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“ON THE THRESHOLD OF WOMAN’S ERA”: LYNCHING, EMPIRE AND SEXUALITY IN BLACK FEMINIST THEORY’

Hazel V. Carby

If the fifteenth century discovered America to the Old World, the nineteenth is discovering woman to herself....

Not the opportunity of discovering new worlds, but that of filling this old world with fairer and higher aims than the greed of gold and the lust of power, is hers. Through weary, wasting years men have destroyed, dashed in pieces, and overthrown, but to-day we stand on the threshold of woman’s era, and woman’s work is grandly constructive. In her hand are possibilities whose use or abuse must tell upon the political life of the nation, and send their influence for good or evil across the track of unborn ages.

[Frances E. W. Harper, ‘Woman’s Political Future’]

The world of thought under the predominant man-influence, unmollified and unrestrained by its complementary force, would become like Daniel’s fourth beast: ‘dreadful and terrible, and *strong* exceedingly;’ it had great iron teeth; it devoured and brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with the feet of it;’ and the most independent of us find ourselves ready at times to fall down and worship this incarnation of power.

[Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*]

My purpose in this essay is to describe and define the ways in which Afro-American women intellectuals, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the orized about the possibilities and limits of patriarchal power through its manipulation of racialized and gendered social categories and practices. The essay is especially directed toward two academic constituencies: the practitioners of Afro-American cultural analysis and of feminist historiography and theory. The dialogue with each has its own peculiar form, characterized by its own specific history; yet both groups are addressed in an assertion of difference, of alterity, and in a voice characterized by an anger dangerously self-restrained. For it is not in the nature of Caliban to curse; rather, like Caliban, the black woman has learned from the behaviour of her master and mistress that if accommodation results in a patronizing loosening of her bonds, liberation will be more painful.

On the one hand, Afro-American cultural analysis and criticism have traditionally characterized the turn of the century as the age of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Afro-American studies frame our response to that period within a conceptual apparatus limiting historical interpretation to theories of exceptional male intellectual genius as exemplified in the texts *Up from Slavery* and *The Souls of Black Folk*. I wish to reconsider the decade of the 1890s as the ‘woman’s era’ not merely in order to insert women into the gaps in our cultural history (to compete for intellectual dominance with men) but to shift the object of interpretation from examples of individual intellectual genius to the collective production and interrelation of forms of knowledge among black women intellectuals. The intellectual discourse of black women during the 1890s includes a wide variety of cultural practices. This essay, however, will concentrate on the theoretical analyses of race, gender, and patriarchal power found in the essays of Anna Julia Cooper, the journalism of Ida B. Wells, and the first novel of Pauline Hopkins.

On the other hand, feminist theory and its academic practice, ‘women’s studies’, appear if not content with, then at least consistent in, their limited concern with a small minority of the women of the planet: those white, middle-class inhabitants of the metropolises. Although feminist scholarship has made the histories of these women visible, it has done so by reconstituting patriarchal power on another terrain rather than by promising a strategy for its abolition. This leaves us with the same complaint as our nineteenth-century black fore-mothers: feminist theory supports and reproduces a racist hierarchy. Feminist investigations of nineteenth-century women writers actively ignore nonwhite women; some of the most recent, exciting, and innovative thinking on sexuality relegates black women to a paragraph and secondary sources. Ellen Carol DuBois and Linda Gordon, in their essay ‘Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth-Century Feminist Sexual Thought’, argue that ‘the black women’s movement conducted a particularly militant campaign for respectability, often making black feminists spokespeople for prudery in their communities’, without direct reference to one of these black feminists or their work. Their subject is ‘how feminists conceptualized different sexual dangers, as a means of organizing *resistance* to sexual oppression’; their motivation is to be able to examine how these strategies changed and to learn what historical understanding can be brought to contemporary feminist campaigns.¹ I hope that a discussion of Cooper, Wells and Hopkins in the context of the black women’s movement will direct readers to consider more seriously how black feminists conceptualized the possibilities for resisting sexual oppression than the dismissal implied in ‘prudery’ allows.

