maimed" baby is "divined" by Marion before she even sees it, perhaps before the baby's birth. Marion blames her husband for the baby's "deformity," because it was upon the news of Howard's infidelity that Marion falls and injures the child in utero. The baby's "little deformed legs," then are a result of the "maternal impression" of grief that Marion feels as a result of Howard's presumed betrayal. At the time that Dunbar-Nelson writes "A Modern Undine," C.J. Bayer's *Maternal Impressions* entered its second printing, arguing that "maternal impression [...] is the reproduction of the mother's mental condition while she is forming the brain and body of her offspring, with its effect upon the mental and physical character of her child" (9).¹³⁴

Through the lens of "maternal impressions," Marion causes her baby's deformity not only

¹³⁴ Bayer later further explains: "That a mother who is in the condition to which attention is called, who has an imperfectly formed object, such as a monstrosity of any kind in her mind, and dwells upon it, or has impure or vulgar thoughts, and mean or unholy ideas [...] will impress such a formation of the brain structure of her offspring, as will for its desires in the direction which her thoughts have taken" (13). "If it be conceded, and it must be: *First*—That mothers can, and they do, produce deformities. *Second*—That a mother can influence the desire of her child, for or against certain articles of food or dress. *Third*—That she can affect the nervous system of her offspring before its birth." (20)

through her Undine-ness, but because she succumbs to her anguish. This is the first moment in the text since Howard has proposed that Marion shows any significant emotional reaction, upon hearing that Howard visits Grace and her family without Marion's knowledge. The story initially suggests that Marion's aloofness inspires Howard's wandering eye. Thus, it seems Marion, despite her denials, creates the baby's body.

Marion is both creator and innocent witness in the creation of her baby's legs. Although the story does connect the baby's "deformity" to the fall that Marion experiences in her anguish, Marion, herself, denies fault in the result. Upon exposing the baby to Howard, who openly grieves "like a woman" at the physical state of his child, Marion accuses Howard: "[Y]ou should know. If you do not, let it be sufficient for you to know that it is your fault" (54). In the body of her child, Marion manifests her rebellion—a corruption of the gender norms that she is expected to uphold through "good motherhood." While it is Howard's perceived crime that instigates Marion's fall, it is Marion's body that turns against the baby, transforming it. Through Howard's crime, thus, Marion's body is transformed into a monstrous creature able to replicate itself.

Echoing the *vagina dentata* or monstrous womb of Ovid's Scylla, Marion's body twists the baby limbs and thereby betrays Marion's sea origins. As a manifestation of Marion's feelings of betrayal, the baby's body reveals Marion's identity and potential. As the "deformity" is located in the baby's legs, much in the same way that Glaucus describes his transformed legs to Scylla, the baby provides evidence of Marion's Undine/sea-origins. Marion's new found passion, her transformation in to "mother," mark her entry into a human, soulful, existence. The sea nymph, Marion, experiences an Ovidian transformation—resistance revealed as monstrous.

Just like the kiss that caused Marion to recoil into herself, Marion's body turns it's wounding by Howard's alleged infidelity upon her unborn son. As Circe transforms Scylla into a monster, Marion's shock and grief morphs her womb into a hostile environment for her son. Marion's fall results in their "cripple" son, the embodiment of failed romance, and the failure or impossibility of replicating any literary tradition in which the writer (mother) is not fully realized (has a soul). Monstrous motherhood results from what critic Christina Sharpe calls "*monstrous intimacies* [...] a set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted, that are breathed in like air and often unacknowledged to be monstrous" (3, italics mine). While the nurses attending to Marion and the newborn shield Marion from her baby for fear that Marion will see her child as a monster, the baby's deformity instead inspires in Marion the passion and ferocity previously unavailable to her. Her emotion finally unleashed, Marion demonstrates through motherhood a type of humanity finally legible to readers, Howard, and ostensibly Marion's greater community. Thus, it is through the birth of her son that Marion is finally anchored to a seemingly traditional gender role, but one that Dunbar-Nelson sees as the product of a "monstrous intimacy."

Marion's identity concretizes in the face of motherhood,¹³⁵ unlike her French predecessor who finds her soul through marriage to a mortal. Marion becomes human through her son's creation, birth, and then death. The baby, her misshapen extension and evidence of weaknesses in her marriage, reveal her flaws *as* her inevitable and undeniable humanity. When Marion's baby is born, the text takes a gothic turn. For weeks, Marion's nurses keep from her the truth Marion already knows about her son. Demanding to see him alone, Marion unwraps the baby

¹³⁵ Marion emerges not as just any kind of mother; she is the black mother of the inevitably "crippled" black child. While apart from descriptions of her "dusky" eyes and dark hair, Marion remains without racial monikers, I argue that the transformation of genre in the novella paired with the physicality of the baby's body points toward Marion as raced. At the turn of the plot, where Marion "discovers" that Howard is cheating on her, the novella turns from fairy and moral tale toward the gothic.

