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THE FOREMOTHER FIGURE IN EARLY BLACK WOMEN'S LITERATURE

Clothed in my Right Mind

Jacqueline K. Bryant

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To My Mother, Mrs. Alberta B. Peterson
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Preface

Readers assume that the stereotypical mammy figure exists indiscriminately in nineteenth-century American literature; however, the older black woman portrayed in early black women's works differs substantially from the older black woman portrayed in early white women's works. The foremother figure, then, emerging in early black women's fiction revises the stereotypical mammy in early white women's fiction. In the context of the mulatta heroine the foremother produces minimal language that, through an Afrocentric rhetoric, distinguishes her from the stereotypical mammy and thus links her peripheral role and unusual behavior to cultural continuity and racial uplift.

Chapter 1 of this study provides background information on the mammy stereotype in southern white culture. Using close reading with a Womanist perspective, the following chapters examine speech situations in a series of works by white and black female authors. Chapter 2 shows how the mammy helps to define the ideal white female in response to a patriarchal ideology in six works by early white women writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Carolyn Hentz, and Kate Chopin. Chapters 3 through 5 examine how the foremother figure helps to define the mulatta heroine in response to a racial uplift ideology. Chapter 3 differentiates the foremother from a strong mother figure in Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative, while Chapter 4 reveals the complexity and range of the foremother-mulatta relationship in three of Frances Harper's novels. In Chapter 5 two minor works by Pauline Hopkins illuminate the foremother-mulatta relationship in the motifs of passing and disguise. Similarly in Chapter 6 Jessie Redmon Fauset's four novels reveal the foremother-mulatta relationship in the context of

passing. Chapter 7 concludes this study with an examination of three novels by later black women writers: Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, and Gloria Naylor, and confirms the consistency of the positioning of the foremother and mulatta whether the relationship is liminal as in the early works of Hopkins or foregrounded as in the recent work of Naylor.

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The Foremother Figure in Early Black Women's Literature

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Stereotypical images of the black female exist in writings of white and black writers who published from slavery through the Harlem Renaissance and beyond. Black female images emerge as Aunt Jemima, Sapphire, Jezebel or wench, and mammy. Aunt Jemima is the cook who is dark in complexion, obese in size, and jovial in nature. Sapphire is headstrong and always emerges with the presence of the black male. She emasculates the black male with verbal put-downs. Her color is generally brown to dark brown. Jezebel is the bad, black girl who is generally the mulatta. She possesses white features and is portrayed with hypersexual behavioral characteristics. White men use her as the excuse for their sexual interactions (Jewell 1993, 46). The Jezebel/wench/mulatta is victimized when the white male blames her for promiscuous behavior consistent with the role which he himself has conceived, and when the white mistress perceives the casting of hypersexuality as a mockery of her own socially imposed purity (Gwin 1985b, 45). These images, which are believed to have evolved during slavery, portray African American women as the antithesis of the American conception of beauty, femininity, and womanhood (Jewell 1993, 36). Of these stereotypical images, the mammy, which emanated from the plantation, is considered to be the most persistent and enduring historically.

Because the plantation embodied the hierarchical structures of southern paternalism (Faust 1996, 32), it served as the primary site of social and political organization. Powerful white males occupied positions that controlled societal institutions and thus influenced societal ideas. White males, then, held the power to construct images. Many consider image construction humorous and a thing of the past,

while others view its perpetuation as representative of larger problems in the society. Recognizing the significant impact that image construction must have had over time in this society has led to my probe into the literature of early black women writers in order to determine their role in combatting such action. In her essay entitled "Images of Black Women in Afro-American Literature: From Stereotype to Character" Barbara Christian (1985, 16) sees the construction of stereotypical images as inhumane action—essentially an act of racism reducing humans to a non-human level. She describes the early literary depiction of the mammy stereotype as a clay-like, silent figure and explains how, over time, this figure evolves into a character which represents a thinking and feeling being. To add to Christian's work, I will look at the effect of the language use of the older black woman in speech situations with the mulatta heroine or someone linked to the heroine in order to identify features of this language that propel the heroine toward action or change that ultimately affects individual, family, and/or community life.

SOCIO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON BLACK FEMALE STEREOTYPES

In considering why the figure of the older black woman has moved from one form to another, it is helpful to view the socio-historical context which gave birth to stereotypes of black people and most importantly stereotypes of the black female. During the 1500s, when Europeans first established contact with blacks, they knew little about African cultures. Explorers and traders returned to their mother countries with fantastic stories that were based upon fear of the unknown and resulted in the creation of stereotypical figures. The majority of white men and women, never having had contact with Africans in their own habitat, relied on the observations of a few. These observations generally focussed on those physical characteristics and behaviors most unlike the Europeans, such as skin color, facial features, body type, and facets of the African lifestyle (Geist and Nelson 1992, 263-64). Before the eighteenth century, whites recognized blacks as different—as the other. They stressed the obvious contrasts in color, religion, and lifestyle, which included such negative descriptors as animality and sexual potency. Gradually, difference and stereotype became reasons to devalue and to create patterns of discrimination. During the mid-eighteenth century, black people, slavery, and

subservience were synonymous if not in practice then certainly in the minds of members of the dominant culture (Foster 1993, 10).

The institution of slavery provided a legal basis for the establishment of specific hierarchical levels of domination and control. The patriarchal plantation fulfilled its role under this hierarchical system of governance, and one way in which its role is evident is in the construction of images. Powerful white men constructed the mammy image, and the patriarchal myth demanded it, but the question is why? According to Christian, nineteenth-century planters rationalized the patriarchal system by relying on scientific "proofs" that cast doubt on the humanness of the slave, and by perceiving themselves to be the patriarchs who existed in the Bible. The patriarchal system demanded obedience from wives, children, and slaves. The white female, above all the white wife, was a symbol of the white male's success; therefore, she could not work (1980, 8-10). Prenshaw discusses how writer George Fitzhugh in his 1854 book, *Sociology for the South*, describes southern white women in terms of their dependency. Any assertion of "independence" from white females, slaves, or children threatened the whole patriarchal system (1993, 77). Thus, if the image of the delicate white lady was to retain some semblance of truth, it would be necessary to create the image of another female based upon exaggerated reality and perceived needs and wants. The other female would be tough and could perform the duties of motherhood for the mistress and herself. As white women were pivotal to the preservation of white civilization through motherhood, black women were central to the continuation of the system of slavery and patriarchy through motherhood as an essential part of the American economy (Christian 1980, 7).

The southern planters' patriarchal myth is seemingly reinforced not only by the mammy's physical features and the tasks she performed, but by her natural cultural tendencies toward maternity. Black women held high regard for motherhood and maternal duties. This regard was maintained whether she was raped (infanticide and abortion were exceptional) or whether her state of motherhood was the result of consensual sexual relations. These views concerning motherhood held by most black women must have reinforced the southern planter's assumption that black women were innately suited for the role of mammies (Christian 1980, 11). In part, then, the existence of two different systems of values and beliefs provided a firm foundation for the maintenance of the stereotypical mammy. As Christian points out, however, a contradiction exists in a society which assigns the revered

state of motherhood to a mammy, who is supposedly lower than animal (1980, 11).

Contradictions in the system and exaggerated contrasts between the ideal white female and the stereotypical mammy make one the correlate of the other. Christian argues that there could be no ideal white female in the imagination of a white patriarchal society without the black stereotypical mammy (1980, 12). Hazel Carby comes to a similar conclusion when she draws on Barbara Welter's attributes of "true [white] womanhood," which she describes as piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Carby explains that white women judged themselves by these parameters just as the white male and society judged them (1987, 23). The image of the ideal white lady was essential for the patriarchal societal dream, but it could not have been imagined, created, or perpetuated without the correlate of the stereotypical mammy, who was not really defined as woman at all, according to Carby. The image of the lady and its correlate, the mammy, were essential components of the South's public dream and thus its literature (Christian 1980, 11). The work of white woman writer Caroline Lee Hentz, for example, contains numerous instances that embody stark contrasts between the white female and the black woman regardless of whether the former holds the role of mistress and the latter of mammy. In Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854), the hero, Moreland, enters the humble abode of a black woman, Nancy. Also present is a white female, Eula, to whom Moreland is very attracted. The narrator verbalizes Moreland's thoughts and forces the reader to see through Moreland's eyes that Nancy's cottage is dark and low. Nancy reflects death because she is variously described as poor, pale, and emaciated. Eula reflects life because she is variously described as lively, youthful, and healthy: "Her skin is soft and like the paleness of moonlight" (1:46). The contrasts of light and dark, good and sinister communicated through the conduit of Moreland's thoughts exemplify early nineteenth-century southern ideology. Without conscious malice or premeditated motive such contrasts were the social norm and thus flourished in the literature.

Despite the over-simplicity of such stark contrasts in literature, however, the relationship of mammy to white mistress was complex. The Civil War illuminated that the gulf between them was not as great as it seemed. According to Drew Gilpin Faust some slave mistresses in isolated areas of the South found that their closest adult connections were with female slaves (1996, 61). With the departure of so many men

to battle, the Confederate home front became a world of white women and slaves (31), and "faithful servant" stories served to calm the fears of the white female (61). White females of the southern elite came face to face not only with fear, but also with the realization that their notion of womanhood had presumed the existence of slaves to perform menial labor and white males to provide protection and support. "Lady," then, meant whiteness and privilege; elite status had been founded on the oppression of slaves, and the notions of genteel womanhood had been intertwined with class and race (7).

Still another dimension of the complex relationship between the white female and the mammy is that the latter was generally second to the mistress in authority. Michelle Wallace explains that the black woman slave achieved status in her role as mammy because she often controlled the household, its white members as well as the black. Even though she sometimes guarded the master's wealth and position with loyalty and vigor, the mammy often served a useful function for the slave community when she interceded on behalf of a slave and aborted cruel punishment (1991, 21). The multiplicity of her roles permitted her to serve in the big house and maintain her link with her own community members in the field.

CULTURAL IMAGERY AND THE MAMMY STEREOTYPE

After considering the origin and maintenance of the stereotype of the black female, I am compelled to ask the following question: Why did the perpetuation of black female stereotypical images continue after emancipation? One of the objectives of cultural imagery is not only to legitimize and perpetuate stereotypes but also to encourage individuals to embrace certain values and beliefs. Through systematic exposure to cultural images, individuals are expected either to conform to, emulate, and internalize the characteristics, values, beliefs, and behaviors of these images, or to reject them and accept those images that are diametrically opposite (Jewell 1993, 69). In each case, cultural images were constructed by those in power based on exaggerated reality and embellished truths, and perpetuated by members of the society. Each image was designed to justify the treatment that black women received during slavery. Cultural images that assign virtue and an assumed level of intellectual ability to the occupation, behavior, and appearance serve to elevate the status of one group above another in a given society (Jewell 1993, 58).