The decade of the 1890s was a time of intense activity and productivity for Afro-American women intellectuals. It opened with the publication of Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, Cooper’s *Voice from the Souths* and Wells’ *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*.² In 1893, as part of the World’s Columbian Exposition, the World’s Congress of Representative Women met in Chicago. Among others, Hallie Q. Brown, Anna Julia Cooper, Fannie Jackson Coppin, Sarah J. Early, Frances Harper, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Frederick Douglass – six black women and one black man – addressed the gathering. Harper told her audience that she felt they were standing ‘on the threshold of women’s era’; in 1894, *Woman’s Era* was the name chosen for the journal run by the Woman’s Era Club in Boston.³ The club movement grew rapidly among Afro-American women and culminated in the first Congress of Colored Women of the United States, which convened in Boston in 1895. In 1896, the National Federation of Colored Women and the National League of Colored Women united in Washington, DC, to form the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). For the first time, black women were nationally organized to confront the various modes of their oppression.⁴

The decade opened and closed with the publication of novels by black women: Harper’s *Iola* and the first of Hopkins’ four novels. *Contending Forces* (1900). Both authors intended that their texts contribute to the struggle for social change in a period of crisis for the Afro-American community. Their novels were meant to be read as actively attempting to

change the structure of the Afro-American culture of which they were a part. As an integral part of a wider movement among black women intellectuals, these books both shaped and were shaped by strategies for resisting and defeating oppression. Organizing to fight included writing to organize. The novels do not merely reflect constituencies but attempt to structure Afro-American struggles in particular directions; both are loci of political and social interests that try to form, not just reveal, their constituencies. Afro-American women were attempting to define the political parameters of gender, race and patriarchal authority and were constantly engaged with these issues in both fiction and nonfiction. The formation of the NACW provided a forum for the exchange of ideas among Afro-American women intellectuals, within a structure that disseminated information nationally. Black women's clubs provided a support for, but were also influenced by, the work of their individual members. Hopkins, for example, read from the manuscript of *Contending Forces* to the members of the Woman's Era Club in Boston; in turn, those members were part of the constituency that Hopkins tried to mobilize to agitate against Jim Crow segregation and the terrorizing practices of lynching and rape.

As intellectuals, these women organized around issues that addressed all aspects of the social organization of oppression. Arrival at the threshold of woman's era did not lead to concentration on what could be narrowly construed as women's issues – whether domestic concerns or female suffrage. Cooper characterized the opportunity this way: To be a woman of the Negro race in America, and to be able to grasp the deep significance of the possibilities of the crisis, is to have a heritage ... unique in the ages' (V, p. 144). Cooper saw the responsibility of the black woman to be the reshaping of society: 'Such is the colored woman's office. She must stamp weal or woe on the coming history of this people' (V, p. 145). To illustrate the process of exchange of ideas within the discourse of the woman's era, I will concentrate on one object of analysis: a theory of internal and external colonization developed in the works of Cooper and Wells and finally figured in the fiction of Hopkins.

As indicated in the epigraphs to this essay, both Harper and Cooper associated imperialism with unrestrained patriarchal power. Prefiguring Hopkins, Harper and Cooper reassessed the mythology of the founding fathers in terms of rampant lust, greed and destruction: they portray white male rule as bestial in its actual and potential power to devour lands and peoples. Cooper developed a complex analysis of social, political and economic forces as being either distinctly masculine or feminine in their orientation and consequences. She saw an intimate link between internal and external colonization, between domestic racial oppression and imperialism. While her critique of imperialism and institutionalized domestic racism is a particularly good example of her larger theories of masculine and feminine practices and spheres of influence, it is important to stress that her categories were not dependent on biological distinction. Cooper made it clear in her application of such analyses that women could conform to masculinist attitudes and practices and men could display womanly virtues.

Cooper saw the imperialist or expansionist impulse, with its ideology of racial categorization, as a supreme manifestation of patriarchal power. She argued that the source of such flagrant abuse had to be questioned, challenged, and opposed:

Whence came this apotheosis of greed and cruelty? Whence this sneaking admiration we all have for bullies and prize-fighters? Whence the self-congratulation of 'dominant' races, as if 'dominant' meant 'righteous' and carried with it a title to inherit the earth? Whence the scorn of so-called weak or unwarlike races and individuals, and the very comfortable assurance that it is their manifest destiny to be wiped out as vermin before this advancing civilization? (V, p. 51)

Cooper refers to Lowell's *Soul of the Far East*, an imperialist treatise which predicted the death of all Asian peoples and cultures, "before the advancing nations of the West". She indicts the author as a 'scion of an upstart race' who felt

confident that, with the stroke of a pen, he could consign 'to annihilation one-third the inhabitants of the globe – a people whose civilization was hoary headed before the parent elements that begot his race had advanced beyond nebulosity' (V, p. 52). The world under a dominant male influence is compared to the beast from the Book of Daniel, devouring all before it and demanding that it be worshiped as an incarnation of power. The complementary force, the female influence, is unable to restrain 'the beast'; the rampant will to dominate and despise the weak is also present in the racist attitudes of white women. Cooper saw patriarchal power revealed in the imperialist impulse, but she also saw that that power was nurtured and sustained at home by an elite of white women preoccupied with maintaining their caste status (see V, pp. 86–7).