and sees the body that her attendants hide from her: “At the last garment that she tore off, she caught his little form up to her heart and rocked to and from in an agony, stifling the cry that would have been wrung from her lips at the tiny, bare, twisted limbs” (43). In the moment of revelation, Marion recognizes her own participation in her son’s formation. She “divined” his “twisted limbs” and “maimed” existence, the transformative power Galatea found when grieving for Acis. Marion’s choked cry is her addition to the silences confirming the child’s “deformity.” The baby’s exposed body highlights that Marion deciphers as well as responds outside of language: Medusa’s laugh, cry, or scream; the hiss of Medea; Galatea’s sighs.¹³⁶ The anguish that Marion feels at the sight of her baby is in excess of the scream her mouth attempts to emit. The baby not only mirrors the pain within her marriage, but the injury that Marion has always already faced—the gendered trappings and feminine affect that she rejects through her aloofness. In response to the baby’s malformed limbs, Marion sequesters herself allowing no one else to tend to him. Marion corporeally transforms as she cares for her son:

The grim look of her mouth was softening, and her eyes were less hard and gloomy over every day. She had given up her whole life completely to the care of her son. There was no moment, waking or sleeping, when her soul was not wrapped around his life, vibrating with every breath that he drew; trembling when he cried, pulsing with joy when he laughed. (55)

¹³⁶ In the 1998 edition of *Euripides Ten Plays*, the translator Paul Roche points to the passage (line 475): *esosā se esosā hos isasi hosoi*. Famous, apparently, for being the place where Euripides demonstrates the “venom” of Medea’s narration to Jason—she hisses (*os-se-os-os-is-si-os*) her counts of crimes against her family and help of him (as she points out all of sailors on Argon already know). As argued by Beth Seelig, it is Medusa’s mouth, her scream (according to Cixous it would be her laugh), and “os,” her mouth that transforms men into stone. In other words, it is her voice and her articulation against crimes against her, as a woman—her rape in the temple of Athena (so also a crime against Athena), Medusa is transformed into a monster as a means of punishing the men who would victimize her. So, then, if the translation sticks, it is also Medea’s mouth, her scream, and her outcry against her victimization that serves, in part, in her revenge. After Medea confronts Jason, and she counts the horrors against women through marriage contract, and particularly dowries and the possibility of being “sold” to a man who no one knows as good or bad (“First Episode”), “to buy some man/to be dictators of our bodies,” she raises her voice to justify her curse against Jason—as if in the name of vengeance for all of those women suffering at the hands of men.

Marion never seemed invested in the life that she “gives up” for the baby. Instead, the baby brings to Marion the life and purpose that she’d not found before. Her “soul” emerges and “wraps” around him, nurtured through Marion’s care of her son. The baby, and particularly because of the state of his body, teaches Marion about her own humanity and how to communicate her personhood through emotion.

Marion’s version of motherhood includes a strong identification with the “deformed” baby—she holds fast to her chest the physical manifestation of her injuries, transmitting the status of “vessel” on to her baby. When she finally speaks, Marion equates the baby to her life, “maimed and warped and imperfect, yet all I have” (52). The baby takes on the parts of Marion that she abandons through her human transformation. The baby is “quiet and solemn,” crying very little (78). Moreover, Marion’s humanity comes into complete fruition when the baby’s weak body loses its fight and dies. Having returned to New Orleans after Howard reveals the couple’s economic ruin, Marion discovers the unmoving and “unnaturally” silent body of her son. She immediately walks outside and faces the sea, laying her burden upon the water and steeling herself to face her newest pain. Upon returning to the bedroom where the baby lies, “Marion set her teeth hard; it was as if she strove with a tangible, personal shape for the possession of her child. She fought bitterly, angrily, and finally, prayerfully, all the mother animal in her keenly awake, and struggling in a primitive way for her mother-rights” (79). As a childless mother, Marion is never more primally human.

The antidote to Charlotte Gillman’s post-partum madwoman in the attic, and even Pauline Hopkins’s newly-black Hagar, Marion finds her humanity in fiercely loving and caring for the baby. The child’s birth and waning health unearths the tension between Marion and her husband, culminating in the final genre shift of the novel. No longer romance, the novella

climaxes when Marion and Howard confront their resentments and insecurities in their marriages. The fight scene between Marion and Howard refuses sentimentality and romantic mores, as the narrator has already foreshadowed this revelation in the scene where Marion reveals the baby's body.

VII. Conclusion: Transformed Genre: From Fairy-Tale to Realism

The various genres in *A Modern Undine* demonstrate Dunbar-Nelson's ability to write through multiple forms and argue for her creative authority and narrative control. The relationship between the heroine and hero of the novella, Marion and Howard, unfolds through the genres of fairy tale, naturalism, romance, the gothic, and stark domestic realism and reflects the instability of genre, nation-building mythology, and the newness of a United States redefining itself. Dunbar-Nelson's story reconsiders a nineteenth century Undine and fairy tale in progress: as the novella opens, the protagonists, Marion and Howard, gaze upon the sea on a moonless night.¹³⁷ "It was in the still quiet of a summer night that Marion met Howard" (1). Echoing the "once upon a time" beginning of any number of stories, this story starts when the characters are in the full bloom of their youths ("summer"). The "quiet" of the night hints at the passionless engagement that Marion will have with Howard, a symptom of the central frustration and tension that surrounds all of Marion's social interactions. Unlike the typical story of a

¹³⁷ A scene familiar to its readers of nineteenth-century romance and Victorian literatures, in another fiction this would be the meeting of lovers. The familiar place transformed into one of unfocused light and uninvited company makes it more difficult for Marion to identify her feelings. She does not know if she finds the sea beautiful. She is not sure she likes Howard's intervention. Like her French counterpart, Marion believes she prefers a moonlit night, and yet that moon is not available to her. Marion prefers focused light, perhaps as a beacon for her attention, her preference for feminine space of her immediate family (why Howard is a disturbance), or, in literary terms, a clear path for her story (in *Undine*, a white path is one of the manifestations of the white ghost). Thus, Marion is not the previously written Undine, but as Dunbar-Nelson warns in her title, the modern evolution of the character.

heroine seeking a complimentary and worthy hero, this plot unfolds despite Marion's resistance to the conventions of casual socializing, courtship, and marriage.