Again, these cultural images were constructed by powerful white males, purveyed by the media that they influenced, and perpetuated by members of the society in order to maintain a system of domination. The construction of cultural images was yet another attempt to control blacks in general. As conveyed in popular wisdom, he who controls the image, controls the mind. To produce images is to define, and to define is another level of control. K. Sue Jewell says that it is reasonable to presume that the cultural images of black women were important economically after emancipation in order to keep black women and others outside the economic mainstream (1993, 56). Those who controlled the images then not only controlled the minds but controlled the wealth. Jewell's *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of U.S. Social Policy* (1993) provides in-depth discussion of each stereotypical image of the black female from antebellum literature to the mass media today. She discusses the purposes for the construction and maintenance of specific stereotypical images which have changed over time but still remain in some form today. My investigation differs from Jewell's in that she looks at stereotypes in relation to the larger society, while I look at the figure of the older black woman historically stereotyped as the mammy in the smaller society of the black community. To determine the purpose of the older black woman in early black women's literature is central. In her scope of the larger society, Jewell concludes that one purpose for maintaining stereotypical images of black women is to elevate the status of other groups, which again points to the underlying desire for not only economic control, but hegemony, which spans every aspect of the domination of one group over another.

The period of Reconstruction was a significant phase in American history when hegemonic notions heightened aggression for economic and political control. Black males were granted the right to vote in 1870; therefore, those in the political arena saw the black man not only as a political opponent, but as a former slave—powerless and noncompetitive. Regardless of how they were perceived, blacks sought political representation, education, land and small business ownership, and employment. Blacks were moving into new areas of society. To maintain domination and control whites required not only aggression, but regression as a form of subjugation. In addition to establishing Jim Crow laws and using lynch violence, whites went to great lengths to "prove" that blacks were physically and intellectually inferior to whites. Cultural imagery, then, was merely a form of continuing social control

and explains why stereotypical images were perpetuated following emancipation and why the features of, especially, the stereotypical mammy are familiar to members of American society even today.

Jewell describes the stereotypical mammy's physical features as obesity, dark complexion, extremely large breasts, extremely large buttocks, and shining white teeth; she is depicted wearing a head scarf, and her extreme obesity is seen as matronly and humorous (1993, 39). The portrayal of the mammy as overweight is not accidental, because this physical feature moves the mammy outside the sphere of sexual desirability and into the realm of maternal nurturance (1993, 40). In concert with her physical features, the mammy's personality is portrayed as kind, loyal, religious, and superstitious; she is a mother who is actually viewed as sexless because she is portrayed as ugly. As a mother, she exhibits a preference for her master's children to her own, and she acknowledges, instinctively, the superiority of the higher race (Christian 1980, 11). The mammy, then, not only contributes to the maintenance of the stereotype, but, according to Christian's observations, confirms the myths, the imagined hierarchical levels, and the general expectations of those who benefitted from the patriarchal system. In *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (1980), Christian traces the development of stereotypical images imposed on black women and assesses how these images affected the works of black women from 1892 to 1976. My study looks back to representative works of both black and white women who published prior to 1892, and it includes Frances Harper's older novels rediscovered since Christian's work.

LITERARY IMAGES OF THE MAMMY

The image of the mammy in early white women's literature challenged critics who argued that slavery was harsh and demeaning. Jewell describes the behavioral characteristics of the mammy in this literature and other media as follows: a) she is submissive to her slave owner during slavery and to her employer following slavery; b) she is aggressive in her relations with other African Americans, especially males; c) she appears satisfied and content in her station in life (1993, 38).

With her ultimate obedience a given, the mammy figure could still be defined and portrayed as independent, aggressive, and decisive. Those in power perceive these qualities to be masculine and therefore

negative because such features are exaggerated when associated with images that represent black women (Jewell 1993, 46). An example of this negative association occurs in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* when Miss Ophelia observes how Dinah supervises the kitchen detail. Meal preparation takes place on the kitchen floor as Dinah rules over her kitchen help. The text describes Dinah's methods as "peculiarly meandering and circuitous" (1966, 225) because in her own unique way she acts decisively, and because she is controlling in her attempts to discourage Miss Ophelia from entering the kitchen. Dinah is depicted as eccentric, secretive, and in some ways threatening. Bent on keeping her position in the power hierarchy, she therefore confirms the hierarchy and her own ultimate obedience. In some cases, however, the negative, aggressive element is so pronounced that it counters the image of submissive and loyal contentment. Variations on the stereotype portray the mammy as cunning, prone to poison her master, discontent with her lot, fierce in protecting her children, and conniving against the system of bondage. (Christian 1985, 5)

Whether the focus is her physical, behavioral, or emotional characteristics, the mammy figure resides in the consciousness of the nation and thus in its works. For example, although most critics ignore Mammy Jane in the critique of Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*, dismissing her as functional in her roles of nursemaid, cook, etc., she reveals significant attitudes. Because Chesnutt creates such a character, Trudier Harris views Mammy Jane critically and determines that her behavior, which is indicative of enslavement, speaks volumes about her portrayal in a literary work set during the period of Reconstruction. Mammy Jane's subservience reflects the attitudes of whites who longed for the days of slavery as well as the attitude of blacks who longed for nothing more than to continue in an attitude of subservience (1982, 39). Langston Hughes inscribes a similar attitude of subservience in the figure of an older black woman in his novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930). Calvin Hernton discusses Langston Hughes's characterization of his grandmother in *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers: Adventures in Sex, Literature and Real Life*. Hughes depicts his grandmother as a laundress for white folks. He also depicts her as uneducated, religious, and emphatically African American in appearance, speech, and manner. Hughes admits that he exaggerated this fictional character to make her appear more "negro." In actuality, his grandmother did not provide laundry service for white folks, nor did she attend church, and she did possess an education (1987, 91). The

compulsion to perpetuate stereotypical images is understandable when one considers the mechanisms that were in place to maintain them, such as a patriarchal ideology that limited what could be published and that resulted in audience expectations. Thus as Harris suggests, writers such as Chesnutt worked within the system and used accommodation subversively in his portrayal of the mammy in order to underscore the vestiges of slavery while Hughes, at times, chose to portray his mammy figure in order to fulfill audience expectations.

THE EARLY BLACK WOMAN WRITER—CONTEXT AND TEXT

During the late nineteenth century, social changes made a significant impact on the relationship between white and black female writers. It was an era that saw the end of slavery and the beginning of greater voice for women's issues. The color line divided white and black women writers as it divided the nation. Their interests developed along separate paths (Foster 1993, 82). Both black and white female writers, however, were concerned with revising, deconstructing, and reconstructing images of women inherited from male literature, but the struggle for black women writers was against white male inherited images *and* the perpetuation of those clay-like images by white women writers (Foster 1993, 82-83).

Christian speaks of black female characters as thinking and feeling people despite the clay stereotypes permanently cast in white literature (1985, 14). In Phillipa Kafka's Introduction to *The Great White Way*, she comments that black women writers are both African American and European American culturally. This makes their response to European American, male-dominated success mythologies more complex than had they been simply European American women writers like Kate Chopin (1993, 14). Most black writers who have created stereotypical maids and mammies have had specific goals in mind for their creations. The goals were frequently dictated by the time periods in which authors wrote, as well as by their degree of commitment to changing the social advancement of black people. Some may have even used character design to spark political consciousness and black awareness among blacks (Harris 1982, xiv). A writer often used a very different and unlikely character in order to instruct her audience. Figuratively, it is the character hovering on the periphery of society that has the ability to see and thus to express contrasting ideologies, question assumptions,

and topple fundamental beliefs. The periphery is a different location, and thus a different viewpoint. It varies from the norm, the expected, and quite naturally it results in a different and often inexplicable perspective.

Foster disagrees with the assertion that early black writers adopted forms and techniques of western literature and addressed their remarks to a white audience. Such an assumption devalues the relationship between black writers and black readers, and it disregards the vitality and versatility of the black culture. Foster believes instead that the early black woman writer appropriated the English literary tradition to reveal, to interpret, to challenge, and to change perceptions of herself and the world in which she found herself (1993, 15-16).

The early black woman writer knew in part that her act of writing tested social attitudes because she was all too aware of how white men scrutinized Phyllis Wheatley's work to determine the legitimacy of her authorship during the late eighteenth century. The black woman writer could not proclaim the importance of her word as the privileged white male such as Thomas Jefferson proclaimed the importance of his. She knew her gender and race infused her words with connotations which were complex and difficult to control (Foster 1993, 17). The black woman writer was painfully aware that when nineteenth-century blacks wrote in a manner that did not correspond to those deeply held opinions of the times, their very authorship was put into question. Such a restriction could have obliterated their very existence, and would have certainly affected the way they wrote about blacks (Christian 1990, 332).

If the act of writing tested societal attitudes, then the early black woman writer wrote to reform as well as transform her audience, since often her focus was spiritual and moral reformation which resulted in home and community transformation. According to Jewell, transformation requires that one eradicate stereotypes, dispel myths, and supplant ideologies that serve as the bases for systems of domination (3).

INTRODUCTION OF THE FOREMOTHER FIGURE

In an effort to understand these early writers' use of a stereotype it is important to look beyond the surface of the generalized stereotype and to look closely and critically at the image of the older black woman in early black women's literature to determine the purpose of her

presence. I propose that the image of the older black woman does not fit the stereotypical mammy image perpetuated by white women writers in their antebellum literature or by the post-war plantation school. I believe that a change in the name and the definition will promote recognition of the differences that exist between the older black female portrayed in early white women's writings and the older black female portrayed in early black women's writings. I will thus rename and redefine the character portrayed by black women writers as the "foremother figure." The foremother figure is actually a character who has presence without prominence and displays force without the benefit of a place in the foreground. The term "foremother" is suggested by Alice Walker (1983b) in her essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," where she explains that this black woman is the one who prepared, molded, and created despite constraints such as physical and mental abuse, inadequate space and materials, and the intrusion of her own children and household responsibilities. By whatever means, these grandmothers, mothers, and older black women in general passed on creative genius in the forms of storytelling, language style, color coordination, and design inside and outside the home. One can add to this image of artistry in the foremother figures in Schultz's observations that they suffer, endure, and maintain a strong faith in God. They do not engage in active resistance, but they are never passive but always building and creating (1977, 341). Mary Hughes Brookhart's quotation from Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* captures yet another dimension of the endowed ancestor or foremother in the following: "'those pure-born Africans was peoples . . . [who] could see in more ways than one . . . the kind can tell you 'bout things happened long before they was born and things to come along after they was dead'" (1993, 129). Even though the supernatural may be associated with these women, they are also great in the most familiar ways. Authors speak of how these women gather daughters into their arms—daughters in need of healing. These sometimes non-biological mothers nurture fledgling daughters in order to rid them of their self-destructive behavior brought on by oppression (Brookhart 1993, 135).