Cooper felt strongly that the only effective counter to patriarchal abuse of power – the feminine – had to be developed through the education of women. Education held possibilities for the empowerment of women, who could then shape the course of a future society which would exercise sensitivity and sympathy toward all who were poor and oppressed. White women, however, rarely exercised their power in sympathy with their black sisters. Cooper was well aware of this, and some of her most vituperative work attacks the exclusionary practices and discourse of white women's organizations which presumed to exist for and address the experiences of 'women'. Cooper challenged white women, as would-be leaders of reform, to revolutionize their thinking and practices. She challenged them to transform their provincial determination to secure gender and class interests at the expense of the rights of the oppressed (see V, pp. 123–4).

These gender and class interests were disguised when the issue of justice began to be displaced by debates about the dangers of social equality – debates that concerned the possible status of subject peoples abroad as well as the position of blacks in the United States. Cooper recognized – and condemned as fallacious – the concept of social equality with its implications of forced association between the races. This was not the social justice which blacks demanded. On the contrary, Cooper asserted, forced association was the manacled black male and the raped black woman, both internally colonized. Social equality masked the real issue: autonomy and the right to self-determination.

Cooper understood that the smoke screen of social equality obscured questions of heritage and inheritance which appeared in the figure of 'blood' and gained consensual dominance both North and South (see V, pp. 103–4). She became convinced that the key to understanding the unwritten history of the United States was the dominance of southern 'influence, ideals, and ideas' over the whole nation. Cooper saw that the manipulative power of the South was embodied in the southern patriarch, but she describes its concern with 'blood', inheritance, and heritage in entirely female terms and as a preoccupation that was transmitted from the South to the North and perpetuated by white women. The South represented not red blood but blue:

If your own father was a pirate, a robber, a murderer, his hands are dyed in red blood, and you don't say very much about it. But if your great great great grandfather's grandfather stole and pillaged and slew, and you can prove it, your blood has become blue and you are at great pains to establish the relationship.... [The South] had blood; and she paraded it with so much gusto that the substantial little Puritan maidens of the North, who had been making bread and canning currants and not thinking of blood the least bit, began to hunt up the records of the Mayflower to see if some of the passengers thereon could not claim the honor of having been one of William the Conqueror's brigands, when he killed the last of the Saxon Kings and, red-handed, stole his crown and his lands. (V, pp. 103–4)

Ridicule effectively belittles and undermines the search for an aristocratic heritage and proof of biological racial superiority; it also masks a very serious critique of these ideologies that Hopkins was to develop in her fiction. The juxtaposition of 'red' with 'blue' blood reveals the hidden history of national and nationalist heritage to be based on the

principles of murder and theft – piracy. Hopkins drew from this analysis of the methods of expansionism, as it applied to the colonization of the Americas and to the imperialist ventures of the United States, as she demystified the mythological pretensions of the American story of origins in her fiction.

By linking imperialism to internal colonization, Cooper thus provided black women intellectuals with the basis for an analysis of how patriarchal power establishes and sustains gendered and racialized social formations. White women were implicated in the maintenance of this wider system of oppression because they challenged only the parameters of their domestic confinement; by failing to reconstitute their class and caste interests, they reinforced the provincialism of their movement. Ultimately, however, Cooper placed her hopes for change on the possibility of a transformed woman's movement. She wanted to expand the rubric defining the concerns of women to encompass an ideal and practice that could inspire a movement for the liberation of all oppressed peoples, not just a movement for the defence of parochial and sectional interests in the name of 'woman' (see V, p. 125).

The pen of Ida B. Wells was aimed at a different target – lynching, as a practice of political and economic repression. Wells' analysis of the relation between political terrorism, economic oppression, and conventional codes of sexuality and morality has still to be surpassed in its incisive condemnation of the patriarchal manipulation of race and gender.⁵ Her achievement drew upon the support of club women but also provided the impetus for the formation of anti-lynching societies. *Southern Horrors*, on the one hand, was dedicated to the Afro-American women of New York and Brooklyn, whose contributions had made publication of the pamphlet possible. On the other hand, Wells claimed in her autobiography that the meetings to organize her first antilynching lecture and the forum itself were 'the real beginning of the club movement among the colored women' in the United States.⁶ The gathering of black women from Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and other cities indicated that organization was already embryonic. The meeting on one particular issue, lynching, was a catalyst for the establishment of numerous clubs and a general movement that would extend beyond any one single issue.