An intrigued businessman, Howard has followed the reluctant New Orleans socialite Marion into her private "sea garden" without her permission and somewhat to Marion's chagrin. As an escape from the party that provides the backdrop to the opening scene and as an extension of her aversion, generally, to "crowds," Marion seeks the seascape as an antidote to the throng of people and the man-made music.¹³⁸ Figuratively, the sea is her home; but literally, Marion lives with her mother and sister in a beachfront house in a New Orleans suburb. Thus, the new fairy tale has already begun: the sea nymph desires nature's rescue and instead finds herself before a man who sees himself as her savior. Howard, who works and finds success in the city, finds comfort in the throng of dancing bodies populating the party that Marion avoids. He appreciates music that drowns out "the night birds' call from the forest"—he slips Marion away from the sea, a reconfigured enchanted forest.¹³⁹ He is a man of industry and commerce, economically bound to human invention that exceeds the natural.

As a sharp contrast to the husband of the "lazy woman" in *Confessions*, Howard must work to support his family and relies, absolutely, on modern industrialization as a means of procuring economic independence. Marion, therefore, becomes a casualty of the industrial movement and migration, unable to reconcile her connection to the sea and to nature with her

¹³⁸ The opening of *A Modern Undine* prefigures *The Great Gatsby* in its opening and negotiation of the city versus suburban New York spaces.

¹³⁹ "The stars cast dim shadows on the ground, and the waves were aflame with phosphorous. It spread a sheet of silver to the horizon; it leapt in forked tongues from the dash of a wave against the breakwater; it crawled in sinister lines over the wet sand" (3). This beachfront scene already reconfigures the French *Undine* and the source of trouble for the young couple. Like Fouqué's story, Dunbar-Nelson presents to her readers an impossible coupling, prefigured through the invasion that Marion feels through Howard's presence in her private retreat. Furthermore, it is a singular white spectre, sometimes the moon, sometimes a stream, sometimes a man that haunts Fouqué's characters. Dunbar-Nelson writes a sea reflecting a light-filled canopy. Marion and Howard face infinite worries and impediments, while the French *Undine* worries only about her "Uncle" in the form of the Moon ruining her chances of mortality.

Northern suburban existence. Initially it appears as if Marion, the “modern” Undine, remains an antiquated character bound to fairy tale and naturalist genres, while Howard is the future—the urbanite working within the new business center supporting American Gilded Age.

As Dunbar-Nelson’s character, Marion, remains distant from the normative narratives of gender and class that circulate around her and influence her roles as daughter, sister, and wife, Dunbar-Nelson’s story suggests a distance between the conventions of romance attributed to “women’s writing” in the nineteenth century and the black women’s fiction tradition into which she writes. As the plot of *A Modern Undine* begins as a fairy tale romance and ends in stark realism, Marion transforms from aloof and seemingly “soulless” failing socialite to fierce and protective mother. While it would seem that by accepting her role as mother, Marion finally succumbs to the social mores she’s previously rejected, I suggest that this particular characterization betrays racial specificity that subverts the notion of Victorian motherhood.

Through Marion, Dunbar-Nelson gestures toward an abandoned American romance, and the birth of a seemingly deformed, if only because it is not easily identifiable, hybrid of pre-modernist fiction. The romantic conventions set up in the middle of the story become undermined by the novella’s end. Howard’s crime is not only the potential affair but that Marion’s life becomes a part of the town’s social fabric, a rupture to Howard and Marion’s domestic space. His frequent visitations to Grace Weaver’s house and his employing Grace’s brother thrusts the Howard family, and particularly Marion, into the realm of public spectacle. Marion’s most dramatic reaction to any event in the novella up to this point, she collapses upon hearing her neighbors gossip about her husband’s alleged affair, highlighting her inability to function socially.

And, while in the end of the story, Marion finds out that Howard has not actually had a sexual affair outside of their marriage, part of Marion's reaction is the public spectacle of the story. Unlike how she found out about Howard's affair, Marion tells Howard about the baby's deformity in the privacy of their home. "I could not be cruel enough to let it come out to you in the presence of others," she tells him in her anger and before revealing the tiny body to Howard. Marion's anger does not come simply because Howard had the affair, but the fact that Marion finds out about her husband's secret activities as word on the street. Giving rise to Marion's historical discomfort with social spaces outside of her home, such as the party she avoids in the very beginning of the novella and her failed attempts to join the Lawrenceville Woman's Club¹⁴⁰ run by the socialite Mrs. Jack Wilton (21), public exposure compounds Marion's injury due to Howard's infidelity.