The foremother is further a moral and cultural reservoir who is unaware of the intensity of her own spirituality and the knowledge of her own sainthood. She is a complex figure, a vessel which preserves and passes on creative genius as well as one who preserves and conveys wisdom. The foremother is a visionary who knows what is to be. She possesses a hope so intense that it directs circumstances. She nurtures,

advises, teaches, protects, and directs those who have the privilege of being in her presence. The foremother loves with tenderness and with toughness. She is blessed by the ancestors and abides by their counsel; thus she possesses the capability to discern truth. I propose that this powerful foremother figure can be defined through the narrative, the direct and indirect language associated with the character, and the direct and indirect language of the heroine and other major and minor characters.

Not all texts portray this ideal construction of the foremother figure. The foremother figure is less than ideal insofar as she emerges in the likeness of the stereotypical mammy, e.g., Hopkins's Aunt Henny. Some foremothers are also clearly flawed in their influence in the life of the mulatta heroine, e.g., Fauset's Hetty.

The construction of the foremother in early black women's works helps, then, to define the mulatta heroine in that the foremother's language functions as a cultural source which influences the heroine's view of the world, her decisions, and/or her actions. The language of the foremother is grounded in the substance of the culture and the knowledge of her experience. In speech situations that include the mulatta or a character linked to the mulatta, the language of the foremother emerges as a feature of character that effects change. The language of the foremother effects change whether she is ideal or flawed. She influences others, that is, whether she adheres to the general qualities of the foremother outlined above or whether she exhibits variability in these character traits. Her language, although limited, simple, and often repetitive, is powerful and connects clearly and meaningfully to the life of the mulatta heroine. Whether the mulatta heroine is a direct or an indirect recipient of her words, the authoritative older black woman influences the mulatta heroine with her wisdom. Even if the latter does not always immediately recognize or deliberately ignores this and other positive qualities in the discursive matrix as a voice of wisdom, the foremother still exists, persists and frequently the resistant heroine eventually yields to her positive influence (Hopkins's Hagar) or becomes reconciled to her flaws (Hurston's Janie). For example Aunt Henny emerges as the stereotypical mammy in *Hagar's Daughter* when she is more protective of her mistress, Hagar, than she is of her own daughter, Marthy. Aunt Henny tells Marthy, "'I don' no 'bout tellin' a disrespons'ble gal like you fambly secrets . . . '" (63). Mrs. Harcourt in Harper's *Trial and Triumph* initially uses the power of her words to silence Annette's insightful description of a neighbor's

disposition when she says: "'You give me more worry than all my six children put together; but there is always one scabby sheep in the flock and you will be that one'" (184). The foremother figure is as meaningful in the preceding portrayals as she is when portrayed as a model—a model who generates language activity that results in social action on the part of the mulatta heroine, as in Harper's *Iola Leroy*. Aunt Linda calls for a leader who will "'larn dese people how to bring up dere chillen, to keep our gals straight, an' our boys from runnin' in de saloons an' gamblin' dens'" (160-61). Ultimately Iola emerges as a moral community leader when she tells Aunt Linda, "'I am going to teach in the Sunday-school, help in the church, [and] hold mothers' meetings to help these boys and girls to grow up to be good men and women'" (276). The older black woman's language activity informs the younger mulatta heroine's practical activity, which then results in social action that makes a difference in the community.

Age is a significant factor in the portrait of the foremother in early black women's literature. Alice Walker refers to Jean Toomer's comments on the authoritative older female and concludes that she is more than a mere woman—she is a saint. The foremother is sanctified, that is, she is set aside for some spiritual use. The foremother figure exists in Walker's observation about Phyllis Wheatley that it is not so much that she sang, but that she kept the notion of the song alive (Walker 1983b, 237). In other words it is not radical pro-action or even reaction, but liminal or barely perceptible aspects of the culture that are cherished and maintained in the embodiment of the foremother figure. She is the life-force that nurtures her own culture as she repels the influences of the dominant culture that are all too often realized in thought, word, and behavior. The foremother's world view acts as a protective shield that aids in narrowing the focus to make one see more clearly. The role of the mammy, then, is carefully and continually moved from the status of stereotype to that of a living human being who is aware of her own desires and needs but places them second to those of the community. Thelma Shinn comments on modern writer Octavia Butler's recreation of the older black woman in her works when she refers to her as the wise old witch within the archetype of the older black woman who is willing to share her survival skills out of compassion and a sense of responsibility with those who are still willing to learn (1985, 214). Such a description connotes the relationship that the older black woman maintains with the community. The needs of the community remain a priority.

Because of the black woman's existence, her experience of and expression of her reality is often culturally distinct; therefore, her perception when verbalized is a strong statement about her condition (Christian 1985, 14). The generative power of her words is embedded in the texts of early black women writers, and this study seeks to determine how early black women writers constructed the language of the foremother in order to weaken the hierarchical structures that strained to keep that clay-like, non-thinking, non-feeling image of the loyal, submissive stereotype in place.

To debunk the image of the stereotypical mammy is to debunk the western ideology of a white male power structure and its system of hierarchy. Trudier Harris argues that some early black male and black female writers chose to portray black women in literature who held on to a sense of self against forces that would stereotype them, force them to conform, or dehumanize them. Of the women writers' heroines she cites Nella Larsen's Helga Crane (1928) and Zora Neale Hurston's Janie Crawford (1937) (Harris 1982, xiii). It is likely that later black women writers recognized the often veiled efforts of early black women writers to construct authentic characterization within the constraints of publication. According to Joanne Gabbin, contemporary black women writers have begun to explore the roots of their cultural tradition and are cleansing, healing, and empowering the images of themselves (Gabbin 1990, 247). Gabbin draws on the works of contemporary writers such as Toni Cade Bambara, Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, and Paule Marshall, who "possess" their images and define themselves as they explore the roots of the cultural condition by confronting the past.

In this proposed re-vision of the image of the black woman, the mulatta stereotype is also relevant. The mulatta character occurs occasionally in white women's writings but more often in black women's abolitionist writings. Southern writers during the antebellum period focussed on the black woman as the contented mammy rather than as the mulatta, since the mulatta represented miscegenation, which whites attempted to ignore (Christian 1980, 16). The mulatta, however, appears alongside the stereotypical mammy image in black women's writings, especially during Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, and the Harlem Renaissance. Specifically, the image of the older black woman, who is present but not prominent in the literature, plays a significant role in her relationship with the mulatta, even in her seemingly muted state.

Why did the mulatta become a staple in early black literature? Alice Walker compares the literary portrayal of the mulatta and white-complexioned female to the black-complexioned female in her essay entitled, "If the Past Looks Like the Present then What Does the Future Look Like?" (1983a). She focusses on the absence of the truly black woman in mainstream black middle-class society. She turns to the literature of early black women writers for answers pertaining to those characters who are seemingly portrayed as black people but who cherish the white blood that stripped their black foremothers of their womanhood. Studying three nineteenth-century novels written by black women: Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900), and Emma Dunham Kelley's *Megda* (1891), Walker focusses on the dialogue of particular characters and describes how they rave over the beauty of the mulatta heroine. Walker questions why black women writers depicted their heroines as white and non-working class. She also speaks strongly against the early black male novelist, William Wells Brown, and others who portrayed their heroines as indistinguishable from whites (295). Walker concludes that these imagined quadroon women were not real and had more to do with the way white men chose to perceive black women than the way black men perceived them or black women perceived themselves (298). Walker further reasons that black women writers used white-skinned heroines in nineteenth-century literature because most of their readers were white; whites could associate human feeling with whiteness or near whiteness. Emma Dunham Kelley's *Megda* provides an excellent example in Megda's best friend, depicted in the death scene: "Ethel was lying on the bed, her face as white as the pillow on which it rested, her fair hair surrounding it like a golden cloud. She smiled when she saw Meg and held out a white hand" (337). The emphasis on whiteness is repeated throughout the novel when associated with young females. Black men can be depicted as dark because darkness connotes masculinity, but whiteness connotes femininity in the European American mind. To portray the dark-skinned black woman would have reinforced the stereotyped perception of the masculine black female (Walker 1983a, 301).

Like Walker, Christian believes that black women writers used the mulatta to secure white women readers' sympathy with black women. The emphasis on the plight of the mulatta then developed into a tradition in black women's writings. Christian suggests that white

readers saw the result of their domination of another people in the portrayal of the mulatta. She concludes that the guilty and powerful enjoy looking obliquely at their own guilt. The mulatta speaks clearly to the workings of domination and control, but on the other hand, the mulatta was an effective means to show that no differences existed between a black and white woman until someone discovered or decided that one drop of negro blood made a difference (Christian 1985, 3). Although the white audience dealt with the delicate issues surrounding the mulatta, the mammy was the familiar mainstay image that they expected in the literature because she was subsumed in the ideology of a patriarchal society.

To look at the foremother figure in the context of the mulatta heroine, the mammy again becomes the foil or the correlate. One can make similar contrasts between the foremother and the mulatta as others have done between the stereotypical mammy and the white female. The mulatta heroine is described as beautiful, with long flowing hair and light-colored eyes; the mulatta heroine has voice, choice, and some level of authority. We hear the voice of the mulatta abundantly in dialogue because she is usually the protagonist. She has choice in that she generally has the option to pass as white. With that choice she thus assumes some level of authority. An emotional tension surrounds the mulatta, however, because she is the beautiful female who represents the illicit crossing between the cultures. The underlying fear that others will discover that she is a member of the black race is always present. The discovery generally emerges through family relations, slave traders, or the birth of the mulatta's child. The mulatta's color is a constant and disturbing reminder that she is the product of a sexual relationship—a sexual relationship for which she, not the white father (the one who holds the power), bears the burden. The mulatta is then the evidence that contradicts the basic philosophical concept of slavery—that blacks are not human (Christian 1985, 3).

While I agree with both Walker and Christian in part, my thesis, in contrast, claims that although black women used their writing for the pleasure and sympathy of their audience, more importantly they used their works containing the foremother figure and mulatta as vehicles for social change. I maintain that black women writers portrayed the foremother figure in their writings during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in order to define the mulatta and her role in social change, and to subvert the stereotypical mammy. I focus on the foremother figure, which is inherent in the works of early black women

writers, as a deliberate act to transform her from object to subject, and to move her from the periphery to the center. The foremother is far more important than her marginal role in the plot seems to indicate. The appeal, blame, contradiction, and tension surrounding the mulatta heroine as an individual are secondary to the role of the foremother in this literary analysis. It is the foremother and her important place in the literature of early black women writers that is central here. Also, it is the complementary foremother-mulatta heroine relationship that is critical in the individual life of the heroine and her ultimate engagement in the collective life of the black community.