Wells established in *Southern Horrors* that the association between lynching and rape was strictly a contemporary phenomenon; she argued that there was no historical foundation for that association, since 'the crime of rape was unknown during four years of civil war, when the white women of the South were at the mercy of the race which is all at once charged with being a bestial one' (*SH*, p. 5). She indicted the miscegenation laws, which, in practice, were directed at preventing sexual relations between white women and black men. The miscegenation laws thus pretended to offer 'protection' to white women but left black women the victims of rape by white men and simultaneously granted to these same men the power to terrorize black men as a potential threat to the virtue of white womanhood. Wells asserted that 'there are many white women in the South who would marry colored men if such an act would not place them at once beyond the pale of society and within the clutches of the law'. The miscegenation laws, in her opinion, only operated against 'the legitimate union of the races' (*SH*, p. 6). In her publications and speeches, Wells increasingly used evidence from the white press – statistics on lynchings and reports that substantiated her claims that black male/white female sexual relationships were encouraged by white women. Wells used the white press in this way not only to avoid accusations of falsification or exaggeration but also because she wanted to reveal the contradictions implicit in the association of lynching with the rape of white women. She wanted to condemn the murderers out of their own mouths (see *RR*, p. 15).

Wells recognized that the Southerners' appeal to Northerners for sympathy on the 'necessity' of lynching was very successful. It worked, she thought, through the claim that any condemnation of lynching constituted a public display of indifference to the 'plight' of white womanhood. Wells demonstrated that, while accusations of rape were made in only one-third of all lynchings, the cry of rape was an extremely effective way to create panic and fear. Lynching, she argued,

was an institutionalized practice supported and encouraged by the established leaders of a community and the press they influenced. The North conceded to the South's argument that rape was the cause of lynching; the concession to lynching for a specific crime in turn conceded the right to lynch any black male for any crime: the charge of rape became the excuse for murder. The press acted as accomplices in the ideological work that disguised the lesson of political and economic subordination which the black community was being taught. Black disenfranchisement and Jim Crow segregation had been achieved; now, the annihilation of a black political presence was shielded behind a 'screen of defending the honor of [white] women' (*SH*, p. 14). Those that remained silent while disapproving of lynching were condemned by Wells for being as guilty as the actual perpetrators of lynching.

The lesson the black community should learn, Wells argued, was to recognize its economic power. The South owed its rehabilitation to Northern capital, on the one hand, and to Afro-American labor, on the other: 'By the right exercise of his power as the industrial factor of the South, the Afro-American can demand and secure his rights.' But economic power was only one force among the possible forms of resistance, she concluded: 'a Winchester rifle should have a place of *honor* in every black home' (*SH*, p. 23). Wells knew that emancipation meant that white men lost their vested interests in the body of the Negro and that lynching and the rape of black women were attempts to regain control. The terrorizing of black communities was a political weapon that manipulated ideologies of sexuality. Wells analysed how ideologies of manhood – as well as of citizenship – were embodied in the right to vote. The murder of blacks was so easily accomplished because they had been granted the right to vote but not the means to protect or maintain that right. Thus, Wells was able to assert that the loss of the vote was both a political silencing and an emasculation which placed black men outside the boundaries of contemporary patriarchal power. The cry of rape, which pleaded the necessity of revenge for assaulted white womanhood, attempted to place black males 'beyond the pale of human sympathy' (*RR*, p. 12). Black women were relegated to a place outside the ideological construction of 'womanhood'. That term included only white women; therefore the rape of black women was of no consequence outside the black community.

Wells' analysis of lynching and her demystification of the political motivations behind the manipulation of both black male and female and white female sexuality led her into direct confrontation with women like Frances Willard, president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, who considered themselves progressive but refused to see lynching as an institutionalized practice. Willard's attitude and Wells' conclusion that Willard was 'no better or worse than the great bulk of white Americans on the Negro questions' are indicative of the racism that Cooper condemned in white women's organizations (*RR*, p. 85). As Harper also pointed out, there was not a single black woman admitted to the southern WCTU. What Cooper called the white woman's concern with caste was evident in the assumption of many 'progressive' white women that rape actually was the crime to which lynching was the response.⁷