Marion's fainting spell upon hearing the street gossip about Howard's infidelity, the incident that creates the gothic and tragic monster in the story, does not stand alone. In the last chapters, Marion returns to New York and runs into her husband who has, himself, fainted on the street. Dunbar-Nelson explains that Howard "swoons" as a result of the stress of "tramping around" and looking for work—to recapture the economic status and reconstruct his family unit.¹⁴¹ Having already lost the baby, Marion focuses her newfound desire to nurture into Howard. Saving Howard from his own fainting spell, Marion and a local policeman loaded Howard into a carriage where Marion "folded her long empty arms about the still form and breathed a prayer of thankfulness that she had him again, with the eyes of her soul awake and

¹⁴⁰ Not to belabor the argument about Marion's race, but the Women's Club scene also provides clues as to the class and racial contexts of the novella. While certainly white literary and social clubs existed for women, Dunbar-Nelson was deeply entrenched in the black Women's Club movement of the late nineteenth century.

¹⁴¹ Dunbar-Nelson comments, here, about the promotion of the disease "neurasthenia" by George Miller Beard in *A Practical Treatise on Nervous Exhaustion (Neuroasthenia): Its Symptoms, Nature, Sequences, Treatment* (1880). According to Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, "Beard interpreted neurasthenia, which literally means nerve weakness, as a disorder of modernity, caused by the fast pace of human life. Additionally, he presented it as a truly American disease, the inevitable, yet quite acceptable by-product of American civilisation [sic]" (15)

wide and seeing” (85). Re-marking Marion’s transformation as complete, she returns to reinstate Howard to his place as her husband, rather than waiting for him to collect her from her mother’s house in New Orleans. Marion brings her humanity to her marriage—she must be complete, first, to fulfill the role of “good wife.” But, even when Marion shows up to fulfill her role, she reinforces her newfound groundedness. Upon waking from his faint, Howard looks into Marion’s eyes: ““Am I dreaming, Marion?” he whispered fearfully.... ‘No, you are not dreaming, dear,’ she smiled back at him, ‘though it seems so to me, too’” (85). Howard exchanges places with Marion, if only for a moment, caught in a liminal and otherworldly space. Marion brings to Howard the very assurances that he never could extend to her, and catalyzes the novella’s hopeful end.

The story turns from a romance to a realist fiction when Howard reveals his financial ruin to Marion. The last encounter that Howard has with the still semi-alooof Marion, the scene unfolds as Marion catches Howard packing his bags and running away from their home. Only because Marion encounters him mid-escape, Howard admits that his business dealings expose him to complete financial ruin and possible legal prosecution. Fearing his arrest, Howard packs his things and prepares to abandon Marion and their sick son. Marion, “[f]or an instant... felt again strangely alooof from the whole scene, apart and out of the disaster which threatened her whole life, but only for an instant” (72). In this moment, the narrator associates Marion’s alooofness with a sense of trauma. Thus, throughout *A Modern Undine*, Marion battles against her “alooof” tendencies as a means of reconciling a series of pre-existing traumas that compound through the tragedy of her story. However, as she heals from these traumas, she learns to reengage with her feelings, no matter how painful.

As the “modern mulatta,” Marion seems destined to the tragic ending of her literary predecessors. Marion walks wounded on land, longing for the sea and alternative ending for her story. While even Hull’s introduction of Schomburg’s *The Works of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* asserts that Dunbar-Nelson wrote mostly white characters, Marion’s preexisting wounds suggest, along with her description, her blackness. When courting, Howard flatters Marion’s speech and beauty: “I suppose you heard the usual gush about your soft, Southern speech and gentle Southern manners and dusky eyes and raven hair, and all that sort of thing?” Dunbar-Nelson offers no definitive racial descriptors of the characters in *A Modern Undine*, however Marion’s “dusky eyes and raven hair” echo the many descriptions of “tragic mulattas” within nineteenth century literature.¹⁴² Ultimately, it is not important whether Marion is or is not a black character, as she is the product of an author deeply entrenched in the uplift movement at the turn of the century. Yet, it seems easy to imagine that Dunbar-Nelson, who was reportedly both classist and “color struck,” would write black (or “tainted”) characters of an elite class. Howard, a successful “business man” who works in “the city,” seems for Marion the perfect match. Within the lens of this revision to “mulatta” romance,¹⁴³ Dunbar-Nelson constructs a multi-racial heroine who saves herself and her husband from a variety of tragedies.

While Howard runs from the ruin that his wife will still face, Marion returns to the comfort and strength of her maternal home. Emmie and Marion’s mother support Marion and the baby and offer a space for gendered criticism of the situation. In Emmie’s words: “If [Howard] had been a woman, of course, he would have had to stay and face the situation, but fortunately,

¹⁴² Marion is also described as having white skin. While getting fitted for her wedding dress, “she... sat, resting a moment, with her bare white neck and shoulders exposed” (16). Dunbar-Nelson exposes Marion’s “whiteness” in a extremely private moment for Marion, unclothed and contemplating the marriage she’s agreed to. At other points in the text, she is likened to a “white lily.” I maintain that these descriptors do not interfere with my reading of Marion as, if not black, at least racially ambiguous. Also note that Galatea’s name translates to “milky white/sea foam” (Sinkman 4).

¹⁴³ See the Introduction’s discussions of “mulatta” fiction and convention.

the world does not expect such things of men, they are always allowed the alternative of retirement or suicide” (78). The first moment of stark criticism, Emmie speech marks the change in genre as well as characterization. The text blatantly reveals itself as invested in a project of gender analysis that is realized through the subverted gendered positions that Marion and Howard occupy when they reunite in New York.

