

5-2020

## **Cultivating Spaces for American Citizenship in Pauline Hopkins's Contending Forces**

Jonathan Puckett

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Cultivating Spaces for American Citizenship in Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces*

by

Jonathan Puckett

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of Honors Requirements

May 2020



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## Abstract

Rediscovered through archival recovery in the late 1970s, Pauline E. Hopkins (1859-1930) was an African American author, journalist, and activist at the beginning of the twentieth century. In *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900), Hopkins's African American characters craft spaces, both sacred and secular, where they can freely exercise their citizenship in the Jim Crow era. As Hopkins utilizes the sentimentalist genre to portray realistically life at the turn of the century, my thesis highlights the historical and literary significance of sacred spaces like Boston's black Baptist churches. I also review two minor characters in Hopkins's novel that have not received much scholarly attention, showcasing Hopkins's responses to minstrelsy and the "Race Woman" ideology. I then discuss Hopkins's subversion of the tragic mulatto literary trope. My research positions Hopkins as a seminal American author responding to the historical realities of her time. Hopkins records what it means to be an African American citizen under Jim Crow, reacting to national issues such as racial and gender discrimination, (black) women's suffrage, minstrelsy, and lynching. Furthermore, my research acknowledges the dual efforts of archivists and literary scholars by expanding the canon of American literature and presenting a fuller narrative of Americanness.

Key Words: Pauline Hopkins, suffrage, tragic mulatto, Boston, gender, race, Jim Crow

## Dedication

To Carla M. Carlson, Dr. William Harold Graham, and Dr. Joseph Chapman Todd  
And to the memories of Roxie R. Poland (1905-1967) and Vida W. Letts (1875-1901)

*Stabat mater dolorosa juxta Crucem lacrimosa*

## Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my thesis adviser, Dr. Sherita L. Johnson, for no small amount of assistance and cheerleading throughout this project. Understanding my passion for both archives and literature, she helped me merge the two and has been instrumental in my professional development.

So too, I am eternally grateful to the Honors College faculty and staff at the University of Southern Mississippi. From studying abroad, to three internships in my career field, to a research symposium, and finally to this thesis, they have offered continual financial, academic, and emotional support.

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## Introduction

The period between the American Civil War and the turn of the twentieth century was turbulent, considering the United States's Reconstruction and subsequent establishment as a segregated and imperial nation. African Americans responded by demanding the equal and just treatment that had been granted by the passing of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. When Rutherford B. Hayes's Compromise of 1877 ended Reconstruction, the formerly Confederate states instituted Jim Crow laws to mandate racial segregation and to disenfranchise African Americans. Black politicians like Hiram Revels and John R. Lynch who had been active in the 1870s and 1880s were replaced by all white Southern Democrats, and states like Mississippi (in 1890) and South Carolina (in 1895) instituted new constitutions to prevent African American involvement in politics.<sup>1</sup> In 1896, a year following the death of Frederick Douglass, the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalized "separate-but-equal" segregation laws. At the turn-of-the-century, African Americans were still fighting for equal citizenship rights.<sup>2</sup>

White Americans were also questioning the meaning of citizenship in terms of others' ethnic and religious backgrounds. As immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe began settling in the United States in the late nineteenth century, they threatened the existing power structure that placed white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants at the top.

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<sup>1</sup> Black Republicanism in the Reconstruction period resulted in the election of African American representatives for the first time in the United States. Black representation in state and national offices ceased following disfranchisement and the passage of Jim Crow legislation. Hiram Rhodes Revels (1827-1901) was the first African American to serve in the U. S. Congress, representing Mississippi in 1870-1871 during the Reconstruction Era. John Roy Lynch (1847-1939) was born into slavery and freed under the Emancipation Proclamation. He was elected the first African American Speaker of the Mississippi House of Representatives in 1873.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the Reconstruction Era, see Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*, Vintage Books, 1979.

Coupled with changing immigration patterns, the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars of the 1890s and 1900s positioned the United States as an imperial power. White America crafted a paternalistic narrative whereby the nation could bring structure to supposed under-civilized countries. Stereotypical political cartoons depicted Filipinos, Spaniards, Asians, and others as savages who required America's assistance, and African Americans were often lumped into the category with these other ethnic groups. In a cartoon published in *The Washington Star* in 1907, Central American countries appear as children with pseudo-Africanized features who are gathered around a large Uncle Sam (Black 25). White Americans limited the civic involvement of other groups on the basis that white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants were superior.<sup>3</sup> Racial prejudice and discrimination created the basis of second-class citizenship for ethnic minorities.

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 "A HINT."  
 —WASHINGTON STAR, 1907.



<sup>3</sup> Although my research does not focus on imperialism, Hopkins recognizes and responds to the link between imperialism and white supremacy tactics in her journalism and novels. For more information on Hopkins and imperialism, see Yu-Fang Cho, "Cultural Nationalism, Orientalism, Imperial Ambivalence: *The Colored American Magazine* and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins" (*Journal of Transnational American Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2011. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6x5280hq>).

During the Jim Crow era, African American women confronted both racial and gender discrimination. Although the Fifteenth Amendment applied to black men, women were still unable to vote and therefore had limited political representation. As a result, black suffragists and “race women” sought access to social and political involvement through activism, the church, and the club movement. Organizations like the National Association of Colored Women sprung out of sacred spaces like the black Baptist church, where women could attain higher degrees of representation. All African Americans endured racial discrimination, but black women also resisted gender persecution.

When Pauline Hopkins wrote *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900), she responded to the racial and gender discrimination of the Jim Crow era by associating blackness with resistance, patriotism, and education. Primarily set in Boston in the same year as *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the novel follows the intertwined stories of the Smith and Langley families. The web of family relations includes the white slave-owning Montforts, their mixed-race descendants—Ma Smith and her children (Dora and Will), Anson Pollock, and John Langley (Pollock’s descendant). When the Montfort family moves from Bermuda to North Carolina and plans to free their slaves, Anson Pollock accuses Grace Montfort of being mixed-race and lynches her. Her two children are then sold into slavery. Several decades later, the Smith family operates a boarding house in Boston. After Sappho Clark, an intelligent and attractive mixed-race woman from New Orleans, rooms at the boarding house, tensions rise between Will Smith and John Langley. Hopkins’s African American characters struggle to secure their rights of citizenship while facing racial terrorism (in lynching and rape subplots) and discrimination based on their mixed-race heritage.

Hopkins's fiction is based on historical realities. Dr. Arthur Lewis, who becomes Dora's husband, operates an industrial school in the South and espouses viewpoints held by Booker T. Washington. So too, Will Smith advocates for DuBoisian notions of education in the humanities and the "Talented Tenth." Whereas Hopkins's contemporaries Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois are well-known, Hopkins was rediscovered in the 1970s by Ann Shockley, a librarian and scholar at Fisk University.<sup>4</sup> The recovery of Hopkins's literary works is nothing short of heroic, and dialogues between archivists, historians, and literary scholars are tantamount to developing a more comprehensive African American literary canon. As Hopkins herself emphasizes in the Preface to *Contending Forces*, "the retrospective mind will dwell upon the history of the past, seeking there a solution of these monstrous outbreaks [mob violence and lynchings] under a government founded upon the greatest and brightest of principles for the elevation of mankind" (14). Scholars like Eric Gardner have cultivated the burgeoning subfield in the humanities that unites historical-critical methodologies with traditional methods of literary analysis, and my thesis utilizes this approach in rediscovering Hopkins as a seminal American author.

In particular, I examine how Hopkins's first novel, *Contending Forces*, responds to Jim Crow policies that sought to limit African Americans' citizenship rights. Hopkins's characters craft their own spaces, both sacred and secular, where they can freely exercise their citizenship. Hopkins equates black resistance to discrimination with American patriotism, and characters like Dr. Abraham Peters, Mrs. Willis, Sappho, and

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<sup>4</sup> See Shockley's seminal, though often overlooked, essay, "Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: A Biographical Excursion into Obscurity." *Phylon* (1960-), vol. 33, no. 1, 1972, pp. 22-26. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/273429](http://www.jstor.org/stable/273429).

Dora demonstrate rugged individualism and perseverance to promote also principles of equality, justice, and freedom.

Following a brief summary of Hopkins's life and her contributions to American literature through genre in Chapter 1, I will analyze the Baptist Church in Hopkins's novel as a sacred space for resistance that is modeled on Boston's historical African Meeting House in Chapter 2. Two supporting characters in *Contending Forces*, Dr. Abraham Peters and Mrs. Willis, are the subjects of Chapter 3, where I observe minstrelsy and the ideology of the "race woman" in Hopkins's novel. My research concludes in Chapter 4, where I examine Hopkins's subversion of the tragic mulatto literary trope.