For Cooper, imperialism linked all those oppressed under the domination of the United States. Patriarchy, for her, was embodied in these acts of violence; therefore she ultimately placed her focus and hopes for the future on a transformed woman's movement. Wells, in her analysis of lynching, provided for a more detailed dissection of patriarchal power, showing how it could manipulate sexual ideologies to justify political and economic subordination. Cooper had failed to address what proved central to the thesis of Wells – that white men used their ownership of the body of the white female as a terrain on which to lynch the black male. White women felt that their caste was their protection and that their interests lay with the power that ultimately confined them. Although Cooper identified the relation between patriarchal power and white women's practice of racial exclusion, she did not examine and analyse what forged that relation. She preferred to believe that what men taught women could be unlearned if women's education was expanded. Wells was able to demonstrate how a patriarchal system, which had lost its total ownership over black male bodies, used its control over women to attempt to completely circumscribe the actions of black males. As black women positioned outside the

‘protection’ of the ideology of womanhood, both Cooper and Wells felt that they could see clearly the compromised role of white women in the maintenance of a system of oppression.

Black women listened, organized, and acted on the theses of both Wells and Cooper, but very few white women responded to their social critiques. Cooper was right to argue that a transformed woman’s movement, purged of racism, would have provided a liberating experience for white women themselves. But racism led to concession, to segregated organizations, and, outside the anti-lynching movement, to a resounding silence about – and therefore complicity in – the attempt to eliminate black people politically, economically and, indeed, physically.

Pauline Hopkins shared this very real fear that black people were threatened with annihilation. She addressed her plea to ‘all Negroes, whether Frenchmen, Spaniards, Americans or Africans to rediscover their history as one weapon in the struggle against oppression’.⁸ Hopkins challenged the readers of her work to bear witness to her testimony concerning the international dimensions of the crisis.

The dawn of the Twentieth century finds the Black race fighting for existence in every quarter of the globe. From over the sea Africa stretches her hands to the American Negro and cries aloud for sympathy in her hour of trial... In America, caste prejudice has received fresh impetus as the ‘Southern brother’ of the Anglo-Saxon family has arisen from the ashes of secession, and like the prodigal of old, has been gorged with fatted calf and ‘fixin’s’.⁹

As a black intellectual, Hopkins conceived of her writing as an inspiration to political action, a pattern for encouraging forms of resistance and agitation, and an integral part of the politics of oppression.

Hopkins regarded fiction in particular as a cultural form of great historical and political significance. In the preface to her first novel, *Contending Forces* (1900), she asserted its ‘religious, political and social’ value and urged other black writers to ‘faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history’.¹⁰ History is the crucial element in Hopkins’ fiction: current oppressive forces, she argued, must be understood in the context of past oppression. ‘Mob-law is nothing new.... The atrocity of the acts committed one hundred years ago are duplicated today, when slavery is supposed no longer to exist’ (*CF*, pp. 14, 15). This thesis is a cornerstone of *Contending Forces*. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of women like Cooper and Wells as well as the central concerns of the black woman’s movement as a whole, Hopkins figures lynching and rape as the two political weapons of terror wielded by the powers behind internal colonization.

Contending Forces opens with a brief recounting of family history. Charles Montfort, a West Indian planter, decides to move his family and estate of slaves from Bermuda to North Carolina in response to the increasing agitation in the British Parliament for the abolition of slavery. Montfort acts to protect his commercial interests and profits. Hopkins is careful to remove any motivation or intention on his part that could be attributed to cruelty or personal avariciousness. Thus she establishes the economic basis of slavery as the primary factor in this decision which precipitates all the events and conditions in the rest of the text. Once the Montfort estate has been established in North Carolina, the focus of the novel gravitates toward Grace Montfort and the suspicion, which becomes rumor, that her blood is ‘polluted’ by an African strain. Hopkins utilizes what Cooper had identified as the American obsession with ‘pure blood’ and reveals its mythological proportions. It is actually irrelevant whether Grace Montfort is a black or a white woman. Her behaviour is classically that of ‘true womanhood’ – but her skin is a little too ‘creamy’. The reader is not apprised of her actual heritage; what is important is the mere suspicion of black blood. This results in the social ostracism of her whole family,

while Grace herself, denied her station on the pedestal of virtue, becomes the object of the illicit sexual desire of a local landowner, Anson Pollock. The possibility that Grace might be black leads directly to the murder of Charles Montfort, the rapes of Grace and her black foster sister Lucy, and the enslavement of the two Montfort sons, Jesse and Charles.