The black community still struggles with cultural images that reinforce beliefs that certain groups of individuals are entitled to more or less of society's resources simply because of gender, race, and social status. These beliefs serve as the basis for class conflict and result in a form of intergroup conflict within the black community where importance is placed on light vs. dark complexion and good hair vs. bad hair (Jewell 1993, 60). Rather than emphasize the conflict, the construction of the foremother figure in early black women's writings seeks to determine the complementary elements of the relationship between the foremother and the mulatta. The foremother and mulatta seemingly existed in two different worlds and grappled with different concerns; however, discursive practices define and determine the significance of the correlation between the physically unattractive mammy—a useful vessel—and the beautiful but deficient mulatta heroine. Christian anchors the latter's deficiency in early nineteenth-century ethnologist Josiah Nott's conclusion that the mulatta was weaker and less fertile than either parent (1980, 16). The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the origin of the word *mulatto* is *mulo*, which means *mule*, an animal that results from mixing. The historical range of meanings noted in the *OED*, regardless of period or context, still indicates a person or thing that is judged to be less than genuine. One definition referred to anyone of mixed race, another to the mix between Negroes and Indians. Still another definition for mulatto was half-Christian. In addition to human beings, mulatto has had as its referent speckled stones, types of clay, and types of soil. In 1891, significant for the period of this study, the term "mulatto jack" referred to yellow fever. One can conclude that all references to mulatto imply some form of mixing, which presumes weakness or some variant of that which is pure.

In contrast, then, to the foremother figure, the mulatta is portrayed stereotypically as the tragic mulatta, the black female whose mother was black and powerless and whose father was white and powerful but disowns her. The tragic mulatta is the one for whom the laws were written to determine that one drop of black blood determines race. She remains a constant threat to the ideal white female. The tragic mulatta sees all the advantages of being white, and often at some point in her life is afforded the opportunity to pass and acquire an education and/or a lifestyle of material ease. But she becomes tragic when the discovery of her ancestry threatens this status and her happiness.

The foremother figure, on the other hand, occupies a place in the prescribed social depth of enslavement or employment in the home of whites. Those in power give her little consideration and perceive her as a mere dark abiding presence. She is, in fact, a persistent black female figure who possesses the emotional stability, the strength to endure, and the audacity to hope. The foremother possesses wisdom instead of education; she serves as a moral repository and naturally preserves and cherishes the culture. She is "clothed in her right mind"; that is, she is surrounded by the dominant culture, but not controlled by it to the extent that she compromises her own cultural beliefs. The phrase "clothed in my right mind," in black culture, reflects what might be called a diachronic culturally-specific change in language which originates from the King James version of the gospel of Mark 5:15: "And they come to Jesus, and see him that was possessed with the devil, and had the legion, sitting and clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid." While the man was possessed with the unclean spirit of the devil, the people were unsuccessful as they attempted to bind him with chains to prevent him from physically abusing himself. After Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to depart from the body of the man, the people saw him sitting and "clothed in his right mind." He had undergone a change so profound that the people were afraid. In both instances the man is in the world but not of the world. In his former state he was demonized; in his current state he is sanctified. Both states represent the extreme in that he is different from the masses. The biblical parable of the legion is much like the literary figure of the foremother, not in the manner of his revolutionary change, but in its outcome. The man possesses a spiritual awareness that sets him apart from the masses so that "the people were afraid." The foremother's spirituality sets her apart from the masses. She does not elicit fear from the masses but reverence. She therefore influences others and effects

change. Historically and still today, blacks repeatedly express the words, "clothed in my right mind," in testimony and prayer in the black church. One gives thanks when he or she utters the phrase "clothed in my right mind." This utterance signifies that he or she has, at some point, experienced a spiritual change which affects how he or she now views the world. The foremother figure, therefore, in all her spiritual, emotional, moral, cultural, and physical complexities holds a central transformatory purpose as she is re-visioned in the works of black women writers.

Alice Walker advises writers to trust the experiences coming out of their own culture, use the resources of their own knowledge, feelings, and thoughts, and isolate the fantasies of others (1932a, 312). The purpose of my investigation is to isolate the myth of the stereotypical mammy and reveal how early black women writers subvert this persistent figure with the foremother figure, and then to argue that black women writers used a seemingly identical but in fact a vastly different figure than white female writers used during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Specifically, I seek answers to the following questions:

1. What is historically inherent in the construction of the stereotypical mammy image that enabled it to persist through the periods of slavery, Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, and the Harlem Renaissance?

2. The stereotypical mammy appears to be the same in black female literature as in white female literature during the periods of slavery, Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction, and the Harlem Renaissance. Did black women writers use the stereotype to fulfill white audience expectations or did black women writers use it to subvert the stereotypical image of the black female in literature, or both?

3. What evidence is available in the language of selected primary texts that supports the idea that black women writers used the foremother figure to subvert the stereotypical mammy in order to define the mulatta heroine?

4. What character traits and aspects of behavior found in the foremother figure yield the construction of a positive image based on characteristics representative of the black culture?

The critical approach I will use to characterize the foremother figure is the re-reading and re-visioning of relevant portions of primary texts, emphasizing the analysis of speech situations and comparative character study. The purpose is to establish that the presumed stereotypical mammy portrayed in the works of black women is in fact a different representation from the black woman portrayed in the literature of white females. She is used in a similar role and occupies, on a first reading, what appears to be a minor place in the writings of black women; however, differences exist in the delineation of character, as already suggested by Barbara Christian (1985, 2). Molefi K. Asante suggests that to delineate character is not to determine authorial intent, but to 'locate' the writer; that is, a text is socially constructed; therefore, a writer always leaves some evidence of his or her attitude with the use of the language (1992, 13). In his essay entitled "Locating a Text: Implications of Afrocentric Theory," Asante clearly explains how one uses the text to make meaningful observations about the author's language use, character portrayal, and audience in order to 'locate' the author or to determine the world view of the author. I will study character portrayal and language use in the works of early white and black women writers to determine the differences that exist seemingly in their identical portrayal of the older black woman figure.

A brief example from an early white female work is Caroline Hentz's description of Aunt Kizzi in *The Planter's Northern Bride*: "ebony face, thick African lips, flattened in a broad smile . . . grunting as she picks up after the child" (1:212). The lexical items selected to describe this older black woman from the outside vary little from the repeated description of the mammy figure in other white literature. The author sees no further than the images held strongly in place by the ideology that balances features in the figure of the ideal white female with opposing features in the figure of the older black woman. In *Hagar's Daughter*, on the other hand, Pauline Hopkins sketches a portrait of Aunt Henny as a seventy-year-old, pipe-smoking "coal-black negress of kindly face" (33). One difference between the two portraits is that physical features are well-defined in Hentz and echo the well-worn descriptions of the explorers who visited Africa centuries ago. The depictions are similar but differ on the level of the lexical descriptions selected to inscribe the older black woman. Hopkins adds a further dimension when she presents Aunt Henny speaking perfect Black English in her own voice and possessing a level of common sense called wisdom as she talks about her monetary savings and the

significance of home ownership: "I got one hunder' dollars up stairs 'tween the feather bed an' de mattress. . . . Can't feel de place is ourn till we's paid up. When I sees you and de chillun under your own roof, I gwine ter gib up de ghos' in peace." (175). In Hentz's words the older black woman is presented as an object. Hopkins's portrait is centered on the older black woman as a subject. She expounds on economics, ownership, and discipline. Aunt Henny possesses agency rather than passivity when she is placed in the position of subject.

In his essay, "Locating a Text . . . ," Asante applies his theory of 'location' of the writer to the work of a black male poet. I will add to work in this area by examining the discursive practices of early black women's fictional works. I will attempt to isolate the myth of the stereotypical mammy and show how the older black woman's language use subverts the myth and creates the mold for the authentic construction of the foremother. The foremother is a literary construction that is characterized by the language of the foremother figure and the language of those with whom she interacts. It is the use of meaningful language that reveals the veiled efforts of the early black woman writer to utilize a true "Afrocentric rhetoric," in the figure of the foremother. A true "Afrocentric rhetoric," according to Molefi K. Asante, is language that opposes those things that negate the cultural experiences of blacks, and is committed to the propagation of a more humanistic vision of the world (1987, 170). Specific to this literary study, the construction of the foremother figure opposes or subverts the negative image of the older black woman in the generalized figure of the stereotypical mammy. The foremother figure expresses through her own voice the imparting cultural wisdom in the texts of early black women writers. I will re-read the texts to determine the place of the foremother figure and the extent to which she influences the lives of other major and minor characters.

To further refine my analysis, I will determine through the traditional new critical textual analysis how the foremother evolves through characterization by foils as she helps to clarify the mulatta figure. The African American texts to be studied in this project are as follows: Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself* (1861); Frances Harper's novel *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), and her novellas *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), and *Trial and Triumph* (1888-89); Pauline Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter: A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice* (1901-02), and *Of One Blood or the Hidden Self*, (1902-03); and *Jessie Fauset's There Is Confusion* (1924), *Plum*

Bun: A Novel Without a Moral (1928), *The Chinaberry Tree: A Novel of American Life* (1931), and *Comedy: American Style* (1933).

LITERATURE REVIEW

I have already referred to a number of secondary works that shed light on stereotypes of black women, some of which speak specifically to the literary portrayal of the mammy image during the nineteenth century. What follows is a brief review of the most relevant of these secondary works listed according to their reference to the portrayal of the mammy image during the nineteenth century, women writing during the nineteenth-century, and the mammy and stereotypes of blacks in general. Each review includes an assessment about how my approach adds to this discussion.

One source that provides a full discussion of the mammy stereotype in nineteenth-century literary works is *From Mammies to Militants: Domestics in Black American Literature* (1982) by Trudier Harris. She provides literary and real-life historical accounts of black women domestics. Of general interest is Harris's discussion concerning how the literary portrayal of the maid reveals whether the writer is committed to the social advancement of blacks. Of particular use to my study is Harris's claim that the black female character consistently struggles against some facet of stereotypical characterization in black male and female nineteenth and twentieth-century works. The foremother figure, then, typifies Harris's claim as it subverts the stereotypical mammy.

Another work of particular importance is Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987). In her chapter on "Slave and Mistress: Ideologies of Womanhood under Slavery," Carby examines the nature of black womanhood in the context of assumptions about "true [white] womanhood" in the works of blacks and whites. She shows how stereotypes in literature function as a disguise for social relations. In her chapter on Nella Larsen she also offers useful ideas on the function of this mulatta as a literary device. My work differs in focus in that I examine and illuminate the language surrounding the foremother figure to establish the significance and extent of her socio-familial relationship with the mulatta heroine.