In the final scene, Marion and Howard contemplate their future as a couple in light of the shift of identities that each experiences. Howard’s ruin paired with the three-month separation from Marion dissolves his attachment to economic prosperity as a requisite for a successful marriage. In this final moment of domesticity and partnership, Howard and Marion discuss, together, the potential for their marriage. Howard remarks that they “shall have to begin life anew,” and therefore renegotiate their relationship within the framework of “poverty and struggles” (86). Marion, instead of acquiescing to Howard’s assessment, assures him that their new life will necessarily be happier than their old because they “know and understand now” (Ibid.). The last shred of a romantic resolution, Marion reveals that the couple’s economic difficulties will resolve because of her inheritance. However, she maintains that “even if it were not, even if we began at the lowest round of the ladder, I should be a happy woman because we have *found each other’s true selves*, and nothing matters much now” (Ibid., my italics). Marion notes the new egalitarian partnership between them, emerging through a mutual shift in identity. Equality emerges when the couple relinquishes the confines of heteronormative gender performances. Howard finally abandons the masculine gender expectation of breadwinner and Marion is no longer bound to a particularly feminine demonstration of emotion.

Marion and Howard’s mutual evolution parallels the shift in genre throughout *A Modern Undine*, and substantiates my argument that Dunbar-Nelson’s novella employs the conventions

of “modern” Black New Women. These shifts in genre suggest shifts in black women’s fiction from the American romance into less easily defined genres. The genre moves provide a literary map of the romantic tradition that Dunbar-Nelson wrote through, modernized, and made her own. Dunbar-Nelson wrote *A Modern Undine* as a composite of myths that betray the complexities of Dunbar-Nelson’s own literary tradition not yet fifty years old. Like other Black New Women writers of the late nineteenth century, Dunbar-Nelson used classical allusions and a mix of genres to ostensibly ground her work in the foundations of the Western canon. However, instead of reifying the narrative of a concrete Western literary tradition, her multi-genre form destabilizes the characters’ racial and gender subject positions and argues for her own unstable position as writer and intellectual.

CODA

Part of the Whole: Fragment Theories and the Black New Woman Archive

I. Venus de Milo

The Venus of Milo

O peerless marble marvel! what of grace,
Or matchless symmetry is not enshrined
In thy rare contours! Could we hope to find
The regal dignity of that fair face
In aught less beautiful? We would retrace,
At sight of thee, or willing steps where wind
The paths great Homer trod. Within whose mind
Was thou a dream, O Goddess? Nearer pace
Brave Hector, reckless Paris, as we gaze;
Then stately temples, fluted colonnades
Rise in their sculptured beauty. Yes! 'tis Greece,
With all the splendor of her lordliest days,
That comes to haunt us: ere the glory fades
Let Fancy bid the rapture never cease.

-H. Cordelia Ray, from *Poems* (1910)

Between the barren sea of total oblivion and the relative safety of cultural terra firma, the fragmentary author has been washed ashore onto an unstable margin of shifting sands and variable tides, where he must hope that the glittering shards to which he has been reduced will attract the attention not only of nest-building birds and of infantile vandals but also of well-meaning, aesthetically minded beachcombers. If he cannot be resuscitated as a whole, maybe he can still hope to be admired as a fragment. Perhaps, after all, he is not so different from the rest of us.

-Glen W. Most, "On Fragments"

Narrative is fragmentary. It begins *in medias res*, within a frame of pre-existing histories, conditions, or fictions. Writers, for instance, choose into which moments of the longer record, they enter their creative production. Sometimes, these narratives come in the forms of fiction; sometimes, they are perspectives of known and unknown histories (non-fiction). Often, they are combinations of fiction and non-fiction. But, consciously or unconsciously, writers make a series

of decisions to locate their work into particular places and spaces that are larger and span distances much further than the confines of any one narrative or set of narratives. Our jobs as readers (and also as writers) then become to look at the segments as a means of understanding the mechanisms within the frames, and the frames as a conceptual whole—we are tasked with exploring and analyzing the factors that shift, influence, and control the very narrative production that we read.

H. Cordelia Ray's "The Venus of Milo" demonstrates the practice of reading and writing the narrative, fragment form. Ray's narrator looks upon the statue of Venus, appreciating the marble contours and the figure as an art object. The sculpture, "peerless" in its beauty and form, inspires the narrator to scrutinize the very origins of Venus, herself. The narrator imagines that the "symmetry" of the statue's contours and the beauty of the etched face provide a map into the history of the goddess and the writers who crafted the narratives of that history. With the narrator, we trace Homer's footsteps and peer into his dreams, finding in the Venus de Milo a window that Homer's own words may not provide. Even more, the narrator sees Greece, itself—not just a representative of a time of when marble columns were hand sculpted. Together, we are transported out of place, from wherever the narrator stands and views the statue and from where we read, and also out of time, back into history.