Grace Montfort rejects the advances of Pollock, who then plots to avenge his wounded pride and satisfy his sexual obsession. Under the pretence of quelling an imminent rebellion by Montfort's slaves, Pollock uses the 'committee on public safety' – in fact, a vigilante group – to raid the Montfort plantation. Montfort himself is quickly dispatched by a bullet in the brain, leaving Grace prey to Pollock. In a graphic and tortured two-page scene, Hopkins represents a brutal rape in a displaced form: Grace is whipped by two members of the 'committee'. Her clothes are ripped from her and she is 'whipped' alternately 'by the two strong, savage men'. Hopkins' replacement of the phallus by the 'snaky leather thong' is crude but effective, and the reader is left in no doubt about the kind of outrage that has occurred when 'the blood stood in a pool about her feet' (CF, p. 69).

Grace commits suicide, in the tradition of outraged virtue, and Pollock takes Lucy, Grace's black maid and slave, as his mistress instead. But the actual and figurative ravishing of 'grace' at the hand of Southern brutality establishes the link that Hopkins is drawing between rape and its political motivation as a device of terrorism. Both Charles and Grace Montfort are punished because they threatened to break the acceptable codes that bound the slave system. The possibility of miscegenation represented the ultimate violation of the white woman's social position and required the degradation of the transgressor and the relegation of her offspring to the status of chattel. The two sons represent two possible histories. Charles junior is bought and eventually grows up 'white' in Britain. Jesse escapes into the black communities of Boston and, later, New Hampshire; he is the ancestor of the black family which is the main subject of the novel.

This preliminary tale acts as an overture to the main body of *Contending Forces*, containing the clues and themes that will eventually provide the resolutions to the crises of relations between the main characters. Living in Boston at the turn of the century, the Smith family inherits this tale of its ancestors: the tale appears remote from their everyday lives but is retained in the naming of the children. Ma Smith, her husband dead, runs a lodging house with her son, William Jesse Montfort, and her daughter, Dora Grace Montfort. The two other main characters are both lodgers, John P. Langley, engaged to Dora, and Sappho Clark, a woman who is mysteriously hiding her personal history. All these characters cannot move forward into the future until their relation to the past is revealed. Hopkins displaces a direct attack on the increasing separation of the races onto issues of inheritance, heritage, and culture – issues where bloodlines between the races are so entangled that race as a biological category is subordinated to race as a political category. The historical importance of rape is crucial to the construction of Hopkins' fictionalized history: it is through the rapes of Grace and Lucy that the two races share an intertwined destiny.

Shifting contemporary debates about race from the biological to the political level was a crucial move for Hopkins to make in her fiction. At the height of debate about the consequences of colonizing overseas territories, Hopkins attempted to disrupt imperialist discourse concerning empires composed primarily of nonwhite peoples. The grounds of imperialist argument derived their problematic from the experience of the internal colonization of native American Indians and Africans. At the moment when black Americans were again being systematically excluded from participation in social institutions, the status of people who lived in what the United States now deemed its 'possessions' was an integral component of the contemporary discourse on race. 'Mixing blood' was seen as a threat to the foundations of North American civilization.¹¹

Hopkins intended to disrupt this imperialist discourse through the figuration of an alternative set of historical consequences. The degradation of a race is not represented as being the result of amalgamation but of an abuse of power

– the use of brutality against an oppressed group equates with savagery, in *Hopkins*' terms. She quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson on her title page and again in the body of the text: '*The civility of no race can be perfect whilst another race is degraded.*' The link that Hopkins establishes between Britain and the West Indies makes visible a colonial relationship that enables her to direct a critique of imperial relations to an American readership. Hopkins carefully demonstrates that blacks are a colonized people for whom it is a necessity that history be rewritten. The histories of the externally colonized and the internally colonized are interwoven in many ways but primarily through questions of rightful inheritance. In Hopkins' fictional world, one consequence of external colonization is that a debt must be paid from the profits of the slave trade and Charles Montfort's plantation. For the purposes of this essay, however, I want to concentrate on Hopkins' presentation of the two main weapons of terror of internal colonization: lynching and rape.

At the heart of the text are two tales told at a public gathering by Luke Sawyer, who is black. In the first, a lynching is the central focus of concern; in the second, a rape. Both tales confirm the privileging of these two acts in Hopkins' thesis of 'contending forces'. The first history that Luke tells is of his father, whose success in trade resulted in competition with white traders, threats on his life, and, ultimately, a mob attack on his home and family. His act of self-defence – firing into the mob – is punished by lynching; the women are whipped and raped to death, the two babies slaughtered.