## Chapter 1

### Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: Dramatist, Writer, Activist-Intellectual

On August 13, 1930, *The Boston Globe* reported that Pauline Hopkins, who “lived alone and ha[d] no known relatives,” died from burns after her clothing caught fire (“Cambridge Man [sic] Dies from Burns In Home”). Her death was mentioned in passing and then quickly forgotten, but Hopkins was far more than an elderly woman without a family. On the contrary, her meteoric rise in the late nineteenth century positioned her as the editor of the most renowned African American periodical of the time, the *Colored American Magazine*. She was an accomplished activist, author, editor, and journalist, and her contributions to American literature and to the civil rights movements following the institution of Jim Crow are comparable to the efforts of better-known figures such as Washington and DuBois. The small obituary that appeared on the bottom of the eleventh page of *The Boston Globe* does not give credit to Hopkins’s long history of activism nor to her legacy of patriotism.

Born in Portland, Maine in 1859, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins grew up in Boston, Massachusetts, where her parents encouraged her early love for literature and drama. At the age of fourteen, Hopkins won an essay contest organized by activist William Wells Brown with her submission “Evils of Intemperance and Their Remedy,” and in 1877 she acted in the drama *Pauline Western, The Belle of Saratoga*.<sup>5</sup> Years later, she wrote the

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<sup>5</sup> William Wells Brown (ca. 1814-1884): Formerly enslaved American abolitionist, writer, and speaker. Brown escaped to freedom in January 1834, becoming involved in the Colored Conventions Movement in the summer of 1843. Hired as a Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society lecture agent, afterwards relocating to Boston and writing a *Narrative* of his life (1847). Hopkins included Brown in her series on “Famous Men of the Negro Race” in the *Colored American Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 3, Jan. 1901, pp. 232-236. For more information on Brown, see “William Wells Brown, 1814?-1884,” *Documenting the American South*, a digital publication of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/brownw/bio.html>.

play *Peculiar Sam*, a drama on enslaved people seeking freedom through the Underground Railroad. Her early career as a dramatist and writer expanded around the turn-of-the-century with her involvement in the *Colored American Magazine*.

The magazine was organized in 1900 in Boston “by a colored man who put the savings of his life from days’ labor into it,” and its monthly issues discussed subjects pertinent to African American culture (DuBois 33). Published by and for African Americans, the *Colored American Magazine* followed a tradition of black print culture that served as an outlet for black communities throughout the nineteenth century. Earlier publications such as *The African Methodist Episcopal Church Magazine* and *The Christian Recorder* were affiliated with sacred institutions and bridged African Americans’ secular experiences with religion.<sup>6</sup> But, the *Colored American Magazine* was one of the first black magazines not only “devoted to the higher culture of Religion” but also “Literature, Science, Music, and Art” (“Announcement,” *Colored American Magazine*, May 1900). The magazine recognized literature and the arts as a component of racial uplift, and burgeoning African American writers like Hopkins had an opportunity to use the platform as such.<sup>7</sup>

In her journalism, Hopkins links the black experience in the United States with patriotism. She published a twelve-part series on “Famous Men of the Negro Race” that began in the November 1900 issue of the magazine, in which she proclaims that “[while]

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<sup>6</sup> A more detailed study of African American print culture, particularly *The Christian Recorder*, can be found in Eric Gardner’s *Black Print Unbound: The Christian Recorder, African American Literature, and Periodical Culture*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> In the past decade, Drs. Brian Sweeney and Eurie Dahn of the College of Saint Rose organized a digital humanities project to highlight the importance of the *Colored American Magazine*. *The Digital Colored American Magazine* offers the public full color reproductions of the periodical, and many volumes have been illuminated with scholarly commentaries. This project exemplifies recent endeavors to link the humanities with archival research and restoration. See *The Digital Colored American Magazine*, coloredamerican.org, Accessed 23 March 2020.

the Negro ... is distinguished only as the former slave of the country ... [t]ruth gives him the history of a patriot, a brave soldier, the defender of the country from foreign invaders, a 'God-fearing producer of the nation's wealth'" (3). Providing examples such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, and Blanche K. Bruce, Hopkins relates their struggles against discrimination to the American quest for freedom from the Revolution era onward. For Hopkins, activism is an expression of patriotism that calls for the recognition of equality, freedom, and justice as documented in the American Revolution. These principles are depicted in *Contending Forces*, where her characters exercise their citizenship rights in direct comparison to the patriots of the Revolution.

Among the magazine's top contributors from 1901-1904, Pauline Hopkins served as editor and head of the Women's Section, and her sharp, non-conciliatory stance threatened white donors and eventually led to her dismissal and replacement by Fred R. Moore, a close affiliate of Booker T. Washington (DuBois 33). Not only did she publish articles in the magazine, but she also advertised her sentimentalist novel *Contending Forces* in 1900 and published several subsequent novels serially. During her time at the *Colored American Magazine*, Hopkins utilized her position to highlight African Americans' struggles for equality, freedom, and justice in the Jim Crow era, and her literature is reflective of the historical period in which she lived. Following her retirement, she continued to publish and worked as a stenographer for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The latter portion of her life, especially in the 1920s, remains open for researchers to explore.

## Hopkins and Sentimentalism

As a mode of writing, sentimentalism seeks to create emotional responses in readers through distressing situations. The sentimentalist genre developed during the Romantic Period of the early nineteenth century and focused on emotions rather than rationality. Young female protagonists usually endure difficult situations in an immoral world, and they utilize their own moral compasses to navigate the spaces around them. Often, like dramatic comedies, these novels end in marriage. The female characters in Hopkins's *Contending Forces* follow the sentimentalist tradition. For example, Sappho must come to terms with her tragic past through a public revelation at an anti-lynching meeting. The scene of Grace Montfort's whipping is emotionally jarring and meant to evoke feelings of helplessness and yet outrage at her abuse. Sappho and Dora, furthermore, both marry suitable gentlemen at the end of the novel. By writing in the sentimentalist genre, Hopkins positions herself as part of a larger movement of black writers who resisted discrimination through print in the early Jim Crow era.

Charles Waddell Chesnutt identifies this “Post-Bellum—Pre Harlem” period as a time when “the novel of life and manners, had not been attempted by any [African American] and “[t]he trend of public sentiment ... was distinctly away from the Negro” (482-483).<sup>8</sup> As a journalist, Hopkins confronts the lack of national sentiment toward African Americans, and, in *Contending Forces*, she recognizes fiction as the “preserver

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932) was a contemporary of Hopkins whose short stories, novels, and essays focus on the “color line” in the postbellum South. Analyzing social and racial identity through literary realism, Chesnutt notably wrote *The Conjure Woman* (1899), a series of short stories where the protagonist is a freed slave, Uncle Julius, who tricks a Northern white couple to achieve his goals in the Uncle Remus tradition. Chesnutt's other works include *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899), *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), and *The Colonel's Dream* (1905). Like Hopkins, Chesnutt wrote in the postbellum-pre-Harlem period, responding to the emergence of Jim Crow. For a good anthology of Chesnutt's writings, see *The Portable Charles W. Chesnutt*, edited by William L. Andrews, Penguin Classics, 2008.

of manners and customs” (13). That is, Hopkins penned a sentimentalist novel to catalyze racial uplift, directly responding to her opposition. Hopkins positioned herself alongside Chesnutt in a long protest tradition of African American writers, who confronted racism and bigotry through literature.<sup>9</sup>

Hopkins uses sentimentalism to create social reform. Her African American characters’ struggles against racial and gender discrimination appeals to public sentiment, and the novel aspires to “raise the stigma of degradation from [her] race” (13). In her introduction, Hopkins notes that the discrimination and lynching scenes in her fiction could also be located in archives and courthouses (14). Through depicting the harsh realities of lynching, poverty, disenfranchisement, and segregation in a naturally emotive genre, Hopkins incites a call-to-action among her readership to confront Jim Crow politics. Indeed, Hopkins largely intended *Contending Forces* for a “New Negro” audience comprised of the educated, black middle class. Elizabeth McHenry notes the importance of the black women’s club movement to Hopkins:

In 1899, Pauline Hopkins presented her novel ... to the membership of the Woman’s Era Club where it met with ‘instant success.’ Hopkins’s indication that she would be ‘glad to give readings before women’s clubs in any section of the country’ suggests that she imagined African American clubwomen as a primary audience for her work. This impression is reinforced by the fact that, when published in 1900 the book was marketed both by and to black clubwomen.