The narrator does not mark the missing pieces of the statue; there is no accounting of what is lost. The groove somehow accidentally or organically etched into Venus's chin, does not interrupt the "regal dignity of that fair face." The conspicuously absent arms of the statue do not disrupt the symmetrical lines, the landscape that the narrator traces back to Ancient Greece. That the Venus de Milo exists before the narrator, but in a different form than it was originally created, does not suspend the narrator's experience of time travel and fantastic vision. Instead, the

journey into the past happens at least in spite of Venus's missing arms and the tiny details that wore and crumbled the figure through time. "We," the narrator and readers together, go on this adventure to Ancient Greece, perhaps, *because* of the missing parts and the history that absence implies.¹⁴⁴ "We gaze" and become haunted by the statue's full history—our collective presence (narrator/audience/sculpture) creating a new narrative and unique sense of the whole.

The statue inspiring Ray's poem is a fragment—albeit a large fragment. The body of Venus that stands before the narrator functions as a "remaining whole" piece of art. In "On Fragments," classicist Glenn W. Most reminds readers that "fragment" in Ancient Rome and Greece applied not to narrative, but instead solely to physical objects: "the Latin term *fragmentum* and the corresponding Greek word *apospasmata*, *spasmata*, *klasmata*, and *apoklasmata* refer to bits and pieces of things like food or textiles and are never used for texts (interestingly, the Greek and Latin verbs from which these terms derive all emphasize the violence that produced the fragments)..." (10). Therefore, in ancient terms, the broken parchments upon which Sappho's verses exist are fragments of parchment; however, the remaining verses, interrupted by eroded pieces of parchment, are portions of text. There is an inherent violence in the fractured parchment; however, this does not stop Sappho scholars from reading and interpreting any number of love poems written in Sappho's hand. The violence does not dismiss the love Sappho has for her daughter Kleis, for instance.

¹⁴⁴ Additionally, through the use of "we," Ray collapses the space between herself as writer, her reading audience, the Venus statue, and Ancient Greece. In effect, the poem particularly situates Ray and her work inside of the world of Ancient Greece, and therefore deliberately into the classical canon. Moreover, and within the scope of Ray's reading audience (which I discuss later in the Coda), Ray also places in this line her middle-class black readership. The work of critic Ifeoma K. Nwankwo informs my reading, here. In her article, "Insider and Outsider, Black and America: Rethinking Zora Neale Hurston's Caribbean Ethnography," Nwankwo considers Hurston's use of "we" as a purposeful community (insider) delineation: "It is significant that Hurston engages in this type of community/self identification in the introduction, because doing so actually positions her as part of a centered, black "us" and her white readers as members of an objectified, passive "them." As she instantiates the text, she indicates her refusal to downplay her blackness and her connections to the communities she is studying. She repeats "we" and "our" several times, making her identification unmistakable" (53).

Most goes on to argue that the change in usage of the word “fragment,” the application of it not just to physical and countable objects, but also to pieces of text and ideas, reflects a Platonic linguistic intervention. As Most says:

For what helps to ground this usage [“fragment” as a metaphor applied to text] is the Platonic notion of the complete well-made text as being like a body, in particular a living human or animal body, all of the parts of which are subordinated to the organic unity of the whole and receive their meaning from their contribution to its total functionality.... Only if the text as a whole is thought of as a body can its dissociated parts be conceived not simply as segments or portions but fragments... (11)

In Most’s terms, Ray maps a philosophically Platonic journey: beginning with the statue of Venus’s body and traveling through Homer’s dreams to Ancient Greece. The human form of the statue, the replica of a once live body or the composite representation of any number of once living bodies, obtains its meaning for the narrator through Homer’s stories and the history of ancient worship of the goddess. The collective narrative articulated through Ray’s poem exceeds the boundaries of the sculpture and extends meaning to an “unceasing” limit. The infinite manifests in the narrator’s experience of “rapture” (Latin: *rapiēmur* from *rapio*). The narrator is taken over and carried away by the breadth of meaning in the Venus de Milo, a boundarylessness that she hopes to repeat.

By the end of “The Venus of Milo,” the audience accompanies the narrator on trip where sensuality, sexuality, history, and imagination converge. As Ovid’s Pygmalion carves his ideal woman with such skill that he fools himself while he touches the statue, unable to distinguish between skin and marble (“saepe manus operi temptantes admovet, an sit / corpus an illud ebur, nec adhuc ebur esse fatetur” ll. 254-55), Ray’s narrator experiences through a carved body any number of satisfactions. Pygmalion’s statue, without the life that Venus will breathe into it, is

merely a *simulacrum* of a woman—one that he caresses, dresses, and kisses (ll. 256-69). It is only after Venus animates the statue that Pygmalion has a human tactile and emotional experience: the statue's flesh first yields to Pygmalion's touch, and then he recognizes that she is looking back at him ("temptatum mollescit ebur positoque rigore /subsidit digitis ceditque...., ll. 283-84). His hands sink into flesh that is like a writing surface of sun-softened "Hymettian wax," and as Lynn Enterline tells us: "In a poem that habitually renders its interest in the "forms" and the "figures" of its own language as erotic stories, it is no accident that this simile for the ivory maiden's animation refers to an actual tool for writing in the Roman world" (7). Both Ovid's and Ray's Venuses bring to life the inanimate, or in the case of history, the deanimated—through each Venus the writer communicates and experiences emotion and passion. Those passions emerge through the creative process, when the material comes into relief against imagination.