The second tale follows from the first. Luke escapes into the woods and is found by a black planter, Beaubean, who rescues him and takes him into his home to raise as a son. Beaubean has a wealthy and politically influential white half brother, who assumes a stance of friendship toward the whole family but particularly toward Beaubean's daughter, Mabelle. At the age of fourteen, Mabelle is kidnapped by this uncle, raped, and left a prisoner in a brothel. After weeks of searching, Beaubean finds Mabelle and confronts his brother with the crime – only to be asked 'What does a woman of mixed blood, or any Negress, for that matter, know of virtue?' (*CF*, p. 261). Beaubean is offered a thousand dollars by his brother which he rejects with a threat to seek justice in a federal court. Beaubean's threat is promptly met with mob action: his house is set on fire and its occupants shot. Luke escapes with Mabelle and places her in a convent.

Hopkins concentrates on the practices of oppression – the consequences of white supremacy – in reconstructing the history of her characters. The predominance of mulattoes and octoroons in the novel is not intended to glorify the possibilities of the black race. If only it would integrate with (and eventually lose itself within) the white.¹² On the contrary, Hopkins states categorically in this novel and throughout her work that 'miscegenation, either *lawful* or *unlawful*, we *do not want*' (*CF*, p. 264). The presence of racially mixed characters throughout the text emphasizes particular social relations and practices and must be understood historically. Such characters are often the physical consequences of a social system that exercised white supremacy through rape. Use of the mulatto figure, as a literary device, has two primary functions: it enables an exploration of the relation between the races while, at the same time, it expresses the relation between the races. It is a narrative mechanism of mediation frequently used in a period when social convention dictated an increased and more absolute distance between black and white. The figure of the mulatto allows for a fictional representation and reconstruction of the socially proscribed. Hopkins' particular use of such figuration is intended, in part, to demythologize concepts of 'pure blood' and 'pure race'. More important, however, it is an attempt to demonstrate the crucial role of social, political, and economic interests in determining human behaviour by negating any proposition of degeneracy through amalgamation. Hopkins transposes contemporary accusations that miscegenation is the inmost desire of the nonwhite peoples of the earth by reconstructing miscegenation as the result of white rape.

Hopkins saw clearly that the threat to white supremacy was not black sexuality but the potential of the black vote. Rape, she argued, should be totally separated from the issue of violated white womanhood and then recast as part of the social, political, and economic oppression of blacks:

‘Lynching was instituted to crush the manhood of the enfranchised black. Rape is the crime which appeals most strongly to the heart of the home life.... *The men who created the mulatto race, who recruit its ranks year after year by the very means which they invoked lynch law to suppress*, bewailing the sorrows of violated womanhood!

‘No; it is not rape. If the Negro votes, he is shot; if he marries a white woman, he is shot ... or lynched – he is a pariah whom the National Government cannot defend. But if he defends himself and his home, then is heard the tread of marching feet as the Federal troops move southward to quell a “race riot”.’ (CF, pp. 270–1)

The analysis of rape and its links to lynching as a weapon of political terror is, obviously, shaped by the arguments and indictments of Wells. In *Hopkins*’ fictional reconstruction of the social relations between white and black, the two parts of the text move across generations and thus, through historical knowledge, invalidate the understanding of cause and effect then being reasserted through white patriarchal supremacy. Hopkins offers her readers an alternative story of origins where the characters are not holistic creations but the terrain on which the consequences of the authorial assertion of history are worked through. This can be clearly seen in the creation of Sappho Clark, the dominant female figure in the text, who has two identities.

The disguise – that which hides true history – is Sappho, the poet of Lesbos, who was admired and loved by both men and women, though her erotic poetry was addressed to women. The Sappho of *Contending Forces* embodies the potential for utopian relationships between women and between women and men; she represents a challenge to a patriarchal order. To Dora, whose duties running the boarding house confine her to a domestic existence, Sappho is the independent woman who, in their intimate moments together, talks of the need for suffrage and the political activity of women (see CF, p. 125). Sappho disrupts Dora’s complacency – Dora will ‘generally accept whatever the men tell me as right’ and leads her to reassess the importance of friendships with women. But Sappho as an ideal of womanhood does not exist except as a set of fictional possibilities. In order to function, to work and survive, Sappho’s younger self, Mabelle Beaubean, a product of miscegenation and the subject of rape, has had to bury her violated womanhood and deny her progeny. Like Sappho of Lesbos, Sappho Clark has a child, ‘whose form is like gold flowers’.¹³ But unlike Sappho of Lesbos, Mabelle exists in a patriarchal order, her body is colonized, her child the fruit of rape. Sappho Clark journeys toward the retrieval of a whole identity, one which will encompass a combination of the elements of Sappho and Mabelle. Such an identity leads to an acceptance of a motherhood which, like that of Sappho of Lesbos, does not require that a male occupy the space of father.