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<sup>9</sup> In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass emphasizes the importance of authorship as a weapon for racial uplift: “I shall labor in the future, as I have labored in the past, to promote the moral, social, religious, and intellectual elevation of the free colored people; never forgetting my own humble origin, nor refusing, while Heaven lends me ability, to use my voice, my pen, or my vote, to advocate the great and primary work of the universal and unconditional emancipation of my entire race.” See Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855, p. 406.

Solicited as agents by the publisher, Boston's Colored Co-Operative Publishing Company, they were promised a 'liberal commission.' (231-232)

By appealing to black club women, Hopkins associates her novel with racial uplift ideologies and indicates that literature can be a catalyst for social and political reform. In a period when African American women confronted both racial and gender discrimination, Hopkins appealed to such audiences to engender real solutions to Jim Crow politics. Hopkins uses her talents for creative writing, editing, and publishing to confront discrimination against all African Americans.

Although Hopkins did not publish *Contending Forces* as a serial in the *Colored American Magazine* like she did her other novels, she still advertised her book in the journal. In an advertisement for *Contending Forces* that appears in the October 1900 edition of the magazine, Hopkins writes the following, of which a shortened version appears in her introduction to the novel: "If the writer is true to life, he will give us pictures of manners and customs, present the religious, political, and social condition of a people, preserving in this way a valuable record of the growth and development of a people from generation to generation" ("Prospectus"; see appendix). Hopkins emphasizes the importance of African American writers who narrate the history of the race through "true to life" fiction, or realism.<sup>10</sup> In describing fiction as a social-change agent, Hopkins identifies her novel as a "[picture] of manners and customs" and "the religious, political, and social condition" of African Americans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So too, she defies gender discrimination by noting the place of both men and

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<sup>10</sup> Literary realism is a movement of the late nineteenth century that sought to display society without embellishment through focusing on the lives of ordinary characters. African American authors like Hopkins and Chesnut utilized this genre to connect their writings to social and political reform efforts.

women in racial uplift. As an activist-writer, Hopkins calls attention to sociopolitical issues in American society.

Rediscovered in the late twentieth century, Pauline Hopkins is an influential American author of the Jim Crow era. Not only did she utilize her position in the *Colored American Magazine* to write materials relevant to African American culture, but she was also active in theater and published several novels. Focusing on American citizenship, her novels highlight the black-white dichotomy that was present in American society at the turn-of-the-century. Disenfranchised and targets of racial terrorism, African Americans endured second-class citizenship without protected rights and social justice. Many turned to sacred spaces and formed their own communities where they could freely practice their rights as Americans.

## Chapter 2

### **Sacred Spaces of Resistance: The Black Baptist Church in *Contending Forces***

In *Contending Forces*, Pauline Hopkins recognizes the important function of the church in African American communities, and her characters utilize this sacred space as an area to practice their rights as American citizens. Not only does the Baptist Church in Hopkins's novel allow her characters to freely express themselves and engage in community functions, but it is modeled after the historic African Meeting House that was founded in Boston in 1805. The African Meeting House served as a link between the sacred and secular black communities of Boston. So too, the activities that occur in the sacred spaces of Hopkins's novel also address black experiences in the secular world where lynchings and other forms of discrimination are ever-present. Hopkins relies on historical realities throughout her novel to acknowledge African Americans' efforts to achieve full citizenship.

The African Meeting House became the first African American Baptist church north of the Mason Dixon line when it was established on Beacon Hill in Boston in 1805 ("Black Boston"). Because African Americans had been discriminated against in white churches, the African Meeting House was formed as a space where Boston's black community could gather to obtain equal representation. Many white churches required their black members to sit in the balconies rather than the pews, denying representation and voting privileges to African American members ("Black Boston"). As the term "meeting house" suggests, the location bridged sacred and secular communities. Constructed largely by African Americans, the African Meeting House exemplifies the

notion that black citizens established viable communities for themselves from the ground-up, despite racial and gender discrimination.

Sacred spaces like the African Meeting House organized efforts to reform secular society. Originally called the African Baptist Church or the Belknap Street Church, the African Meeting House was the founding place of the New England Anti-Slavery Society in 1832 and welcomed noteworthy speakers such as William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass. According to David B. Landon and Teresa D. Bulger, the African Meeting House consisted of a schoolroom, spaces that members of the community could rent out, and areas for social gatherings such as dinners, speeches, and other civic functions (123-124). George A. Levesque's broader study of African American churches in Boston indicates that black religious communities were buffers and tools against racial discrimination. Formed as "asylum[s] from white prejudice" and "retreat[s] from repression," black Baptist churches in Boston afforded their congregants the liberties to maintain economic independence, to take part in community functions, and to receive educational and living assistance (493). Black churches granted African Americans spaces free from white persecution. The establishment of independent, segregated centers of worship allowed black citizens opportunities to educate themselves and to become active members of the spaces they inhabited.

Black Bostonians utilized churches to improve their communities, as white institutions did not often possess opportunities for African Americans' uplift. Landon and Bulger posit that "African Americans were forced to rely upon their own resources to maintain their physical, mental, and spiritual health" (125). The establishment of the black Baptist church highlights social resistance, and Hopkins, a resident of Boston,

participated in this history. The church's activist functions are present throughout her novel, and Hopkins showcases the black Baptist church as a space that creates opportunities for civic engagement as well as religious worship. Her characters rely on their own resources for their wellbeing, and they are assisted through church functions that underscore their social equality and call for justice. The church in *Contending Forces* demonstrates the "contentions" between white and black America. My research underscores how Pauline Hopkins understands the church as a space for both resistance and for promoting American citizenship, and she draws on the historical backdrop of the African American church as a communal space. I utilize a historical-critical methodology in discussing Hopkins's church, as her novel's depiction of religious life directly relates to Boston's history of black Baptist resistance and the cultivation of spaces truer to the American ideals of freedom, justice, and equality.

### **The Baptist Church of *Contending Forces***

The Baptist church that Hopkins's characters attend plays an historically significant role in the struggle for equality within American society. Once "the place of worship of a rich, white Baptist congregation" where African Americans were only allowed to sit in the galleries, the church dwindled after African Americans left and established their own church in a building that had previously been a theatre (Hopkins 130). The galleries were isolative and non-communal, and they distanced black church members from both the preacher and the white members of the congregation. So too, the establishment of the African Meeting House in Boston resulted from similar discriminatory tactics. Segregation limited black members from taking part in church

functions, so they made the proactive decision to remove themselves from the restrictive galleries and to search for spaces truer to the American value of equal representation.

Hopkins links African Americans' ability to craft spaces with greater representation for themselves to the sacrifices of the country's original patriots in the Revolutionary War. The narrator, whose point of view is comparable to if not the same as Hopkins's, laments that "[i]t is impossible of belief for some, that little circles of educated men and women of color have existed since the Revolutionary War" (145). Hopkins posits that African Americans have played an invaluable role in the upkeep of American society since the very start, and many formerly enslaved people "boldly took the rights which man denied" (145). Whether in the sacred space of the church or the secular space of the plantation, African Americans organized to create a freer and more just society. In *Contending Forces*, Hopkins connects members of Boston's black community to the American Revolution, a war which was fought against a tyrannical government to gain equality, freedom, and justice.

Hopkins herself was involved in commemorating blacks' participation in the American Revolution when, in 1903, she and other activists created a Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution organization for African Americans with Revolutionary War ancestors. Hopkins and the other organizers felt that "they ha[d] an inalienable right of admittance to the society of the Sons and Daughters of the Revolution, but for the better maintenance of their rights against any possible prejudice which might arise against them, wish to organize their own society" ("Organization of Their Own"). Likewise, Hopkins's characters craft a segregated church for themselves

where they can attain and practice equality, justice, and freedom as did their patriotic ancestors.

Hopkins bridges African American religiosity with the secular world, demonstrating the high level of involvement of African Americans in segregated society and portraying the church as a space to implement positive social changes. The former members of the white Baptist church establish another place of worship at “an old building long used as a theatre” (130). Though a minor detail in the novel, Hopkins’s choice to locate the church in a theatrical venue is meaningful. Hopkins joins the sacred with the secular by establishing the church in a space originally reserved for cultural entertainment. Hopkins herself began her career as a dramatist when in March 1877 she performed *Pauline Western, the Belle of Saratoga*. Hopkins’s plays, particularly *Peculiar Sam* (1879), respond to black minstrelsy by providing complex characters beyond racial stereotypes. As Daphne Brooks explains in her seminal work on black theater in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hopkins connects historical events and theatricality to defy stereotypes such as the Mammy figure (285, 287). When Hopkins connects the church with the theatre, she places literature, drama, and religion in the arena of social reform. The church in Hopkins’s novel is very much involved in community affairs, and she relates her fictional depiction of the church to its real historical counterpart. When her characters utilize the church to discuss oppressive forces, they do so to reach outward into other communities and to enact positive reforms.