Still another work which narrows the focus of the image of the black woman in literature is Mary P. Robinson Viguerie's dissertation

entitled My Dear Ol' Mammy in Southern Literature (1993). Viguerie argues that early black writers, male and female, portray the figure of the mammy in such a way that it is really an expansion of the plantation version. She believes that black writers denounce slavery and refute aspects of the stereotype, but that all versions really confirm, rather than subvert, a general conception of mammy as evidence of intertexuality. All versions have as their basis the vision of stability, home, harmony, and a rural society (17). Although Viguerie includes early black works such as Jacobs's *Incidents* and Harper's *Iola Leroy* along with early white works such as Caroline Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride*, my work differs from Viguerie's in that I am suggesting that there are identifiable differences between the white female writer's portrayal of the mammy and the subversive black woman writer's portrayal when one views the mammy through her language and in the context of the mulatta heroine.

In her dissertation entitled A Peculiar Motherhood: The Black Mammy Figure in American Literature and Popular Iconography, 1824-1965 (1995) Kimberly Wallace-Sanders studies how the mammy figure, which symbolized racial harmony, was transformed from a pro-slavery representation, which included all the expected physical and behavioral characteristics, to a late nineteenth-century figure representing commercialism and consumption. Of interest to my work is that Wallace-Sanders compares the mammy's relationship with the children of the white owner or employer with the relationship with her own children. Wallace-Sanders sees the stereotype as responding to audience expectations and uses visual illustration and literary dialogue in her analysis. My work differs from Wallace-Sanders in that I focus on the foremother and her relationship with the mulatta, and base my analysis on the influence of the foremother's language use in the life of the mulatta rather than on the presumed authorial intention about audience.

A more general work which relates to the period of my study is Frances Smith Foster's essay entitled "Adding Color and Contour to Early American Self-Portraitures: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women," in Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers's *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition* (1985). Foster looks at the relationship between genre and characterization as she examines two early black female autobiographical works. She discusses how Jarena Lee and Nancy Prince illustrate new forms and styles of nineteenth-century autobiographical writing as each writer goes beyond

the simple reversal of stereotypes in her form of characterization. Each writer offers a redefinition of femininity and a woman's proper place. My work, primarily on another genre, confirms Foster's in that my focus on the portrayal of the stereotypical mammy figure in the fiction of white females and the foremother figure in the literature of black women shows that black women writers of fiction certainly went beyond the mere reversal of a stereotype, as the foremother represents not simply an individual but a cultural context and a social commentary.

In *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (1992) Claudia Tate does not speak on the particular topic of subverting stereotypical figures, but generally on the topic of reconstructing first audiences. Since audience acts as a constraint, Tate discusses how the texts of white antebellum female literature celebrate the consummation of the orderly household as a sign of a moral society, while the texts of black women writers mourn the violation of black womanhood, maternity, family, and home. Amelia E. Johnson's *The Hazeley Family* (1894) and *Clarence and Corinne or God's Way* (1890) are examples of late nineteenth-century texts which mourn the violation of family and home. My work will add to Tate's work in that I will attempt to show that despite these violations, the language of the foremother uncovers the positive and strengthening relationship that exists between the older black woman and the mulatta heroine and among black folks in general. Early black women writers reveal that despite the ever-present oppressive conditions, the constraints of audience expectations, the ever-looming negative images, and the seemingly impossible situations in the home, community, and society of black folks, there are ties that bind. I will project the spirit of the language of the foremother as an abiding element of the tradition of black women writers.

A final source which addresses issues related to the period of my study is Frances Smith Foster's *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (1993). Foster discusses the works of early African American women writers and some of the elements that constitute the tradition. She comments on a work by each African American woman writer mentioned in my study through Pauline Hopkins. In her commentary Foster notes that Harper was aggressive in her attempt to portray the African American perspective through characterization and style of language. It is through such characterization and pragmatics of language that I contextualize my

more specific investigation of the foremother and her relationship with the mulatta.

A secondary source which looks at the mammy figure and stereotypes of black women in general is Elizabeth Schultz's essay "'Free in Fact and at Last': The Image of the Black Woman in Black American Fiction," in Marlene Springer's edited collection, *What Manner of Woman: Essays on English and American Life and Literature* (1977). Schultz discusses later black women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Kristin Hunter, and Margaret Walker, who in *Jubilee* looks back to the period of this study. Schultz discusses how twentieth-century black women writers have redefined blackness, beauty, and womanhood according to standards other than the white ideal. Schultz says that black women writers have inverted the image of ugliness and found beauty and strength in blackness. My work shows how early black women writers already were redefining the stereotypical mammy image, specifically in characterization through language use.

Discursive practices in the form of remembrance enables Veta Smith Tucker to examine the mammy in her dissertation entitled Reconstructing Mammy: Fictive Reinterpretations of Mammy's Role in the Slave Community and Image in American Culture (1994). Tucker studies representations of the mammy figure in the historical novels of contemporary black women writers to show how they oppose the sentimental image constructed in early white literature. She examines the figure of the slave woman in the works of contemporary writers Sherley Anne Williams, Toni Morrison, and Octavia Butler to show how these writers have corrected, developed, and transformed the construct of mammy. My work adds to Tucker's, as it did to Schultz's, in that I focus on the early writings of the black woman and her presentation of the foremother figure. My work will conclude with a brief discussion of a few selected works of contemporary black women writers, but only to suggest that the foremother figure undergoes change, yet remains in the literature as an inheritance from the nineteenth century.

DEFINITIONS

As I examine a representative sample of works written by black women during slavery, Reconstruction/post-Reconstruction, and the Harlem

Renaissance, I will use words repeatedly in this text which may require definition:

Foremother Figure—an older black woman who acts as a moral repository, preserves and cherishes the black culture, possesses wisdom and intense spirituality, and is instrumental in defining the mulatta heroine through language use in black women's literature.

Negro, Black, African American—used interchangeably as the reference changes over time; people of African descent.

Mulatto, Mulatta—masculine and feminine spellings for an individual with mixed heritage—black and white.

Woman, female—generally used for blacks.

Lady, female—generally used for whites.

OUTLINE

This study consists of a total of seven chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two will present a portrait of the stereotypical mammy figure in the literature of white females. Included in Chapter Two will be analyses of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [1852] (1966), Caroline Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854), Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) (1993), and three of Kate Chopin's short stories, "Beyond the Bayou," "A No Account Creole," and "La Belle Zoraïde."

Chapter Three offers a re-reading of relevant portions of Harriet Jacobs's [Linda Brent's] *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* [1861] (1987), in which the foremother figure is Aunt Nancy and the mulatta heroine is Linda Brent. Chapter Four consists of an examination of Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), in which the foremother figure is Aunt Linda and the mulatta heroine is Iola Leroy. I will also examine newly discovered works by Frances Harper entitled *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869), and *Trial and Triumph* (1888-89). In Chapter Six I will examine Pauline Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter: A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice* (1901-1902), in which the foremother figure is Aunt Henny and the mulatta heroine is Hagar. I will also examine Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood or the Hidden Self* (1902-03), where the foremother figure is Aunt Hannah and the mulatta heroine is Dianthe Lusk. Chapter Six looks at Jessie Redmon Fauset's

Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral (1928), in which the foremother figure is Hetty and the mulatta heroine is Angela Murray. I will also examine additional works by Jessie Redmon Fauset entitled *There Is Confusion* (1924), *The Chinaberry Tree: A Novel of American Life* (1931), and *Comedy: American Style* (1933).

Chapter Seven concludes my discussion of the treatment of the foremother figure in selected writings of early black women writers of fiction and looks to the future. Using the textual evidence gathered in this study, I will determine how the black woman writer located the foremother figure in her texts based on language use and specify the differences between the black woman's representation of the foremother figure and the white woman's representation of the stereotypical mammy figure. In this concluding chapter I will offer implications for future research and discuss how the foremother figure has been inherited in the print media of later black women writers, as Jewell has documented the presence of this figure in the electronic media today. The foremother in later black women's literature emerges, for example, as Nanny in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* [1937] (1990), Lutie's grandmother in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), and Miranda and Abigail in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988).

The older black woman persists and resists. As the foremother figure she persists and performs socio-cultural functions in the works of early black women writers. As the foremother figure she resists the myths, the assumptions, and the ideology behind the stereotypical mammy in the works of early white women writers.

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CHAPTER 2

The Mammy in Early White Female Writers

Harriet Beecher Stowe, Caroline Lee Hentz, and Kate Chopin

Harriet Beecher Stowe, Caroline Lee Hentz, and Kate Chopin are representative of nineteenth-century white women writers who produced works that reflect a range in their portrayal of the black female character—a range that includes clear examples of the older black woman in the role of the stereotypical mammy. This chapter will determine the basis on which each mammy figure is delineated within the context of the ideal white female by drawing attention to the language of the narrator, the white mistress, the minor character, and the mammy figure herself, as well as the absence of the language. Both Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854) were published prior to the Civil War. Stowe writes from the anti-slavery and Hentz from the pro-slavery perspective. Chopin integrates race, gender, and class issues in her short stories, "La Belle Zoraïde (1894), "A No Account Creole" (1894), and "Beyond the Bayou" (1894), and in her novel, *The Awakening* (1899), which were published long after the Civil War. Chopin published during a decade when black female literary works flourished.

In the great expansion of white women's writing and publishing in the nineteenth century, the popular domestic novel, according to Jane Tompkins represents an effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view. Domestic and sentimental novels dominated white women's writings during the nineteenth century and were so

widespread that male-dominated criticism categorized women's works separately in contrast to their own. Some common descriptive contrasts were light "feminine" versus tough-minded intellectual treatises, and domestic chattiness versus serious thinking. Nathaniel Hawthorne voiced the most memorable contrastive commentary on nineteenth-century white women writers in a letter to his publisher in 1855. He referred to white women writers as that "damned mob of scribbling women," presumably in contrast to a few intellectual giants such as himself (Tompkins 1985, 83).

Because many nineteenth-century women writers focussed on home and familial relationships as centers of meaningful activity, their scholarly efforts were minimized; nevertheless, they maintained their focus on the home and produced works that reflected their view of the world and those who participated in their world. The perspectives and periods of publication differ for the writers considered here—Stowe, Hentz, and Chopin; however, their works reveal more similarities than differences in the treatment of the older black woman in the context of the ideal white female. The early white woman writer may not have perceived her place as one of domination and control, but the literature reveals that she assumes the binary views of superior and inferior, strength and weakness, at all levels of society including the home. Jewell says that according to the prevailing ideology, one group must dominate another group. A system of domination breeds competition, and competition serves as an incentive for production (3), that is, work and responsibility. Elements of the system of domination that result in some form of production channeled through work and responsibility emerge in the literature of early white women writers. It is important to note how these elements relate to the ideal white female and the stereotypical mammy figure, whose origins are associated with labor. Upon re-reading works by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Carolyn Lee Hentz, and Kate Chopin, it is important to observe how this representative group of white women writers reflect similarities and differences in the literary portrayal of the stereotypical mammy, especially during the nineteenth century, when there was uncritical acceptance of stereotypes (Prenshaw 1993, 82). It is also important to heed Nina Baym's warning that contemporary scholarship fails to distinguish between earlier and later parts of the nineteenth century and instead treats the period as a single block, even though situations were clearly different for women in general (1978, 313). Using Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) as my middle and latter-century text

with the focus on the portrayal of the older black woman in the context of the white female, I see the former as a well-integrated mainstay in the household—the center of patriarchal rule, helping to define the ideal white female. Toward the latter part of the century, I see the older black woman as a presence that is still easily identified by her household and care-giving duties in the white home, yet she is more of a presence whose occasional sass and assertiveness are veiled and muted. She occupies a place in the white household but not the integral position that she was portrayed to have held during the middle of the nineteenth century. Yet, she remains.

