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### **She Voices Them: Evidence of Black Feminism in Black Women's Harlem Renaissance Literature**

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She Voices Them: Evidence of Black Feminism in Black Women's Harlem Renaissance  
Literature

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“Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts of  
the City College of the City of New York.”

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## Introduction

In the Negro World there is one figure the victim of two-fold segregation and discrimination- the New Negro Woman. Woman's emancipation is strangely parallel with the Negro's struggle. Inferiority is the reason given for her oppression. She has been considered as a mere chattel, cowed and subdued, taught that she, like children, must be seen and not heard. Pettied as an ornament of the home, a plaything for the male, producer of a line of warriors and race builders. Lacking all chance for development she is called inferior because she hasn't developed. The Negro woman falls heir to all these prejudices, and to add injury to distress she is a Negro. If there is any one person against whom the doors have been closed it is the New Negro Woman. As a woman she was outside her sphere. As a Negro woman she was impossible. In industry, education, and politics she is gradually coming into her own. But remember her closed doors are of the thickness of two- she is first a woman, then a Negro. May the fates be kind to her! (Whaley 772)

A renaissance denotes new growth in something, especially art, literature, music, ideas, and/or the sciences. Originating in Italy, Europe experienced a cultural, scientific, and artistic renaissance between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, signaling the end of the medieval era and a shift into modern times. There were core changes in thinking, creating, believing, and perception that helped move Europeans towards the age of Enlightenment. The Harlem Renaissance was appropriately named because a new generation of blacks, the children and grandchildren of former slaves, recognized the necessity for resetting the perception of blacks not only racially and ethnically but also communally and individually as gendered beings. The migration of blacks during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 1900s and the 1910s, from places such as the American South, the Caribbean, and Africa, brought with it the opportunity for blacks to change the way society sees them according to their own self-perceptions and not the misconceptions of others, as in the past. It also afforded blacks the opportunity to display the growth of their music, art, and especially literature. The Harlem Renaissance, spanning from around 1918 through the 1930s, served a multipurpose agenda. It was a definitional period used to sever ties with the Old Negro construct which was grounded in stereotype, prejudice, and mythology, built by whites and placed upon blacks. This separation

needed to happen in order to establish and connect blacks of the new century to the New Negro. The New Negro was an individual focused on self-determination, self-identification, and positive presentation through display of a newly designed black aesthetic for both himself and the black community. Interestingly enough, not only can the New Negro be defined by what he is, he can also be defined by what he is not: a woman. This meant that the New Negro was not a universal construct or gender inclusive and that the black woman's identity had yet to be addressed during this time.<sup>1</sup>

I am interested in the definitional aspects of the Harlem Renaissance, especially those pertaining to the black woman, as she moves from objectification to self-definition and works to establish a blended identity that recognizes her double-consciousness in being black and female. In this thesis, I address the following questions: What were the pre-established identity constructions and gender expectations for black women? Why was there rebellion and outrage over these identity constructions and gender expectations? How did black women of the Harlem Renaissance see themselves? What did gender nonconformism look like during the Harlem Renaissance? What did it mean? What did working class black women want? Were the things that working class black women wanted the same things that middle class women wanted? Did any of these women see an opportunity for mobility? What, if any, is the significance of the literature written by female Harlem Renaissance writers today? In other words, who or what did this literature impact? This thesis answers these questions in the following ways: by providing a brief, historical background of events and reasons why black women of the Harlem Renaissance felt the need to define themselves through a discussion on how the following foundational essays, Elise Johnson McDougald's "The Task of Negro

Womanhood," Marita Bonner's "On Being Young- a Woman- and Colored," Alice Dunbar-Nelson's, "Woman's Most Serious Problem," Marion Vera Cuthbert's "Problem's Facing Negro Young Women," and Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to be a Colored Me," work together to provide a complete, self-developed, picture of how they thought about their lives and challenges, and generated their own self-definitional constructs. It further communicates that these women were protofeminists who preceded the current black feminists in their search for empowerment. I will also analyze the play *Rachel* by Angelina Weld Grimké as a radical, literary piece by a black woman who forthrightly constructs an alternative to the projected definition of black womanhood.

I chose these texts because first, I think the essays by McDougald, Bonner, Dunbar-Nelson, and Cuthbert thoroughly, honorably, and effectively encompass the ways in which black women Harlem Renaissance writers see and define themselves and wish for others to see them. These essays are broad and general enough to discuss identity aspects yet, specific enough to discuss issues particular to the black woman's experience. The essays also acknowledge the interlocking oppressions and their effect on black women's lives. Hurston's essay expertly sums up the self-identification, feeling, and attitude that the other four essayists are considering. Instead of focusing on black women occupying liminal, negative space in "double jeopardy," Zora writes in the voice of blended "me-ness," a balance of blackness and womanhood that is distinctly connected to black women. Finally, I chose the play *Rachel* because of the way Grimké uses drama to portray not only the effects of racism and sexism on black women's lives, but also how the play moves away from simplistic analysis on these interlocking oppressions and assists black women in re-defining themselves through gender nonconformist action.