II. Archive, Fragments, and Future

On one particular July afternoon, I sat with H. Cordelia Ray's volume, *Poems*, cradled on the book support system in front of me. On the large library table in the middle of the Schomburg Center's Rare Books Division, *Poems* sat in the center of black foam cushions with edges as thick as six inches. The foam cradle created an almost absurd frame that dwarfed the faded cover and yellowed pages, making the volume seem even more fragile and aged than its 103 years. I was surprised to find the volume so small, with evidence of gilded pages and gold leaf on the leather binding. I realized that her volume was intended to be a gift book¹⁴⁵ for Ray's

¹⁴⁵ Simon Eliot in "Books and their readers—part 1" from *The Nineteenth Century Novels: Identity* (2013) describes the gift book as: "received as a present, mostly by young women; it was something that was to be looked at and touched—reading it seemed almost secondary.... Books have always been used as symbols of wealth, power or sanctity, and such values were often best conveyed by appearance rather than substance. In this sense, the gift book of the first part of the nineteenth century was carrying on a long tradition, albeit in a more popular form. Such books

readers—and that, based on the American gift book market, the binding, fonts used, and the overall size, those readers were upper-middle-class women. I can now safely view Ray’s publication within the tradition of the gift book, the keepsake-publishing trend begun in England in the early nineteenth century and also made popular in America. This becomes important to my project because it situates Ray’s work in the popular sphere. In short, *Poems* was published for “proper” and formally educated ladies of the new twentieth century. A carryover from the Victorian tradition of both educational and feminine convention, Ray’s gift book would have been widely distributed. Her work was likely bought by women to give as gifts to other women, thereby also creating or circulating within communities of readers.

Unlike the earliest versions of gift books, *Poems* included in its adornment a type of simplicity that suggests practical rather than only ornamental use. Ray’s *Poems* might serve to communicate sentiment between lovers, through the “Chansons D’ Armour” grouping, or to brush up on the “Champions of Freedom” promoted by Ray and members of the turn-of-the-century Race Movement. Because I focus on the classical form and content in Ray’s poetry, this glimpse into the book history of *Poems* suggests that her style of writing was marketable to a burgeoning black middle class and perhaps crossed racial boundaries. It is also further evidence concerning the formal classical education practiced by black Americans at the turn of the century. Indeed black people were reading and writing in the classical tradition, along with their neoclassical white American counterparts. *Poems* provides evidence to this end and suggests a expressly feminine readership of classically-influenced work by black women authors.

I looked at this beautiful and small book on these huge cushions, happy to be in front of it, to touch it and adore it in ways that some time, one hundred years ago, another woman might

may have been relatively expensive, but their bindings, if lush, were... keepsakes.... The gift book was a commonplace luxury” (177).

have. But, I also thought of how lonely the projects of this volume seemed without additional, directly related archival items to accompany it. Witnessing this volume in this way answered many questions I had about Rays' reading audience and the literary project known as *Poems*; it also cleaved open a space and gave way to a host of questions and desire for knowledge about Ray's other, less known work and the details of her biography. Where were Ray's letters, like those from Alice Dunbar-Nelson to her famous husband Paul Lawrence Dunbar held at the University of Delaware? Where was a hand-written manuscript from her earlier work, a parallel to Fisk University's gem, "Peculiar Sam; Or, the Underground Railroad," the play written by Pauline Hopkins during her youth? I thought about this tiny book, meant as a present and joy passed from woman to woman, and the journey that it perhaps took from the status of a precious object into a place of relative obscurity, all before the collection buyer at the Schomburg recognized its value and welcomed it into the archive. Sitting in the arguably most famous archive of black intellectual history in the US, I realized that this fragment was and wasn't enough.¹⁴⁶

In the Summer of 2013, I traveled to New York City to conduct dissertation research in the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division. Located in Harlem, the Schomburg Center serves as both a cultural and academic archive for New World African Diasporic materials, and more. As a scholar of African American letters, the trip to the Schomburg, the "Mecca" of my field, served as an important credential in my career. More specifically to my project, motivations, and to the careers, works, and archives

¹⁴⁶ I do believe that the archival book-object is precious. To this end, I think of Most who also said: "Curiosity, and even a kind of piety, urge that we gather such relics; but so too does a deeper, more mysterious urge, one that makes us want to render less incomplete the many imperfections of our own experience and to redeem to some degree the dominion that chance and disappointment have over our own lives. Perhaps, if we can succeed in rescuing the broken fragments of some long-dead Greek philosopher or sculptor, then might no the shattered hopes of our own existence somehow be restored?" (18)

of Black New Women writers, the Schomburg provided me with some of the core publications I analyze in “Niobe Repeating,” and the political and professional contexts in which the authors wrote.

I spent the two weeks reading, thumbing through, and taking pictures of no fewer than eight of their archival collections. I began by seeing any and all of the rare books and first editions by the authors in my study. The Schomburg offered me two volumes by Pauline Hopkins, and one each by Frances Watkins Harper, H. Cordelia Ray, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. I received different information from my time in the Schomburg than I had in the previous weeks at U Delaware, particularly while examining Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s first book of short stories, *Violets and Other Tales*. The volume, which I’d never seen in person before, had Dunbar-Nelson’s sister’s name and address written in the front cover. So, already, I was excited to see her sister’s personal copy of the volume. (It is this kind of “discovery” in an archive that makes the process feel like treasure hunting.) But more, this particular copy of *Violets* opened up a larger question concerning the variety of factors determining this break in Dunbar-Nelson’s archive. The University of Delaware, where I spent nearly a month during that summer, houses the balance of Dunbar-Nelson’s papers. The U Delaware archive came directly from Dunbar-Nelson’s niece, the daughter of Leila Young, the very sister whose volume of *Violets* sat in the Schomburg. I am now in communication with both Steven Fullwood, the Assistant Curator of the Schomburg Manuscripts and Rare Books Division, and Timothy Murray, the Head of Special Collections at the University of Delaware and person responsible for cataloging the Dunbar-Nelson Papers. The three of us tried to surmise how Young’s copy of *Violets* was separated from the rest of the archive; however, we could not arrive at a definitive conclusion.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ I will pursue this with more fervor as I prepare my digital archive project, which I will discuss in greater detail toward the end of this Coda.