### **Racialized Perspectives in the Black Baptist Church**

By contrast with the black church—which, in Hopkins’s novel, is a space where positive social changes can occur—the white Baptist church limited freedom of

expression and did not allow African Americans to participate in church elections or functions. Boston's white Baptist church was unable to continue functioning after the black members rebelled against oppressive segregation tactics, and the once wealthy church was left in financial ruin. This church is a microcosm of the conditions African Americans endured during the Jim Crow Era.<sup>11</sup> Hopkins sets her novel in 1896, the same year of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the landmark Supreme Court case that legalized "separate but equal" segregation policies. The ultimate failure of the white Baptist church is due to the segregation of African Americans in the galleries. The white congregants chose not to recognize African Americans' contributions to the church, just as white Americans did not value the influence of black people in American society. Thus, the white church equated American-ness with the Supreme Court's ruling, but the black church showcases an America where citizens exemplify concepts of freedom, equality, and justice. Although segregation endangered the future of the white church, the African American community resolved the issue through creating their own space of worship that promoted ideals truer to American values.

Hopkins notes regional differences in perceptions of African American worship, and an unnamed Southerner in the novel confronts Will Smith about black religious practices. By granting the Southerner a voice in *Contending Forces*, Hopkins draws attention to the ignorant prejudice of many white Americans and deters negative racial stereotypes through strong black characters. The Southerner in Hopkins's novel argues:

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<sup>11</sup> Segregation was a common reality in predominately white denominations, especially in the urban North. Frederick Douglass, in a letter written December 17, 1894, writes: "I was a member of the Methodist Church ... and should have joined a branch of that Church in New Bedford, Mass., had I not discovered the spirit of prejudice and the unholy connection of that Church with slavery." Thus, discrimination in a majority-white church led Douglass and other activists to become involved in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. See James Walker Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church*, New York: A.M.E. Zion Book Concern, 1895, pp. 541-542.

Negroes are all alike with regard to religion; ignorant, thieving, dirty and lazy, but withal crammed full of religious enthusiasm. You should know them as I do – shouting, screaming, frothing at the mouth with the outpourings of the ‘spirit,’ and as soon as they are outside of the church door, robbing hen-roosts and watermelon patches. Bah! (Hopkins 294).

This Southerner—unnamed and therefore identifiable with the South’s general viewpoint—typifies black churches as irreverent, loud, and hypocritical; however, Hopkins’s church-going characters are virtuous, thoughtful, and honest in confronting oppressive institutions like the wealthy, white Baptist church. The Southerner, on the other hand, attempts to tribalize and/or trivialize African American celebrations of Christianity, removing them from American religious culture and equating them with a pagan African heritage. Stereotyping African American religious practices as primitive was commonplace in the time period, as an analysis of Peters will emphasize in the next chapter. The scope of Hopkins’s characters, from Sappho to John Langley to Mrs. Willis, also denies the offensive idea that “Negroes are all alike.” The Black church is far from unsophisticated, and Hopkins’s characters easily dispel these myths.

Will Smith thwarts the negative characterizations implied by the Southerner. Smith responds to the Southerner by emphasizing that “*times* have changed, and the Negro with them” (295). Whereas the Southerner still holds on to negative racial types and notions of white superiority, Smith and other African Americans have progressed. Indeed, Will had previously engaged in a religious conversation in which an Episcopal clergyman discussed “the final end of man,” which is a theological concept posited by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (292). Looking forward to the “final end”

rather than outdated and misinformed racist stereotypes, Will promptly dismisses the Southerner's outburst and continues the conversation in a more suitable direction.

Unlike the white church, the black center of worship is an area of full community participation. The church serves as the meeting place for the American Colored League following the lynching of Jim Jones for the rape of a white woman, and the church is shown as a space for community engagement with national issues. The church is adorned with patriotic colors and presentations, and speakers reveal the violent truths of lynching. The narrator shows that "[t]he excitement among the colored people was intense: prayers were held in all the churches ... [t]elegrams were received from the branches of the League all over the state ... [and] [t]he meeting would be a great expression of public opinion" (242). The attendees desire full citizenship rights, freedom from tyranny, and equal protection under the law, and the church is the space used to protest the threat of diminishing civil rights under the tyranny of Jim Crow. The Baptist church is depicted as an arena where African American citizens can pursue justice.

The church is a nationalistic location that underscores two different views of American citizenship generally held by white and black citizens. The narrator realizes that "[f]or the loyal white man there would be no greater joy in life than to see his poetic dream of superiority to all other governments realized in the 'land of the free and the home of the brave' (242). The "contending forces" of Hopkins's novel are on full display at the Baptist church during this meeting, as two visions of American citizenship—one including African Americans and the other not—are apparent. The meeting itself was patriotic, and American flags covered the platform (243). Black church members recognized their identities as American citizens even while they did not receive equal

treatment under the law under the threat of lynching. Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" is sung at the meeting, and Howe is recognized as a white abolitionist and advocate of woman's suffrage. The church is therefore on the cutting edge of progress, supporting the expansion of American citizenship.

The American Colored League's communal discussion of Jim Jones's lynching is significant, as Hopkins unites her novel to the historic realities of the period. In the late nineteenth century, hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan, as well as town mobs, lynched and publicly killed African Americans on a regular basis. Following the lynchings of three African American businessmen in 1892, African American journalist, suffragist, and abolitionist Ida B. Wells-Barnett began an anti-lynching campaign whereby she brought attention to the injustices faced by black citizens.<sup>12</sup> Utilizing data journalism to calculate the number of lynchings every year, Wells-Barnett indicates that from 1899-1908 about 857 African Americans were lynched ("Lynching, Our National Crime"). Hopkins links the anti-lynching movement with the church in *Contending Forces*, suggesting that the sacred space in her novel is an outlet through which national issues can be discussed freely without limitation. By allowing the American Colored League to meet in the black Baptist church of her novel, Hopkins connects the sacred and secular worlds and links black religion with resistance to oppression.

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<sup>12</sup> In her famous "Lynching, Our National Crime" (1909) speech, Ida B. Wells-Barnett emphasizes lynching as a national and un-American crisis: "Time was when lynching appeared to be sectional, but now it is national—a blight upon our nation, mocking our laws and disgracing our Christianity. 'With malice toward none but with charity for all' let us undertake the work of making the 'law of the land' effective and supreme upon every foot of American soil—a shield to the innocent; and to the guilty, punishment swift and sure."

Ida Wells-Barnett, "Lynching, Our National Crime." National Negro Conference. New York City, 01 June 1909, <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/09/mob-murder-in-a-christian-nation-june-1-1909/>.

The meeting that the American Colored League holds in the church positions black churchgoers as participants in national issues such as lynching. Two opposing notions of American citizenship are revealed; however, African American leaders like Luke Sawyer seek to confront the country's history of racial violence and attain freedom, equality, and justice—full rights as American citizens. The further display of patriotism through decorations and song choices highlights the loyalty black citizens had toward the country despite their persecution. The meeting demonstrates that Hopkins's characters are true American citizens, who—in the spirit of the Founding Fathers—fight for their liberties with much gusto.

African Americans in Hopkins's novel, just as at the historic African Meeting House, transformed an oppressive space into one in alignment with racial equality and religious freedom. As the narrator explains, “the despised people, who were not allowed a seat outside of the galleries, now owned and occupied the scene of their former humiliation” (130). The actual space of the church is a landmark to resistance, which suggests the importance of community rather than the isolation of racial groups. Likewise, Hopkins's decision not to name the Baptist church that her characters attend signifies a universal idea that African American religious practices could conquer societal issues and realize freedom and equality for their members. Hopkins links her characters' struggles to the patriots of the American Revolution, and she further identifies the church as a sacred space linked to secular struggles. Black churchgoers in *Contending Forces* possess freedom of expression and add to national dialogues on subjects such as lynching. Despite racist stereotypes, African Americans descend from the galleries onto

the church's main floor, voicing their concerns about the country and transforming America through their involvement as citizens.

### Chapter 3

#### **Minstrelsy and the Ideology of the “Race Woman” in Hopkins’s Novel**

Just as Hopkins presents the church itself as a space where African Americans can involve themselves in secular issues and contribute to society as American citizens, the characters in her novel dispel racist ideologies. Confronting both race and gender discrimination, Hopkins introduces two minor characters who are affiliated with the black Baptist church to showcase black respectability and activism. In a period when African Americans were ridiculed through minstrel performances and black women confronted both racial and gender discrimination, Hopkins’s characters espouse anti-minstrelsy and “race woman” ideologies. Dr. Abraham Peters and Mrs. Willis, introduced in the chapter “Friendship,” both exemplify African Americans’ central place in forming American society and recognizing American ideals. These characters confront oppressive forces and carve out areas for resistance even within an America that has not fully attained freedom, equality, and justice for all its members.