Also, *Rachel* works as a social commentary on black middle class lives in how black children are affected by racism, and quite possibly how homosexuality is handled, or not handled, in the black community. Therefore, the literature not only works as literature, but it also works as period and cultural commentary on the perception of black women during the Harlem Renaissance as told in their own voices and from their own perceptions.

## Literature Review

What is commonly called literary history... is actually a record of choices. Which writers have survived their times and which have not depends upon who noticed them and chose to record their notice.  
(McDowell 153)

It seems that when scholars set out to compose literary criticism on the Renaissance, their initial action is to consult “the fathers” of the movement: Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois, followed by their protégées: Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay, to name a few (Smethurst 2007, Pochmara 2001, Harris 2010). The black women of this time were largely active in both race and gender politics as well as literary publication and some were well known in literary circles, however it is still mostly male writers that are primarily recognized within the movement.<sup>2</sup> As a result, their literary contributions and therefore their works are the most heavily studied and criticized.

The marginalization of these essayists, and essentially black women writers during this time period by scholars, has a large part to do with black male writers of this time relegating black women’s works to marginal space. This lack of criticism on women of the Harlem Renaissance is also apparent when dealing with queer aspects of

the period, which I will discuss later. One present-day critic, however, Anne Stavney recognizes the absence of the black woman's voice in her identity construction within Harlem Renaissance discourse and chronicles the steps taken by black men to establish female identity and their purposes in doing so. Conversely, even with the little criticism generated about them, I find that the four essays under analysis in this work are fundamental and essential to unpacking and understanding the self-defined black woman of the Harlem Renaissance, yet they are barely represented in the canon and have largely gone unnoticed by literary scholars and critics.<sup>3</sup>

Out of these four protofeminist essays, I have always considered the McDougald essay to be one of the most important texts to the Harlem Renaissance. McDougald's essay has received the most critical attention out of all of these essays. Walter Kalaidjian also finds value in McDougald's work, evidenced in his lines,

However ignored today, McDougald herself remains an important precursor of black feminist theory. In particular, her contribution to Alain Locke's March 1925 *Survey Graphic* issue, 'The Double Task: The Struggle for Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation' - later reprinted as 'The Task of Negro Womanhood' in *The New Negro* - lays out a devastating analysis of African American women's dual oppression in their racial and sexual lives. (89)

Crystal J. Lucky juxtaposes the construct of Locke's New Negro male to McDougald's New Negro Woman, noting that both of these "New Negro" identity tropes are housed within the same work, but do not match. Locke's New Negro "is male, forward-moving, integrationist, and in possession of a new sense of spirituality and creativity" (26) while McDougald's New Negro Woman is climbing an uphill battle throughout all areas of society. She is the victim of both racism and sexism both at home and at work and still seen through the lens of stereotype. Lucky writes, "The 'new'



Negro woman is vastly different from the self-satisfied ‘new’ Negro man described by Locke. She is no less assertive, competent, or visionary than he, but she is forced to grapple with the twofold quandary of sexual and racial discrimination as it is manifested in social, familial, and economic oppression” (26). Linda Kinnahan, a professor of feminist theory, writes that McDougald’s essay is a “class based analysis identifying intra-racial gender conflicts between black women and black men” that “considers the impact of a self-directed working woman on the black family structure” (66). Jennifer M. Wilks writes that McDougald’s essay helps to deconstruct the negative image of the black woman by presenting her in a new, positive light. Emily Hinnov uses the McDougald and Bonner essays as well as Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in order to answer the question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, posed in Gayatri Spivak’s article. She defines the Bonner and McDougald texts as subaltern, as the essays “illustrate the fact that black women of their era struggled with an unacknowledged need and a lack of language for imaging an unfettered or autonomous sense of self... these women were very much aware of their (subaltern) status... their work reveals their own attempt to speak out...” (Hinnov 62). Be that as it may, what is most relevant to my analysis is how Hinnov calls the audience to recognize Bonner and McDougald’s efforts and identities as black feminists, who speak out and write about race, class, gender, and interestingly, silence, thereby letting the subaltern speak.