AUNT CHLOE, AUNT DINAH AND MAMMY IN *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) inscribes three mammy figures whose correlation with the white female results in characterizations reflected in forms of work and responsibility. Christian says of Stowe's characterization that the Negro is a dramatic focal character rather than a comic minor character (1980, 21) because feminine qualities are assigned to both male and female Negro characters. Abolitionists viewed these feminine qualities as superior rather than inferior because these were humane qualities that many whites lacked. Based on a first reading and Christian's seemingly positive criticism, one could locate the writer in abolitionism and easily disregard other significant factors associated with this dramatic focal characterization. Christian reveals, however, that this quality of feminization parallels servility; thus dramatic focal characterization is not necessarily a superior or positive character portrayal, but fitting for the Negro, whether male or female. Similar to Christian, Ducksworth finds that the author's antislavery sentiments, though full of righteous condemnation, lack notions of racial equality (1994, 205), even though religion, which assumes spiritual egalitarianism, is used as a motif for her message of sympathy. Such contradictions of course, are not unusual among white abolitionists. Yarborough, too, finds that although Stowe sympathized with the slave, her commitment to challenging the claim of black inferiority was undermined by her own endorsement of racial stereotypes (1986, 47). An example of this endorsement is evident in the narrator's description of the stereotypical figure, Aunt Chloe:

> A round, black, shining face is hers, so glossy as to suggest the idea that she might have been washed over with white of eggs . . . . Her whole plump countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment from under her well-starched checked turban . . . the first cook of the neighborhood, as Aunt Chloe was universally held and acknowledged to be. A cook she certainly was, in the very bone and centre of her soul (31).

The narrator couches the stereotypical element of contentment in the description of physical features and defines Aunt Chloe innately as a cook, hence a servant. A close reading further reveals that the language of the stereotypical mammy complements this tone of condescension reflected in the voice of the narrator. It is only Aunt Chloe who refers to herself as mammy, and it is only Aunt Chloe who refers to her sons as niggers when she says, "Here you, Mose and Pete! get out de way, you niggers! Get away, Polly, honey,—mammy'll give her baby somefin, by and by" (33). Her language provides further role-and self-identification when Aunt Chloe refers to Mrs. Shelby in saying, "I can't do nothin' with ladies in de kitchen" (36). In a similar passage later in the St. Clare household in response to Miss Ophelia's rearranging the kitchen, Dinah, another mammy figure in the novel, says, "if dat ar de way dem northern ladies do dey an't ladies no how . . ." and "I don't want ladies round a henderin' . . ." (229). In both instances the language confirms the myth of contentment in the work role in which each older black woman is cast. Both characters express dissatisfaction when the white mistress attempts to change the configuration of their routine or attempts to enter their work space—the space that defines who they are as a dark presence that occupies a realm on the periphery of someone else's center. Their relative autonomy is both created and circumscribed by the power hierarchy. Grumbling over interference from the mistress is tolerable insofar as it confirms the mammy's subservient status.

A typical mammy, Aunt Chloe is portrayed as one whose vision is skewed by the oppressive institution of slavery. When her emotional rebelliousness assumes more serious proportions when her family is broken up, she still remains fatalistic. She holds that the next generation will be bound by the same systemic pattern of separation of family regardless of industry or loyalty. To her children she says, "ye'll live to see yer husband sold, or mebbe be sold yerself " (111). Although Aunt Chloe's heartbreak and hopelessness are portrayed sympathetically when the family prepares for Uncle Tom's departure, the narrator in her

omniscience nevertheless objectifies and stereotypes the Negro when she says "that all the instinctive affections of that race are peculiarly strong. Their local attachments are very abiding. They are not naturally daring and enterprising, but home-loving and affectionate" (109). Aunt Chloe's bitterness and despair are thus passed over, relegated condescendingly to a racial stereotype of the other. Moving immediately to a practical hope, Aunt Chloe can imagine only an extension of her work productivity—baking—as a way to purchase Tom's freedom (277).

In general black characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* served the writer's abolitionist purpose and at the same time fulfilled white audience expectations. Ducksworth suggests that today's reading audience asks what the characters represent and how they function in the novel (1994, 214). It is obvious that Stowe envisions no beauty in female blackness since none of her dark-skinned women characters possesses pleasant features. Ducksworth points out that this presumption is confirmed by her depiction of quadroons laughing at dark-skinned blacks (1994, 231). Alice Walker refers to such a response as colorism, defined as prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color (1983, 290). This action divides people of the same race. Strengthening a system of hierarchy, domination, and control requires weakening the ties that bind a people. To define whiteness as the ideal accomplishes both. Again, Aunt Chloe's reference to herself as mammy and to her children as niggers, and a quadroon's derision of dark-skinned blacks reveal the perpetuation of inferiority among blacks. Negative language flows from the mouths of these fellow black characters as profusely and naturally as it does from white characters. Such language confirms that an oppressive system is effective when its victims begin to see themselves through the eyes of the oppressor. The oppressed group fulfills the role expectations defined by the dominant group. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* supports the view that the institution of slavery or legalized subjugation is bad, but also that the white race is generally superior to the black race (even if an individual such as Tom may be morally superior to an individual white man, such as Mr. Shelby). This belief is clearly inscribed in portrayals of the white mistress and in her correlate, the stereotypical mammy.

The white mistress is used as the female standard based on her behavioral characteristics as exemplified in the character of Miss Ophelia and especially Marie St. Clare. Miss Ophelia, a northerner,

believes—paternalistically—that the slave owner is responsible for his slave's behavior and will be held accountable before God (194), just as the slave owner is responsible for his own behavior and will be held accountable before God. As in her beliefs, she is described according to her habits of order, method, and exactness. She holds in contempt and abomination anything of a contrary character, such as Topsy (174-75). Such an attitude characterizes those who participate in the construction and maintenance of stereotypical images. Anything or anyone perceived to be different from oneself can then be relegated to the "other." The "other" is objectified; it is scrutinized and judged from a distance. One is thus justified in treating the "other" differently because it is defined differently.

An example of such objectification lies in the cases of womanhood and motherhood. This objectification of the "other" is exemplified above all in Marie St. Clare's perception of the slave in general. She views all slaves as children (191) and makes every effort to maintain the superior-inferior hierarchy, which she believes neither the northern white female nor the southern white male fully comprehends (191-92). Stowe is clearly critical of the Southern mistress mentality when she characterizes Marie St. Clare's general and specific views regarding her slaves. With her southern mistress mentality, Marie objectifies in particular her slave, Mammy, when she contends that Mammy could not love her dirty children as she (Marie) loves her own daughter, Eva: "Mammy could n't have the feelings that I should. It 's a different thing altogether,—of course, it is,—and yet St. Clare pretends not to see it. And just as if Mammy could love her little dirty babies as I love Eva!" (191). Marie St. Clare views Mammy as incapable of a mother's love. Marie's perspective places Mammy outside the realm of not only motherhood, but womanhood, since a characteristic of womanhood is to be motivated largely by emotion. This link between womanhood and the capability to feel and to empathize is confirmed earlier when Mrs. Shelby is accused of allowing herself to feel. An argument ensues while Mr. and Mrs. Shelby are discussing the sale of Eliza's child, Harry. Of note is Mrs. Shelby's use of the word "woman" rather than "lady" in response to Mr. Shelby's accusation: "you allow yourself to feel too much." Mrs. Shelby responds, "Feel too much! Am not I a woman—a mother?" (84). Because of its use in this context, the term "woman" is indeed more meaningful and more substantial than "lady." The word "woman" clearly connotes life and nurturance in its connection to motherhood. "Lady," on the other hand, stereotypical in itself, bears the

connotation of a porcelain figure, incapable of serving any purpose other than adornment or accessory. The superficiality of the alabaster lady image emerges again when Senator Bird urges his wife to repress her emotions. The narrator describes Mrs. Bird as "a timid, blushing little woman, about four feet in height, and with mild blue eyes, and a peach-blow complexion, and the gentlest, sweetest voice in the world" (91). During their discussion of the Fugitive Slave Law Senator Bird says, "we must n't suffer our feelings to run away with our judgment; we must put aside our private feelings" (93). This is yet another instance in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that reveals that the preservation of the white female porcelain facade is controlled mainly by the props of patriarchy.

The stereotypical mammy in her role of mother and worker is not admonished for her outward expression of feelings because such unrestrained expressions enact the opposite emotional response from that imposed upon the white lady. While Eliza tells her story of escape, "Mrs. Bird had her face fairly hidden in her pocket-handkerchief; and old Dinah, with tears streaming down her black, honest face, was ejaculating, 'Lord have mercy on us' with all the fervor of a camp-meeting" (97-98). The stereotypical mammy is characterized by extremes, yet she is perceived to possess feelings at a lower level than the white lady, for she is made to endure the agony of separation from her own husband and children, as cited earlier in the characterization of Mammy. Marie St. Clare, for example, tells Miss Ophelia that Mammy is "smooth and respectful, but she 's selfish at heart. Now, she will never be done fidgeting and worrying about that husband of hers" (186). The stereotypical mammy's role as wife holds little significance when her reason for being is perceived as merely to render personal services for the white mistress and her family, and to serve as a correlate in order to maintain the ideal white female image.

It is not only the stereotypical mammy's physical and behavioral features, but even her family life that is depicted as vastly different from that of her correlate, the ideal white female. Regarding the contrasts between Aunt Chloe and Mrs. Shelby and old Dinah and Mrs. Bird, Stowe reveals how black and white women function within their separate families. Both are like magnets, holding their very distinct cultures together (Ducksworth 219). Stowe constructs obvious contrasts not only between Mrs. Shelby and Aunt Chloe, but even between their dwellings. Mrs. Shelby's dwelling is called "the house," while Aunt Chloe's is called "snug territories" (30). Inscribed in the text also is an

imposed hierarchy among the slaves: "The evening meal at the house is over, and Aunt Chloe, who presided over its preparation as 'head cook,' has left to 'inferior officers' in the kitchen the business of clearing away and washing dishes . . ." (30). Again, Stowe's selection of lexical items is representative of her world view. As in the society at large the writer sees hierarchy, domination, and competitive individualism as a way of life even at the very core of family life—the home. Ironically the center of the home, the kitchen, is supervised by the mammy figure as Stowe, with mockery and condescension, inscribes Aunt Chloe with a level of authority in the hierarchy as "head cook" over the "inferior officers."