As part of rediscovering and situating Hopkins as a seminal American author of the postbellum era, I focus on Dr. Peters and Mrs. Willis because they are minor figures that have not been discussed in literary criticism in as much detail as central characters like Sappho, Will and Dora Smith, and John Langley. While Dr. Peters and Mrs. Willis are largely relegated to one chapter of the novel, Hopkins places both in dialogue with main characters like Sappho and highlights the varied ways in which African Americans could be activists. In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss Dr. Abraham Peters’s narrative, in which he transitions from enslavement to economic independence, in terms of minstrelsy, Hoodoo, and the self-made man. I will then identify Mrs. Willis as a

paradigm of the race woman ideology poised against public attacks against black womanhood.

### **Minstrelsy, Hoodoo, and the Self-Made Man: Dr. Abraham Peters**

The Baptist church serves as a social space where different members of the African American community voice their narratives of resistance. Dr. Abraham Peters's life is an American narrative of the self-made man, where he succeeds despite enduring racial discrimination. Hopkins describes Peters as "a well-read man, greatly interested in scientific research, but who had lacked the opportunity to obtain information in his youth" (130-131). Born an enslaved person, Peters gains his freedom following the Civil War, marries, and later works as a chef on a steamboat. When he receives the opportunity to become a janitor at a Christian Science hospital by feigning ignorance to his white employers, he is hired as a doctor for his healing abilities. Peters's negotiation of discriminatory spaces highlights the struggles that African Americans endured as well as exemplifies how they surmounted these difficulties.

Peters subverts the "coon" stereotype of black minstrelsy to feign ignorance to his white employers and advance occupationally. The "coon" caricature portrays African Americans as "lazy, easily frightened, chronically idle, inarticulate, buffoon[s]" ("The Coon Stereotype Galleries"). Attempting to get a job onshore when he was working on a steamboat, Peters addresses his employer: "'Mornin,' Cap'n; how's yer corporosity seem to segashiate?" (137). His white boss, along with his coworkers, find this statement laughable, and they give him money for his good humor and even begin calling him "corporosity segashiate." Peters attains a higher paying job offshore because of his intelligence, but in addressing his white employer he feigns ignorance by utilizing an

existing racial stereotype. Peters uses this characterization to his advantage, allowing white people to ridicule him in order to succeed.

Black minstrelsy established racial stereotypes like the “coon” to maintain control over African Americans. Minstrel shows portrayed African Americans inaccurately and one-dimensionally, as characters like Jim Crow and Uncle Tom were unthreatening to notions of enslavement or white oppression. Peters’s speech mirrors minstrelsy’s vigorous use of dialect. Whereas other contemporary black writers like James Corrothers “used Negro dialect and minstrel images ... to validate his class superiority and fitness for leadership,” Hopkins places Peters in a comfortable dialogue with Sappho and demonstrates the inaccuracy of racial stereotyping (Gaines 342). Hopkins describes Peters as a “m[a]n of brain and thought, but of unique expression and filled with quaint humor,” but she does not label him as unproductive to society or inferior to other people (Hopkins 130). Hopkins inverts the coon stereotype by granting Peters depth, a character arc, and an influential role in her novel.

Hopkins features Peters as a trickster figure in line with Joel Chandler Harris’s Br’er Rabbit, signifying that Peters uses the “scene of [his] former humiliation [minstrelsy]” to his advantage (Hopkins 130). In “The Wonderful Tar Baby Story,” Br’er Rabbit asks the Tar Baby “[h]ow duz yo’ sym’tums seem ter segashuate,” a phrase that Peters copies in his dialogue with the ship captain (Harris par. 5).<sup>13</sup> Both Br’er Rabbit and Peters are tricksters who utilize their wit to remove themselves from difficult situations (e.g., enslavement, lack of work). When Peters falsely portrays himself in the racist coon stereotype, in a sense he masks himself with blackface to climb the social ladder.

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<sup>13</sup> Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908) wrote *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880), a collection of animal stories and oral histories that are written in dialect and set on plantations in the Deep South.

Through Dr. Peters, Hopkins indicates the persistence of racial stereotyping in defining African Americans. Sappho remains emphatically “interested in [his] story,” just as racial caricatures and minstrelsy captivated multiracial audiences (Hopkins 131).

Just as Peters subverts black minstrelsy, he also advocates for the practice of traditional African religions like Hoodoo, signifying that Hoodoo is not primitive. Peters connects the traditional African religion of Hoodoo with the Christian Science Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, intimating the importance of the African American experience within American society. Peters expresses that “[m]agnifyin’ an’ hoodooin’ is ‘bout the same thing,” and he credits his early spiritual experiences as an enslaved person to his profession in Christian Science (Hopkins 132). Molefi Asante defines Hoodoo as “a system of magic, divination, and herbalism widespread among the enslaved Africans in America,” and Peters connects this religion to Christian healing practices (“Hoodoo”). According to Hopkins, Christian Science sought to heal illnesses through faith (138). Peters’s syncretic knowledge of both religions allows him to advance as a self-established doctor, and African culture strengthens Peters’s identity as an American. Just as the official motto of the United States is *e pluribus unum* (“out of many, one”), so too does Peters craft an identity through both Hoodoo and Christian Science.

Whereas newspapers described Hoodoo as superstitious, Peters hints at the limitations of Christian Science and showcases the unfounded prejudices surrounding traditional African spiritualities. In the same year that Hopkins published her novel, the *New-York Tribune* described Hoodoo as the belief of “superstitious colored folks” and (sacred) places where Hoodoo was practiced as “unholy” (“The Devil’s Crossroads”).

The public reception of Hoodoo was therefore narrow-minded, but Peters also establishes that Christian Science did not cure his rheumatism and notes that ““faith-cure is weak”” on some occasions (Hopkins 138-139). Recognizing the limitations of both Hoodoo and Christian Science, Peters more honestly shows the connections between African and American values.

Drawing upon minstrelsy and Hoodoo as a form of resistance, Hopkins uses magical realism like Charles Waddell Chesnutt, another author of race problem novels and short fiction during the era. In his collection of stories, *The Conjure Woman* (1899), Chesnutt presents Hoodoo as an agent for trickery. In “The Goophered Grapevine,” Uncle Julius, a former slave, utilizes Negro dialect and Hoodoo to fool his former enslavers and other white individuals.<sup>14</sup> Hopkins’s Dr. Abraham Peters advances Chesnutt’s Uncle Julius, insofar as he utilizes both minstrelsy and Hoodoo as survival tactics. Hopkins’s novel is part of a larger literary movement that highlights self-advancement through utilizing and subverting stereotypes.

Despite his lack of formal education, Peters possesses more wit than his white employers. Peters recognizes the faults, or “diversions,” of Christian Science and notes the limitations of “faith-cure”; however, he still utilizes his medical skills advantageously and acquires an occupation (139). Christian Science was a religious movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that emphasized the ability to cure diseases through idealism and faith. Peters, on the other hand, “don’t b’lieve (sic) that,” and he logically asserts that his rheumatism was not cured following the doctors’ treatment (138). Hopkins highlights Peters’s rationality alongside his religiosity, characterizing him

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<sup>14</sup> The *Atlantic Monthly* published Chesnutt’s first important work of fiction in 1887.

as a logical professional who was denied proper training because of his skin tone. She thereby attacks the American Dream as a myth, as deserving individuals like Peters are unable to attain their full potentials. Hopkins's black characters seek to realize the American Dream through contributing to society as free citizens, and her critique of the Dream underscores the need for reform.

Peters's biography indicates that he is a self-made man, a character type representative of the American ideal of individualism and personal freedom. Peters gained notoriety as a doctor without receiving an education in his youth; furthermore, his quick-wittedness allows him to advance economically through using minstrel stereotypes and Negro dialect. In her introduction, Hopkins emphasizes that she has "tried to portray [African Americans'] hard struggles here in the North to obtain a respectable living and a partial education," and Peters is a prime example of Hopkins's ability to narrate self-advancement in American society (15). The self-made man character type is nationalistic, insofar as the character obtains success through rugged individualism. Frederick Douglass's famous "Self-Made Men" speech (1893) is useful to clarify Peters's anti-minstrel representation. Douglass notes that self-made men are *true* Americans:

[They are] not brought up but ... obliged to come up, not only without the voluntary assistance or friendly co-operation of society, but often in open and derisive defiance of all the efforts of society and the tendency of circumstances to repress, retard and keep them down. They ... acquire their education elsewhere and, amidst unfavorable conditions ... hew out for themselves a way to success (421).