These conversations did reveal how the Delaware archive was purchased,¹⁴⁸ but the Schomburg's curating practices remain a mystery. I hope to understand the movement of these materials as a means of acknowledging the ways in which my central authors' works have or have not been preserved. Along with the politics of their contemporary moments, my project examines the histories of their works. At present, only Dunbar-Nelson has a large and comprehensive archive. The other authors' extant materials are scattered throughout the country. At the very least, this juxtaposition exists because Dunbar-Nelson's niece, Pauline A. Young, was a librarian and therefore understood the importance of archiving her aunt's materials. As I read through Dunbar-Nelson's papers, I reflected upon the culture of a family who would produce both a prolific writer and a librarian, in two generations. This culture would likely cultivate values around the reading, creative production, and letter writing that may have produced more archival material and means of preserving paper records. Within this scope, I began to see the deliberateness of Dunbar-Nelson's record keeping. Her lesson plans, for instance, allowed me to see into her rhetorical instruction and the connections she made through her curriculum between Roman and African American orators.

The lack of central archival spaces for the other authors in my study parallels the ways that their works were lost or forgotten through much of the twentieth century. Each of these authors was widely published in her contemporary moment, and therefore her initial popularity does not explain the loss African American letters faced since the early twentieth century. I hope that the information gained from the Schomburg-Delaware conversation and comparison will

¹⁴⁸ Murray was at U Delaware when the library decided to purchase the collection. He told me that he visited Pauline A. Young at her home in Wilmington to review the collection before it was processed. He recalled Young's garage, stacked high with Dunbar-Nelson's papers as well as the records from the first NAACP chapter in Delaware. The university purchased only Dunbar-Nelson's papers, and Murray processed the entire collection. It was during this time, also, that Gloria T. Hull was in the English faculty at the university and began her in-depth study of Dunbar-Nelson's work and life.

eventually shed light on the political or other reasons that lead to the holes within the archive. Moreover, I expect that this information will also help scholars understand the history of under-reading and studying literature at the center of my study.

III. The Twenty-First Century Archive (Project)

In a way that enables me to identify with Pauline Hopkins's protagonist, Reuel, as he accidentally discovers a history in which he can be very proud, I somehow tripped into this project.¹⁴⁹ I started my graduate studies by studying twentieth-century literary references to witches and conjure women, a convention that I soon understood had earlier roots—so, I guess I was always leaning toward nineteenth-century issues. Still, when I began to see the world of black classicism more concretely, through my work on Gayl Jones's *The Healing*, I didn't realize that I would walk into a collection of deliberate interventions into literary canon formation, and the socio-economic and gendered parameters governing intellectual authenticity. I followed the contours of the idea and the archive yielded a series of black women's rewritings of Ovid.

I also didn't understand that so much of the most vital information for projects like mine would be difficult to source. I ventured into the realm of nineteenth-century women writers because some of my favorite texts and authors have long seemed under-read and -studied. Black feminist writers did a wonderful job of introducing the academic world to many of these lost authors; and yet, only a select number of scholars continued the lines of inquiry. In a time of mounting pressures to find "new" things to study and discuss, particularly the pressures that junior scholars face around originality and innovation, we are also plagued with notions of exhausted discourse—that because previously explored texts have been discussed (at all), we

¹⁴⁹ Moreover, I will admit that I, and many of those who have participated in the PhD process, might share feelings that dissertation writing is its own sort of catabasis.

have “finished” with them. This is particularly applicable to literatures, methodologies, and theories that engage socio-political issues with unresolved conditions of inequity. “Niobe Repeating” calls for a return—a reexamination of the places of conversation left dangling and frayed. My study challenges scholars to consider all areas of black and feminist studies inexhaustible, and to expressly concentrate upon the largely unexplored realm of early black classicalism. In a moment where violence against black people is mounting, largely in reaction to the election of the first black president in America and the stress of an unstable economic environment, “Niobe Repeating” turns to the voices of women who also faced similar societal pressures.

To that end, the next step in the process of archival work for me will be the gathering and mapping of archival fragments via digital means. I will, with the help of librarians Deborah Lilton and Jennifer Schnabel, begin a nineteenth-century black women writers digital mapping project. Beginning with the classicist writers in “Niobe Repeating,” I hope to create a living archive. While not open-sourced, the archive will remain always open to updating. As scholars cast their nets into the area of black classicist women writers, notably Black New Women, we may, collectively, create a virtual web of archive sources assisting those academic projects. I view this as a rewriting/weaving Arachne’s tapestry—while not a reparative for the crimes against these women writers, a way to combine our efforts and tap into the collective potential.

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