Again, the aspect of hierarchical portrayals most significant for this study in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the contrast between the ideal white female and the stereotypical mammy. The character whose name is Mammy is described as a middle-aged mulatta with a respectable appearance (181). Marie St. Clare's child, Eva, loves Mammy unconditionally. Mammy's severe headaches are minimized and altogether disregarded by others, yet the reader knows of her suffering because of Eva's empathy. Marie St. Clare's physical and mental ailments are maximized. She voices her complaints so frequently that everyone knows of her condition (184). Further, Marie blames her slaves for her ill health. She thinks Mammy to be selfish because Mammy sleeps soundly and is thus unaware of Marie's discomfort (185). Marie judges Mammy by what she expects as an acceptable level of production. She sees her servants in general as grown children and describes them as stupid, unreasonable, childish wretches (191). Marie exercises the freedom to define; thus the implication of her superiority is clear.

This implied superior nature of the white female goes beyond the individual to the family and ultimately to society. According to Ducksworth *Uncle Tom's Cabin* portrays the white woman not only to be superior, but to possess strength of character like a powerful field of light which is used to guide and uplift her male partner and her sons (219). Although this characterization does not fit Marie St. Clare, whom Stowe treats as an unworthy exception, both Mrs. Shelby and Mrs. Bird exemplify the ideal white female who voices her view on slavery and pricks the consciousness of her male companion, even though her words are tempered by the constraints of patriarchy so as not to blur the boundaries of the portrayal of her superior nature. Even though the white female, Marie St. Clare, does not possess in reality the

superior nature she thinks she has and that is reflected in Mrs. Shelby and Mrs. Bird, she is portrayed to be superior in status to the black woman regardless of her moral disposition as a white female. The older black woman, on the other hand,—as represented by Chloe—is merely a force which supports her child-like black male and her uncouth sons. Ducksworth refers to the stark contrast between Stowe's black and white mothers when they reprimand their children. During dinner in her home, Aunt Chloe speaks to her sons with an overall tone of intolerance, "'Oh, go long, will ye?'" and "giving now and then a kick, in a general way under the table." She sternly warns, "'Better mind yerselves or I'll take ye down a button-hole lower, when Mas'r George is gone. Get along wid ye!' she said, pushing away their woolly heads" (37). On the other hand, the narrator describes Mrs. Bird's interaction with her children in a tone of poetic loving tolerance: "ever and anon mingling admonitory remarks to a number of frolicsome juveniles, who were effervescing in all those modes of untold gambol and mischief that have astonished mothers ever since the flood" (90).

Stowe's range of characterization of the black female extends beyond the stark contrasts suggested by Ducksworth. In fact, Stowe portrays heart-wrenching scenes of black mother-child relationships in the portraits of Eliza and Harry when Eliza risks their lives while crossing the Ohio River on ice (72). A similar portrayal consists of Susan and Emmeline, mother and daughter respectively, as they await the wretched experience of the auction block and Susan agonizes over the curse of black beauty within the confines of enslavement (355).

Amid this range of sympathetic portrayals, however, remains the perpetuation of stereotypical images consistent in the correlation between the black female as mammy and the white female as mistress. The white mistress portrayed in the works of early white women writers participates in the perpetuation of images that stereotype physical features and predict behavior, especially when the behavior relates to work and responsibility. The stereotypical mammy and the ideal white lady are consistently portrayed together in the context of work and responsibility.

As noted in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, work and responsibility play a major role in maintaining hierarchy, domination, competitive individualism, and thus production. Work and responsibility are also used as activities that distinguish and identify. Drew Gilpin Faust, like Barbara Christian, stresses that the white female's identity depended on having others perform life's menial tasks. Faust learns from primary

sources such as letters and diaries that one white female, after securing a slave to resume her household duties, stated, "she had taken the cooking and we are all ladies again. . . ." Another complained that her husband did not know how much a woman's happiness depended on good servants (1996, 77). "Lady" and "work" are perceived to be incongruent; where one exists the other cannot. In Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, two of the stereotypical mammies, Dinah and Aunt Chloe, communicate the notion that if one is classified as lady, one cannot function in the kitchen. Faust contends that most white women saw themselves as incompetent to manage their slaves, and most slaves shared their mistress's views of their own incompetence (56-57). This is clearly shown in black female slave narratives such as *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself* (1861). In the former narrative Mrs. Woods repeatedly threatened to order Mary Prince flogged because of her sass. It was seldom that she followed through in her threat. In the latter narrative Harriet Jacobs characterizes the incompetence of Mrs. Flint as incapable of running her home while Jacobs's Aunt Nancy is in jail. Not only is this incompetence inscribed in early black women's works, but in early white women's works like Caroline Lee Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride.*

PERFECTING MAMMY IN HENTZ'S *THE PLANTER'S NORTHERN BRIDE*

The complexity of white and black female relations is more revealing in the pro-slavery novel of Caroline Lee Hentz, *The Planter's Northern Bride* (1854). Kizzie serves as a stereotypical mammy correlate to the ideal white female, Eula, exhibiting the expected embellished physical and loyal behavioral characteristics while uncovering some of the tension that exists in this relationship. Crissy provides the stereotypical mammy characteristic of loyalty as the correlate to Ildegerte. But Hentz magnifies the portraits of Aunt Dicey and Aunt Dilsey, who take loyalty and submissiveness to new depths. The complexity of the white and black female relationship will never be entirely revealed, but as noted in my Introduction and in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the white female must maintain the black female presence in her sphere to keep her own identity intact, while a tension forever exists between the two females. Hentz's work reveals a relational tension not only as an outgrowth of work and responsibility couched in a patriarchal ideology,

but also as a result of northern and southern ideological contrasts as Eula struggles to establish the superior-inferior hierarchy expected of a southern slave-holding mistress. Hentz includes a meaningful scene in *The Planter's Northern Bride* that depicts the variable nature of the relationship between the white mistress and mammy figure prior to the advent of the Civil War. Eula speaks to Kizzie as one would to a sister or a friend when Kizzie prepares to attend a Sunday evening church service:

> "Did you think of going to church to-night, Kizzie? Little Russell is so unwell I would rather you would not leave me. I have a bad headache myself, also."
>
> "La, missus! there is nothing the matter with him, just wakeful; that's all. He'll go to sleep directly."
>
> "I do not feel able to take care of him to-night, Kizzie. I want you to stay."
>
> "Won't Netty do, missus? . . ."
>
> "Netty has no experience, and I am sure the child is sick. . . ." She did not want Kizzie to see how much she was wounded by her reluctance to fulfil [sic] a positive duty (2:139).

More important than Eula's dependence on Kizzie is her seeming reluctance to insist upon Kizzie's remaining and taking care of the child. Eula's language suggests that she is asking a friend for a favor and is disappointed by the negative response.

Yet another dimension of this complex relationship is fear. Faust describes one white woman who talked about how her fears were aroused when her husband was absent from the plantation because of his participation in the Civil War. She recalls that "there was the fear . . . dark, boding, oppressive and altogether hateful . . ." (60). Eula experiences a similar foreboding upon first visiting her husband's plantation:

> Eula gazed with a kind of fascination on the dark procession, as one after another, men, women, and children, passed along to the gin house to deposit their burdens. It seemed as if she were watching the

> progress of a great eclipse, and that soon she would be enveloped in total darkness. She was a mere speck of light, in the midst of shadows. How easy it would be to extinguish her! She recollected all the horrible stories she had heard of negro insurrections, and thought what an awful thing it was to be at the mercy of so many slaves, on that lonely plantation (2:33).

This text exemplifies Toni Morrison's contention that the need by whites to deal with internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation resulted in a construction of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire, which Morrison calls American Africanism. She explains that suppressed and repressed darkness became objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona (1992, 38-39). Morrison's insight is borne out in another scene in Caroline Hentz's *The Planter's Northern Bride* when Eula sees her husband, Moreland, as "an angel of light surrounded by spirits of darkness, and, knowing that he was defended by the breastplate of righteousness, she was assured of his safety as well as his power" (2:200). Eula confirms the myth that the white male who participates in the system of patriarchy is symbolic of the larger-than-life white male who existed during biblical times. Hentz's choice of reference more importantly portrays the white male as one who is endowed with the light of Christ in contrast to the shadow of Satan. Scriptural use of "breastplate of righteousness" connotes a protective shield against evil—the dark abiding presence—the Africanist persona.

This tension between blacks and whites in general most assuredly made an impact on the white female's perception of the black female in ways that emerge in later literature, especially when relational hierarchies began to be disrupted by the Civil War. Some white females came to see the black female as faithful friend and servant, as suggested in Hentz's pro-slavery work, but also as protector. For some older black women, then, work and responsibility later took on the added dimension of protection.

Although work and responsibility along with the identity that results from domination and control are melded into relational structures that call for redefinition, the superior-inferior presumption still permeates the society at all levels. Hentz's work consists of numerous correlations between the ideal white female and the stereotypical mammy. The major correlations lie between Eula and Aunt Kizzie, and Ildegerte and Crissy. Eula is described as wife and mother but still having a virginal innocence: "Though a wife and

mother, she retained the expression of child-like, virgin innocence, which gave her the similitude of a vestal in the white-robed village choir; and this expression was the mirror of her soul" (2:124). Aunt Kizzie, on the other hand, is described with "her ebony face shining like the sun, and her thick African lips flattened in the broad smile that parts them" (1:212-13). Aunt Kizzie is nurse, seamstress, mammy, and submistress (1:212-13); the latter indicates that she possesses some level of authority in the hierarchy of work and responsibility. Crissy, too, is so devoted to Moreland's sister, Ildegerte, that, unlike Stowe's Mammy, willingly and readily, she leaves her husband and children in order to attend to Ildegerte and her sick husband, Richard, as she resolves, "'You go, I go; Mars. Richard sick, I nuss him; take care of you. Never mind Jim and the children. Leave 'em to Lord Almighty'" (1:222). Each black female figure possesses the physical features, the behavioral features, and work activities of the stereotypical mammy.

Descending to the depths of more extreme stereotype is Hentz's depiction of Aunt Kizzie's mother, Aunt Dicey, a contented slave who serves as an example for the others:

> An old Aunt Dicey is found in almost every large household establishment at the South. The old family nurse, often the tutelary genius of three generations, the faithful servant, who had devoted the vigour of her youth and energies of her womanhood to her master's interest, and to his children's service (1:233).