Hopkins attaches Peters to this character type and thereby places her writing in the context of other activists who also expressed links between blackness and Americanness. A former slave who is successful despite a lack of education in his youth, Peters aptly mirrors Douglass's description of the self-made man. While Peters admits that he still “take[s] piles of unregenerate sass from his [white] boss,” he also realizes his advancement despite forces that sought to keep him in bondage (Hopkins 140).

Just as the Baptist church was once a space of oppression, Peters utilizes traditionally exploitive areas like black minstrelsy as forms of resistance. Intelligent and resourceful, Peters pulls himself up by the bootstraps just as Booker T. Washington advocates in his memoir *Up From Slavery* (1901). Douglass notices this tendency in the self-made man image, noting that “[t]he Jim Crow Minstrels have, in many cases, led the negro to the study of music ... [t]hus detraction paves the way for the very perfections which it doubts and denies” (453). Staging Peters's life through a conversation with Sappho, Hopkins places a metanarrative within *Contending Forces*—a minstrel, of sorts, within her sentimentalist novel. Peters is thus able to narrate his own story to his audience.

Though a minor character, Dr. Abraham Peters draws attention to minstrelsy and racial stereotypes in American society. By subverting notions of racial inferiority, Peters utilizes available resources to climb the social ladder. While not advocating for minstrel shows and other racist forms of entertainment, Hopkins follows Douglass in highlighting ways African Americans have carved spaces for themselves within American society to

more truly achieve freedom of expression, justice, and equality.<sup>15</sup> Peters is a character type who shows the ability for African Americans to advance in society in a truly American pattern: through rugged individualism and self-creation.

### **The Race Woman Ideology, Black Church Women, and Suffrage**

Hopkins emphasizes the importance of black church women in the racial uplift ideologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through her fictional characters like Mrs. Willis. A church member revered for her opinion in the community as well as an advocate for women's suffrage, Mrs. Willis exemplifies the race woman ideology posited by contemporary activist-intellectuals like Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Mrs. Willis is "the pivot about which all the social and intellectual life of the colored people of her section revolved" (Hopkins 148). Experiencing the duality of racial and gender discrimination, Mrs. Willis searches for political autonomy none the less. By placing Mrs. Willis in a position of mentoring authority over characters like Sappho and Dora—particularly in setting of the church's sewing circle Hopkins emphasizes the important roles African American women played to expand democracy in both sacred and secular spaces.

The narrator introduces Mrs. Willis as a pillar of the Baptist church and leader of the church's sewing circle. Utilizing her leadership role in the church, Mrs. Willis is a mentor to the younger women at the sewing circle and advocates for women's suffrage. Originally of the class of enslaved persons who "toiled when they should have slept, for the money that purchased their freedom, or else they boldly took the rights which man denied," Mrs. Willis advocates for her freedom even while facing both gender and racial

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<sup>15</sup> For further reading, see Sutton E. Grigg's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), as well as Frederick Douglass's speech, "A Nation Within the Midst of a Nation" speech.

discrimination (145). Like Dr. Peters, Mrs. Willis is self-made and continues to struggle to achieve gender equality, but, prior to the Nineteenth Amendment, Mrs. Willis and other women were still unable to vote. Mrs. Willis is a member of the second or third generation of black suffragists who sought political representation starting in the antebellum period, and citizenship for African American women in the Jim Crow era was more limited than for men. Defining citizenship in terms of active political participation, black women encountered the double burden of being both black and women. As my research highlights, Mrs. Willis exemplifies the race woman ideology present in Hopkins's time period, as she stands between sacred and secular spaces to advocate for her (and all black women's) citizenship rights.<sup>16</sup>

Mrs. Willis is comparable to many other black women in the Baptist Church who were leading activists in the late nineteenth century. Scholars like the historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham document black church women's involvement in the burgeoning civil rights and suffragist movements of that period. Higginbotham notes that "church women contested racist ideology and institutions through demands for anti-lynching legislation and an end to segregation laws; [t]hey expressed their [righteous] discontent with both racial and gender discrimination and demanded equal rights for blacks and women" (1). Thus, Higginbotham asserts that black church women utilized their authoritative roles in sacred spaces to advocate for their freedom of expression in the secular world. Fannie Barrier Williams, a founder of the National Association for Colored Women, emphasized that "[t]he training which first enabled colored women to

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<sup>16</sup> As 2020 is the centennial anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment, my analysis of Mrs. Willis as a suffragist and race woman is timely. For more information on the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, see the National Archives's exhibit *Rightfully Hers: American Women and the Vote*, <https://www.archives.gov/women#event-/timeline/item/e-cady-stanton-susan-b-anthony-and-lucy-stone-ask-friends-to-send-petitions-for-womens-suffrage>.

organize and ... carry on club work was originally obtained in church work” (Higginbotham 17). As a pillar of the church, head of the sewing club, and an advocate for the expansion of citizenship rights to women through suffrage, Mrs. Willis exemplifies the race woman ideology of the period.

Mrs. Willis first appears at Ma Smith’s sewing circle, where Mrs. Willis leads a discussion on “[t]he place which the virtuous woman occupies in upbuilding a race” (Hopkins 148). Mrs. Willis places African American women at the forefront of racial uplift, particularly noting a moral obligation to act in a Christian manner. Mrs. Willis suggests that virtue is innate for black women, and she defines virtue as “[s]trength to do the right thing under all temptations” (148-149). By expressing virtue in terms of temptations, Mrs. Willis notes that trials assist in strengthening African Americans and in instilling desires for freedom and equality. Like Peters and the African Americans who formed the church community, Mrs. Willis emphasizes black women’s ability to carve out spaces of freedom for themselves despite “all temptations” that hinder them (149).

Mrs. Willis’s authority at church functions like Ma Smith’s sewing circle highlights both women’s involvement in the Baptist church and the church as a place for discussing issues pertinent to the black community. The Baptist Church served as “a public sphere in which values and issues were aired, debated, and disseminated throughout the larger black community” (Higginbotham 7), and Mrs. Willis leads conversation and is a well-respected member of the church in Hopkins’s novel. Hopkins establishes Mrs. Willis as a particular character type, indicating that women like her could be located in every city in New England; consequently, the widespread involvement of women is expressed through Mrs. Willis’s characterization (Hopkins

144). At church, Mrs. Willis discusses important issues such as race relations and the roles of black women in secular society, but the church is a buffer from the rest of American society that has enacted oppressive agendas against African Americans and women. Mrs. Willis's church involvement grants her a medium for discussing both the "race problem" and the "woman problem," societal debates around the turn of the century.

Mrs. Willis's involvement in the women's suffrage movement depicts the experiences of black women with the early feminist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mrs. Willis pushes her husband to become politically active; furthermore, she encourages her children to advance in their careers. Following her husband's death, Mrs. Willis argues that "[t]he advancement of the colored woman should be the new problem in the woman question" (147). Black women had largely been excluded from the mainstream women's movement; for instance, Ida B. Wells-Barnett advocated for black women's suffrage but was often barred from white women's suffragist groups.<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Willis advocates for the expansion of rights to black women, suggesting that suffrage will allow them freedom of expression and political authority to change the country for the better. Mrs. Willis links the struggles of black women to the mainstream suffrage movement, connecting black women's involvement with the expansion of democracy.

Mrs. Willis works both inside and outside of the church for the women's suffrage movement, indicating that the black church goes into areas that have not yet attained

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<sup>17</sup> A notable example is that of the National American Woman Suffrage Association's parade in Washington, D.C. in 1913, when Wells-Barnett and other black women were asked to walk at the end of the parade rather than with the white women.

equality and freedom. Mrs. Willis is successful in “the formation of clubs of colored women banded together for charity, for study, for every reason ... that can better the condition of mankind” (147). She has formed groups not only for charitable work but for education, and Mrs. Willis asserts that female involvement will better American society as a whole. Higginbotham realizes that the secular club movement whereby black women advocated for an expansion of citizenship rights was largely started by church women like Mrs. Willis, who used leadership roles in churches to “c[o]me together in associations that transformed unknown and unconfident women into leaders and agents of social service and racial self-help” (17). By utilizing her church position to advocate for education and racial uplift, Mrs. Willis exemplifies a larger historical movement of black church women who advocated for greater representation.