The most significant absence in the network of social forces is the black father. In narrative, the father is a figure that mediates patriarchal control over women; in most texts by nineteenth-century black women, this control is exercised by white men who politically, socially, and economically attempt to deny patriarchal power to black men. The absent space in fiction by black women confirms this denial of patriarchal power to black men, but Hopkins uses that space to explore the possibilities of alternative black male figures. Black men are depicted in peer relations, as brothers, or as potential partners/lovers. Women are not seen as the subject of exchange between father and husband; neither are their journeys limited to the distance between daughter and wife. As partners, sexual or nonsexual, the narrative impulse is toward utopian relations between black men and black women.

Nineteenth-century black feminists cannot be dismissed simply as ‘spokes-people for prudery in their communities’. Their legacy to us is theories that expose the colonization of the black female body by white male power and the destruction of black males who attempted to exercise any oppositional patriarchal control. When accused of threatening the white female body, the repository of heirs to property and power, the black male, and his economic, political, and social advancement, is lynched out of existence. Cooper, Wells, and Hopkins assert the necessity of seeing the relation

between histories: the rape of black women in the nineties is directly linked to the rape of the female slave. Their analyses are dynamic and not limited to a parochial understanding of ‘women’s issues’; they have firmly established the dialectical relation between economic/political power and economic/sexual power in the battle for control of women’s bodies.

A desire for the possibilities of the uncolonized black female body occupies a utopian space; it is the false hope of Sappho Clark’s pretend history. Black feminists understood that the struggle would have to take place on the terrain of the previously colonized: the struggle was to be characterized by redemption, retrieval, and reclamation – not, ultimately, by an unrestrained utopian vision. Sappho could not deny the existence of the raped Mabelle but, instead, had to reunite with the colonized self. Thus, these black feminists expanded the limits of conventional ideologies of womanhood to consider subversive relationships between women, motherhood without wifehood, wifehood as a partnership outside of an economic exchange between men, and men as partners and not patriarchal fathers. As DuBois and Gordon have argued so cogently, we have ‘150 years of feminist theory and praxis in the area of sexuality. This is a resource too precious to squander by not learning it, in all its complexity’.¹⁴

But let us learn *all* of it, not only in its complexity but also in its difference, and so stand again on the “threshold of woman’s era” – an era that can encompass all women.

NOTES

1. Ellen Carol Dubois and Linda Gordon, ‘Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth-Century Feminist Sexual Thought’, in Carole S. Vance (ed.) *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston, 1984), pp. 34, 33.
2. See Frances E. W. Harper, *Iola Leroy: or, Shadows Uplifted* (Philadelphia, 1892), and Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* (Xenia, Ohio, 1892); all further references to this work, abbreviated *V*, will be included in the text. See also Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *On Lynchings; Southern Horrors; A Red Record; Mob Rule in New Orleans* (New York, 1969); all further references to *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record*, respectively abbreviated *SH* and *RR*, are to this collection and will be included in the text. These were preceded by a novel by Emma Dunham Kelley (‘Forget-me-not’ [Emma Dunham Kelley], *Megda* [Boston, 1891]) and followed by the publication of a short story by Victoria Earle (Victoria Earle Matthews, *Aunt Lindy: A Story Founded on Real Life* [New York, 1893]) and a survey by Gertrude Mossel (Mrs. N. E [Gertrude] Mossell, *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* [Philadelphia, 1894]).
3. Harper, ‘Woman’s Political Future’, in May Wright Sewell (ed.), *World’s Congress of Representative Women*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1894), 1: 433–4.
4. This paragraph draws upon material from my forthcoming book, *Uplifting as They Write: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*.
5. Wells’ pamphlet *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* was published in 1892; *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892–1893–1894* was published in 1895; and *Mob Rule in New Orleans* was published in 1900. All three have been reprinted; see Wells, *On Lynchings* (New York, 1969). My account of some of her arguments is oversimplified and extremely adumbrated.
6. Wells, quoted in Alfreda M. Duster (ed.), *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago, 1970), p. 81.