She is simple-hearted and pious, but now old and infirm. Aunt Dicey lives in what Hentz describes as a comfortable dwelling similar to Stowe's description of Aunt Chloe's "snug territories," both, naturally, on the plantation. Aunt Dicey is the one to whom all the slaves pay respect and reverence (1:232-33). Similar to Aunt Dicey, but the most stereotypical of the four stereotypical mammy figures, is Aunt Dilsey, who is described as a "most ancient and honorable matron of the establishment" (2:36). The impact of this mammy figure's language is great because it occurs while she is upon her death bed. Aunt Dilsey is prepared to depart from the corporeal state of respected elder to the spiritual state of African ancestor. Her language, however, reflects the effectiveness of a lifetime of domination—the domination of one culture over another. She says to Moreland, "'Oh! massa! 'spose you don't know poor Dilsey when you git to heben, 'cause she'll be beautiful, white angel den'" (2:52). Aunt Dilsey's view reflects a literal

concept of the Christian faith. She believes that she will be changed from a corporeal to a spiritual state upon her death. Most important is that Aunt Dilsey reflects the Christian teaching of her white teachers, for she perceives the godly, the spiritual, the celestial to be white. To her people she says:

> "Yes! brudders and sisters!" she cried clapping her cold, feeble hands, "rejoice that ye eber hearn of de Lord Jesus and de blessed herarter. If we'd all staid in de heathen land, where all de black folks come from, we'd neber known noting 'bout heben, noting 'bout de hebenly 'deemer or de golden streets of de new Jerusalem. Tink of dat, if Satin eber tempt you to leave good massa and missus" (2:53).

Aunt Dilsey's sermonic discourse complements the pro-slavery message that the institution of slavery is paternal, protective, and based on Christian ethics.

The mammy figure is clearly established in Hentz in the forms of Aunt Dilsey, Aunt Dicey, Kizzie, and Crissy. Their construction permits contrast through direct discourse in expressions that reinforce the notions of the superiority of whites and the correctness of slavery. They are permitted to speak in their own variety of the language, yet their language is usurped by an early white female proslavery author to express hegemonic views and confirm stereotypical behavior. These characters' reverence for whiteness is depicted in Kizzie's loyal, child-like manner, Crissy's voluntary disruption of her own family ties, Aunt Dicey's reverence for white superiority, and Aunt Dilsey's aligning the white race with the Divine. A most significant aspect of Hentz's portrayal is the characteristic of old age ascribed to Aunt Dicey and Aunt Dilsey. To weave the ideology of proslavery through the language of the significant elder figure of the slave community is a powerful narrative strategy to promote the status quo and perpetuate a system of institutional hegemony.

CHOPIN'S SHORT STORY AND NOVEL PORTRAITS

During the latter part of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century the portrayal of the older black woman still conveys contentment with the status quo. As political and social situations change, domestic situations change. The stereotypical mammy figure laboring in the white household under the oppressive system of slavery

evolved into the colored or Negro female domestic servant rendering services far below cost in the white household, where her work and responsibility still fall under the authority of the white female. Because the black female is a component of the social context, she is a constant figure in the literature. Her presence is meaningful whether she speaks or not. Trudier Harris points out that a peculiar and most degrading aspect of domestic service is the requisite of invisibility. A maid draped in invisibility is devoid of the power to cause trouble or disturb the status quo (1982, 12). Contradiction, however, surrounds the narrative strategy that silences a figure to the point of invisibility, yet permits that figure repeatedly to emerge. The ultimate silence would be the complete erasure of the black female image. Apparently presence in utter silence is more meaningful than absence.

Near the end of the nineteenth century, Chopin's work shows constructions of the dark abiding presence of blacks generally and the mammy and domestic servant figures specifically. Her style is to show that blacks are denied voice. Birnbaum suggests that the white female's struggle to use her own voice and to express her own desires silences the black female voice. Anyone over whom the white female has control cannot be realized in the language of the text (1995, 322). The correlation between the two is still racialized. The stereotypical black female acts as a correlate to the ideal white female because the black female's nonverbal presence is meaningful for the white female's verbal presence.

"La Belle Zoraïde" (1894)

Per Seyersted alludes to Kate Chopin's authorial presence when he points out that she is interested in human characteristics more than racial issues and that she is a detached observer; therefore, her own views are never imposed on the reader. Seyersted argues that Chopin never advocated social change in her works; nevertheless, he admits that in the short story "La Belle Zoraïde" Chopin reveals some level of condemnation of slavery. In "La Belle Zoraïde" Chopin permits the mammy figure, Manna-Loulou, to tell a story about a white mistress, Madame Delarivière, who forbids her mulatta slave, la belle Zoraïde, to marry the very black Negro slave, le beau Mézor. The mistress ultimately sends la belle Zoraïde's newborn to a distant neighbor. It appears that Seyersted, just as the white mistress and listener, Madame Delisle, misses the message of the story told by Manna-Loulou.

Seyersted credits Chopin's effort to denounce slavery because she shows Madame Delisle pitying the child who was snatched from her slave mother. Ever looming, however, is a system that allows one human being to have total control over another human being's life because the system demands that one group dominate while another group submit to its domination. Manna-Loulou communicates this in her story; however, the white mistress, Madame Delisle, envisions only a minute component of a massive and pervasive system of domination, so she responds with the fleeting emotions expected during a bedtime story ritual. If this story had infiltrated her heart and her mind, then Madame Delisle would have been able to see with understanding the destructive nature of a system of domination. She would have responded with outrage followed by action rather than pity followed by inaction.

Madame Delisle's cognitive impairment is paralleled by the narrator's visual impairment, which is revealed in the generalized description of Manna-Loulou's physical and behavioral characteristics. Manna-Loulou is described as "black as night" and "the old negress" (303). In contrasting images of physical beauty as white the narrator says that "the old negress had already bathed her mistress's pretty white feet and kissed them lovingly, one, then the other. She brushed her mistress's beautiful hair that was as soft and shining as satin . . . and began gently to fan Madame Delisle" (303). Behaviorally, she is portrayed at the depths of subservience, yet her story of Zoraïde reveals that she is all too aware of the system that dominates and controls her life. Given this awareness, why does she seem to adore her mistress's white beauty, even her feet? Anna Elfenbein credits Chopin for revealing the extent to which oppressed people are shaped by the stereotypes applied to them (118). In each of Chopin's representative works selected for this study, Chopin reveals behavior associated with her black female character that is consistent with the subservient stereotype; thus she is obedient in "La Belle Zoraïde," even while telling a subversive tale, silent in "A No Account Creole," and loyal in "Beyond the Bayou."

"A No Account Creole" (1894)

In Chopin's short story "A No Account Creole" blacks are easily silenced. Blacks in general are figuratively silenced through a narrative classification with animals and objects. La Chatte in particular is also

literally silenced by the whim of a white male child. Both strategies render the black presence mute. In Chopin's "A No Account Creole" blacks are generalized as "darkies" (90) and equated with animals when the narrator says, "for the little darkies had scampered away to their cabins, the dogs had run to their kennels, and the hens were puffing big with wretchedness under the scanty shelter of a fallen wagon-body" (91). The narrative is socially constructed; therefore, by nature it is subjective. The language also contradicts Seyersted's conclusion that Chopin's views are never imposed on the reader. The writer's choice of language leaves an imprint even when it is channeled subtly through the narrative voice and tone. Literally categorizing humans with animals forces the close reader to raise questions about the author's genuine interest in the depiction of human characteristics.

In concert with the local-color parade of objects above, the narrator describes the mammy figure, La Chatte, as "a broad, black woman with ends of white wool sticking out from under her tignon" (89). La Chatte's size can be inferred from the language chosen to describe how she sat "lazily and heavily on the doorstep" (89). The description follows the norm for the stereotypical mammy even in the absence of an explicit ideal white female who plays the role of mistress. The beautiful white female, Euphrasie, however, is present. She is portrayed with thick chestnut waves in her hair, wistful light eyes, red lips, and cream-colored flesh (85-86). Again, Euphrasie is present as the contrastive ideal white female even though she is not technically cast as La Chatte's mistress.

Like Chopin's "black woman" at the door in *The Awakening*, La Chatte in "A No Account Creole" is silenced by the young white male of the household—a young white male who threatens her with a gun to fulfill his desire for a particular baked good. She tells her listener, Rose, "'I goes to de ba'el, de gun's a-p'intin'. Ef I goes to de fiah, de gun's a-p'intin'. W'en I rolls out de dough, de gun 's a-p'intin'; an' him neva say nuttin', an' me a-trim'lin' like ole Uncle Noah w'en de mis'ry strike 'im'" (90). In retrospect La Chatte acceptingly views the ordeal as mischievous behavior rather than as a battle of wills or a struggle to preserve the superior-inferior hierarchy.

Finally, animal imagery again reinforces the stereotype because La Chatte's name means "cat."

"Beyond the Bayou" (1894)

In Chopin's short story "Beyond the Bayou," La Folle breaks her self-constructed silence in order to perpetuate the stereotypical behavior of loyalty, thus confirming the superior-inferior hierarchy in the white female-black female correlation. La Folle is constrained not by obvious strategies of domination such as control, silence, or invisibility, but by an emotional self-confinement. Ironically, La Folle's confinement is due to a childhood experience which left her fearful of leaving her dwelling. In her self-confinement, La Folle actually imposes a perimeter of silence because her neighbors have moved beyond the bayou over the years. As Lydia Boren suggests, La Folle, in refusing to travel beyond the bayou, subjects herself to a geographical prison (1992, 4). With the exception of obesity, La Folle is typical of most older black women portrayed in early white female literature: "She was now a large, gaunt black woman, past thirty-five. She had more physical strength than most men, and made her patch of cotton, corn and tobacco like the best of them" (175). As in other Chopin works, La Folle, too, is compared to an animal: "She walked with long strides. Her eyes were fixed desperately before her, and she breathed heavily, as a tired ox" (178). It is the ideal white female whom she desperately attempts to reach with Chéri, the white female's wounded son. Even though the narrator provides no full portrait of Chéri's mother in "Beyond the Bayou," it is understood that she holds the position of superior white female and mother, for she is the only white female inscribed in the narrative. La Folle plays the expected role of subservient mother and woman as she overcomes her own deep-seated and long-standing fears to save the life of the white boy, Chéri, whom she loved as if he were her own son.

The Silence in *The Awakening*

In Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), the narrative silencing strategy restricts the black female presence through descriptive namelessness and partial voicelessness as she struggles to maintain her identity through work and responsibility. Regardless of role in *The Awakening*, the black presence is again portrayed as if it were an object in a local-color description: "A little black girl sat . . ." (40); "The little negro girl who worked . . ." (51); "The quadroon had vanished" (59); and "the light-colored mulatto boy . . . admitted them" (69). Yet Chopin chooses to write that "a maid . . . offered the callers liqueur" (69), without color