Characters like Dr. Abraham Peters and Mrs. Willis defy stereotypes while advancing the race as self-made individuals. Peters subverts racial stereotypes and utilizes minstrelsy to his advantage, tricking his white employers and advancing socially. So too, Mrs. Willis, as a black woman, encounters both racial and gender discrimination and connects the Race Problem with the Woman Problem. Through Mrs. Willis, Hopkins notes the importance of African American women in the expansion of democracy through the suffrage movement. Though minor characters, Dr. Peters and Mrs. Willis both craft spaces where American freedom, equality, and justice are more accessible.

## **Chapter 4**

### **“The Fate of the Entire Race”: The Tragic Mulatto Stereotype Revisited**

Not only does Hopkins present black men and women like Dr. Peters and Mrs. Willis as patriots, but Hopkins also condemns the tragic mulatto myth and suggests that America’s future is multiracial. The tragic mulatto figure was a common feature in American literature from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but Hopkins subverts this trope through Sappho Clark’s encounter with Mrs. Willis. Scholars like Suzanne Bost and JoAnn Pavletich contest Hopkins’s use of the tragic mulatto. Whereas Bost indicates that Sappho’s happy end defies the trope, Pavletich notes that the character’s marriage to Will Smith “reaffirms gender norms requiring female submission [and] does not allow the trope’s disruptive potential to travel far, even if the character crosses the ocean” (651).

This chapter responds to other critical perspectives of Sappho and underscores Hopkins’s subversion of the tragic mulatto myth. After defining the tragic mulatto in literature, I will posit that Sappho’s marriage to Will Smith exemplifies the political partnerships that empowered many black women to continue activist-intellectual pursuits even after they married. Pavletich’s thesis is more applicable to Dora’s marriage, and this chapter will consider both Sappho and Dora as (non-)tragic mulatta characters. Concluding this section, I will connect Hopkins to Charles Waddell Chesnutt, as both authors perceived mixed-race individuals as America’s future citizens.

### **Countering the Tragic Mulatto Myth**

Introduced by Lydia Maria Child in her short story “The Quadroons” (1842), the tragic mulatto is a sentimental characterization that embodies racial fears. Because the

mulatto figure typically has one white and one black parent, the character is unable to reconcile the dichotomies of race in America.<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, the tragic mulatto often dies by suicide, goes into exile, or attempts racial passing. Notions of black inferiority abound in the tragic mulatto myth, as the characters struggle between recognizing their supposedly superior identities as “white” Americans rather than their heritage of blackness. Hopkins redeems the tragic mulatto character type in her novel, and her characters are positive examples of mixed-race individuals who succeed, albeit through marriage. Mrs. Willis and Dora both suggest that mixed-race individuals result from the country’s history of slavery and sexual violence against black women by white men; however, they do not place the burden of guilt on tragic mulatto figures like Sappho.

Mrs. Willis denounces the tragic mulatto figure as a popular myth, suggesting that mixed-race individuals are representative of America’s national identity. Rather than utilizing arguments that mixed-race people are less virtuous or capable, Mrs. Willis notes that virtue is “an essential attribute peculiar to [African Americans]” and was not lost due to rape during or after slavery (149). Sappho, who feels guilty because she was raped by her white half-uncle, is (according to Mrs. Willis) faultless. Mrs. Willis posits that white men, like Sappho’s uncle, are to blame for the mulatto’s sense of anguish.

Mrs. Willis’s importance as an activist race woman in *Contending Forces* gives clout to her arguments against the tragic mulatto stereotype; however, characters like Sappho still struggle with their heritage until the novel’s conclusion. When John Langley

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<sup>18</sup> A precise system of racial classification in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries allowed for the continuation of racist policies. The one-drop rule indicated that “one drop” of black blood legally defined a person as black, banning them from social and political representation. In the Jim Crow era in which Hopkins lived, the one-drop rule allowed anti-miscegenation laws and disenfranchisement of African Americans to persist. Racial classifications were as follows: mulatto (1/2 black), quadroon (1/4 black), octoroon (1/8 black), etc. Homer Plessy of *Plessy v. Ferguson* was only 1/8 black.

threatens to reveal her secret child by her uncle and her genealogy to Will Smith, Sappho panics and returns to New Orleans to start a new identity. Like other tragic mulattoes, Sappho goes into exile without meaning to return. As Bost notes, Hopkins circumvents Sappho's unhappy end by allowing Will Smith to locate and marry her. Sappho is a tragic mulatto figure throughout much of Hopkins's novel, but the conclusion ultimately rescues Sappho from an inevitable tragic fate.

While Pavletich dismisses Hopkins's inversion of the tragic mulatto character type, I argue that Sappho and Will's marriage exemplifies political couplings that were commonly made by African American activist-intellectuals. Pavletich stresses that "the tropes and conventions of sentimental culture result in an inability to move beyond the limits of an idealized domesticity that subsumes female identity into patriarchal authority" (650). Certainly, Hopkins maintains the standards of the sentimentalist genre by ending her novel with two marriages and a cruise into the sunset. Even so, Sappho still resists gender oppression through her marriage to the DuBoisian character in the novel, Will Smith. Hopkins establishes early on that Sappho is as intelligent as she is attractive, and following her marriage, it appears her autonomy will still be preserved. Sappho is "naturally buoyant and bright" at social gatherings such as the sewing circle (Hopkins 111). Interested in activism and racial uplift discussions, Sappho regularly engages in conversations with people like Mrs. Willis. After her marriage, Sappho is "happy in contemplating the life of promise which was before her," suggesting that she will continue to be interested in activism and be supported by her spouse (401).

African American activists of the period often married one another to increase their sociopolitical influence. Shirley Graham DuBois—W. E. B. DuBois's wife—was

herself an accomplished playwright, composer and activist and the recipient of several prestigious awards. According to David McCant, Shirley's son from a previous marriage, his mother broadened DuBois's influence even as she continued to work for civil rights. ("Du Bois, Shirley Graham," par. 4).<sup>19</sup> Married, Sappho and Will are "[y]oked in all exercise of noble end," which implies future involvement in the racial uplift movement (Hopkins 402). Sappho's marriage may not be just a facet of the sentimentalist novel; on the contrary, it resolves the racial dilemma of the tragic mulatto through positioning Sappho as a "race woman."

Dora Smith is more trapped by the sentimentalist genre, as Pavlotich suggests. While capable and independent, Dora ultimately loses her individuality through marriage. Dora states, "I am not unhappy, and I am a mulatto," and she does not dwell upon her mixed-race heritage (152). The descendant of the slave-owning Montfort family, Dora does not feel guilt for her blackness. On the contrary, Dora utilize "instruments [of prejudice for her] advancement" (152). The Smith family inherits wealth from their white, slave-owning ancestors. In so doing, they redirect money that had been gained through oppression to benefit worthy causes. Gaining the money is described in terms of "[j]ustice," and the case "Smith vs. the United States" emphasizes the family's attainment of equality under the law as American citizens (383-384). In short, Dora is capable and attains equality and justice by utilizing the oppressive systems of slavery and segregation to her advantage.

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<sup>19</sup> For further reading on political partnerships that African American activists entered to increase their effectiveness, see Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore's *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Dora tries to remain fiercely independent throughout the novel. Dora's dialogue with Sappho prior to either woman's marriage suggests that marriage will not be the end of Dora's autonomy: "I don't believe there's enough sentiment in me to make love a great passion, such as we read of in books." (119). Likewise, Dora desires to "enjoy ... life" and to locate happiness (152). Dora's search for contentment accentuates the American vision of the pursuit of happiness. Seemingly, Dora's ability to choose her husband marks her independence, as she selects Dr. Arthur Lewis over John Langley. The wedding scene identifies that Dora "solemnly plighted her vows to the man of her choice," but she ultimately loses her ability to make choices following her marriage (382).

Hopkins struggles against the grain of the sentimentalist genre with Dora, whose characteristic independence throughout the novel is lost at the end. After she marries Dr. Arthur Lewis, she readily "accept[s] whatever the men tell me as right" despite possessing valuable experiences through working at her mother's boarding house and attaining economic freedom (125). Dora's "own individuality [is] swallowed up in love for her husband and child" (390). While Dora has an ending in which she is content, avenues for individual advancement seem to be closed to her by the novel's conclusion. Pavletich's argument may be more well-applied to Dora rather than to Sappho. Whereas Sappho is characterized as a tragic mulatto throughout the text and eventually attains happiness through marriage (and potential for further advancement), Dora is represented as an independent figure in the novel but ultimately loses her individuality.

In a period when African American women were unable to vote, hold elected office, and freely express themselves, Hopkins showcases political marriage couplings as

a potential method of advancement. Sappho's marriage with Will Smith will seemingly allow her to escape the tragic mulatto trope and to "[contemplate] the life of promise which was before her," suggesting that marriages can be beneficial for women insofar as they can advance both spouse's agendas rather than being degradingly patriarchal (401). Dora's marriage, on the other hand, causes the loss of her individuality and freedom of expression. Hopkins thereby addresses marriage as either a potential area for advancement or regression, indicating the bleak uncertainty of representation in American society for African American women.

### **"The Fate of the Entire Race"**

For Hopkins, African Americans' common heritage of mistreatment and rape during enslavement does not result in the tragic mulatto stereotype but as a unifying attribute, as Mrs. Willis states: "[T]he fate of the mulatto will be the fate of the entire race" (151). In other words, American citizens carry the marks of their oppression as motivation for progress, and "the fate of the mulatto" should not depend on predefined notions of race or tragedy. Rather, mixed-race individuals vie for social justice, freedom of expression, and racial and gender equality. Causing gasps from her audience at the sewing club, Mrs. Willis defines African Americans generally as "a race of mulattoes" (151). Mrs. Willis reconciles oppression with American citizenship, realizing that African Americans battle racial, social, and political obstacles to seek full citizenship rights.

African American author Charles Waddell Chesnutt, a contemporary of Hopkins, responds to claims of white racial superiority in his essay "What Is A White Man?" (1889). Chesnutt observes that white Americans were increasingly concerned with maintaining racial purity, and miscegenation laws and mandatory segregation were

proposed as remedies to racial and cultural mixing. Whiteness was defined by negation and “the line which separated freedom and opportunity from slavery or hopeless degradation” (Chesnutt 452). Laws such as the Mississippi Code of 1880 limited interracial marriages, suggesting that African Americans, on the basis of their race, were subpar citizens if not also considered a subspecies (457). African Americans and other minorities were subjected to a second-class form of citizenship because of Jim Crow policies that supported notions of white superiority.

Like Hopkins, Chesnutt ultimately argues that the United States will transform into a country of mixed-race individuals, primarily because of the legacy of enslavement. Chesnutt argues the legitimacy of interracial unions and America’s mixed-race heritage “are questions which the good citizen may at least turn over in his mind occasionally,” considering that “[m]ore than half of the colored people of the United States are of mixed blood” (459). Hopkins and her contemporaries realized the tragic mulatto as a fictional character type invented to showcase the importance of racial purity and white superiority. Both Hopkins and Chesnutt, however, imply that the country, still questioning its mixed-race heritage, had not yet come to terms with its legacy of enslavement. By positioning mixed-race characters as the protagonists in her novel on “Negro Life” in the United States, Hopkins demonstrates the changing face of America and takes pride in the power of mixed-race women to overcome societal obstacles. So too, Hopkins allows Sappho a happy ending and foreshadows an America that has reconciled with the past.

Hopkins redefines the tragic mulatto character type, noting the legacy of enslavement in American society that caused mixed-race individuals to be commonplace because of rape. Allowing Sappho to overcome her past and to attain a happy ending,

Hopkins demonstrates the importance of persevering through racial and gender discrimination and showcases marriage as one route women took to further their activism. On the other hand, Hopkins notes the dangers of marriage as a patriarchal tool, whereby Dora loses her individuality. By stressing the hardships that mixed-race individuals, especially women, endured, Hopkins still negates the tragic mulatto stereotype and, along with contemporaries like Charles Chesnutt, refashions the United States into a more just space that has come to terms with its racial heritage.

## Conclusion

In Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces*, characters like Dr. Abraham Peters, Mrs. Willis, Sappho, and Dora resist discrimination through carving out spaces truer to the American values of freedom, equality, and justice. Not only does Hopkins recognize the importance of the church in African American communities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but she also dispels negative racial and gender stereotypes found in minstrelsy. Mrs. Willis, the mentoring voice of the novel, exemplifies the race woman ideology, for she overcomes both race and gender discrimination to fight for an expansion of democracy through the club movement. Likewise, Hopkins inverts the tragic mulatto stereotype with Sappho even while recognizing the woes of marriage for many African American women with Dora. Exploring what it means to be an African American in the Jim Crow era, Hopkins demonstrates the necessity for equal citizenship under the law.

Throughout her first novel, Hopkins is cognizant of the historical period in which she is writing. By responding to key issues in American society at the turn-of-the-century, Hopkins positions herself as a seminal African American author alongside more prominent members of the canon like Charles Chesnutt and Booker T. Washington. In this thesis, I have brought attention to the historical roots of the Baptist church in Hopkins's novel, understudied characters like Dr. Abraham Peters and Mrs. Willis, and added to the scholarly discussion on Hopkins and the tragic mulatto literary figure. Much of Hopkins's work went unnoticed until the late twentieth century, but her reputation as a journalist and author is expanding, and my research will hopefully lead to more discussions on this rediscovered American figure.

## Appendix

**“Prospectus ... of the New Romance of Colored Life, ‘Contending Forces.’” *Colored***

***American Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 5, Oct. 1900**

In her positions as editor of the Women’s Section and later as the literary editor of the *Colored American Magazine*, Pauline Hopkins was one of the periodical’s most productive contributors. The October 1900 issue includes advertisements for her novels *Contending Forces* and *Hagar’s Daughter*, a serial novel that she wrote under the penname Sarah A. Allen, as well as a preview of her series on “Famous Men of the Negro Race.” The issue also contains her short story “Talma Gordon,” which follows the murder of a white man who turns against his children after learning that their mother is part black. In the spirit of archival recovery, the following two pages are photocopies from the October 1900 issue announcing the publication of *Contending Forces*. This full issue and many others have been digitized and made available through the efforts of *The Digital Colored American Magazine* project at The College of Saint Rose.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For more information on this useful source, see *The Digital Colored American Magazine*, <http://coloredamerican.org/>.

## PROSPECTUS . . .

### of the New Romance of Colored Life, “Contending Forces.”

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WE beg to announce to the friends of Miss PAULINE E. HOPKINS of Cambridge, Mass., and the public, a romance written by Miss Hopkins, entitled “CONTENDING FORCES.” This is pre-eminently a race-work dedicated to the best interest of the Negro everywhere.

**THE STORY.**—The incidents portrayed in this important and valuable romance of Negro life, North and South, have actually occurred, ample proof of which may be found in the archives of the Court House at Newbern, N. C., and at the seat of government at Washington, D. C.

The author has endeavored to tell an impartial story, leaving it to the reader to draw conclusions; but she has presented both sides of the dark picture—lynching and concubinage—truthfully and without vituperation, introducing enough of the exquisitely droll humor peculiar to the Negro to give a bright touch to an otherwise gruesome subject.

**OF WHAT USE IS FICTION TO THE COLORED RACE AT THE PRESENT CRISIS IN ITS HISTORY?**—They have historians, lecturers, ministers, judges, and lawyers of signal brilliancy and renown; but, after all, it is the simple, homely tale told in an unassuming manner which cements the bond of brotherhood among all classes and all complexions. If the writer is true to life, he will give us pictures of manners and customs, present the religious, political, and social condition of a people, preserving in this way a valuable record of the growth and development of a people from generation to generation. **No one will do this for the race. They must themselves develop the men and women who can and will do this work faithfully.**

**TIME OF PUBLICATION.**— We desire to announce that the book will be ready for distribution early in October. Those who have already subscribed will find when the work appears, that they have lost nothing by waiting, and that their interests have been duly considered; while those who favor us with their orders from now on will find us willing to make **special arrangements** in order to place a copy of this work in every household in the United States. Miss Hopkins presented this work before the Woman's Era Club of Boston on November 15, 1899, with instant success. She will be glad to give readings before women's clubs in any section of the country. **Terms on application.**

**CONDITION OF PUBLICATION.**— Owing to the peculiar nature of this work, the publishers deem it advisable to place it before the public by **subscription**. We offer a fine work of about four hundred pages, good paper, clear print, bound in **CLOTH** and ornamented in gold and color, and most beautifully **ILLUSTRATED**, at the very low cost of \$1.50 upon delivery. Send in your name as a subscriber and help the work. Club women wanted as agents. Liberal commission. Address

COLORED CO-OPERATIVE PUBLISHING COMPANY,  
5 Park Square, Boston, Mass.

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.....190

**COLORED CO-OPERATIVE PUBLISHING CO.,**  
5 PARK SQUARE, BOSTON, MASS.

*I hereby subscribe for one copy of the new romance by  
Pauline E. Hopkins, entitled, "Contending Forces," and agree to pay  
\$1.50 on the delivery of the same, bound in cloth.*

.....Name.  
.....Street.  
.....Town.  
.....State.

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