Cheryl Wall is one of the first critics to write about black women of the Harlem Renaissance. Wall explicates the text and references lines which show how “Bonner’s essay images the consequences of racial prejudice, gender bias, and class stratification in metaphors of confinement and division” (9). Bonner’s speaker, and all black women, are

trapped by the trifecta of race, class, and gender. Wall also offers criticism on other works during the period which discuss how being young, black, and women impacted both their lives and their literature.

Kinnahan so far is the only critic/scholar to even mention anything on Alice Dunbar-Nelson's "Women's Most Serious Problem" and Marion Vera Cuthbert's "Problem's Facing Negro Young Women." Otherwise, these two essays have been virtually untouched by scholarship. I would speculate because these essayists cover issues not exclusive to black community matters, it took a feminist scholar to write criticism on these essays. Even then, she only writes a few lines. She discusses the black woman as a worker and "the woman worker's double shift" (Kinnahan 66) as she toils for both job and family yet remains the victim of racism and sexism. She also addresses Dunbar-Nelson's focus on issues pertaining to motherhood and birthrates in the black community.<sup>4</sup>

For the play *Rachel*, critic Michelle Hester recognizes that it can and must be read as a commentary on the intertwining of racism and sexism on black women's lives. She is one of the only critics to read the play in such a light. I build my analysis on both Anne Stavney's and Michelle Hester's criticisms, and I offer my own criticism of the play as a protofeminist text, one that predates the conception of feminism but still contains elements of feminist theory. I will also show that the actions of the protagonist in the play battle gender expectation in her behaving in a gender nonconformist manner, as an act of protest of unwanted constructions or who they are as gendered beings. identity and gender projections.

Overall, the essays and the play, *Rachel*, discuss many issues that present-day black feminists discuss and conceptualize: the silencing of black women, motherhood, labor, social class, the intertwined effects of racism and sexism, relations with black men, and establishing a sense of self, which become the subjects of my analysis in this work.

## Black Women's Opinions of Themselves

To those working with Black women writers prior to 1940, the contextual approach is especially useful... it is useful to determine what the prevalent attitudes about Black women were during the time that they wrote. (McDowell 156)

Both Anne Stavney and Deborah McDowell discuss the New Negro Woman's primary desire to be a wife and mother and remain in the home, first evidenced in various issues of A. Philip Randolph's socialist publication *The Messenger* during 1927, under a write-in section entitled, "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs." In the pages of *The Messenger*, as well as several other media of the black aesthetic, art, music, and especially literature, black women define themselves juxtaposing their desired roles as wife and mother to their needs for education, leadership, recognition, self-actualization, self-determination, opportunity, and equality. Their education did not necessarily have to be in a formal classroom setting, although at least high school completion was valuable and tertiary education was highly favorable. However, education was more of a broad term that included but was not limited to vocational, moral, black history, and domestic elements. Furthermore, she was already a laborer, this was already established during the period of enslavement. Nonetheless, there were some identity ambiguities. Some black women fully accepted the charge of raising their status, whether through marriage, vocation, etc., yet, they continued to construct their identities in relation to black men. It was as if every step forward they took, they had to bring men along because they were directly responsible for men's growth and development as well as their own. An opinion from a reader in the July 1923 "The New Negro Woman" issue of *The Messenger* reads:

Yes, she has arrived. Like her white sister, she is the product of profound and vital changes in our economic mechanism, wrought mainly by the

World war and its aftermath. Along the entire gamut of social, economic and political attitudes, the New Negro Woman has effected a revolutionary orientation. In politics, business and labor, in the professions, church and education, in science, art and literature, the New Negro Woman, with her head erect and spirit undaunted is resolutely marching forward, ever conscious of her historic and noble mission of doing her bit toward the liberation of her people in particular and the human race in general. Upon her shoulders rests the big task to create and keep alive, in the breast of black men, a holy consuming passion to break with the slave traditions of the past; to spurn and overcome the fatal insidious inferiority complex of the present, which, like Banquo's Ghost, bobs up ever and anon, to arrest the progress of the New Negro Manhood Movement; and to fight with increasing vigor, with dauntless courage, unrelenting zeal and intelligent vision for the attainment of the stature of a *full man*, a free race and a new world. ("The New Negro Woman" 757)

There were a number of black women that embraced DuBois' rhetoric in that their role in preserving and uplifting blacks was to remain in the home and be wife and mother. W.E.B. DuBois' essay "The Damnation of Women" and "The Burden of Black Women" poem place the blame for the condemnation, degradation, and violation of black women squarely on white men. DuBois is also initially responsible for designing a new model for black womanhood, evidenced in the following lines:

No other woman on earth could have emerged from the hell of force and temptation which once engulfed and still surrounds black women in America with half the modesty and womanliness that they retain. (DuBois "Damnation" 134, 143)

By combining this unique identity signature with black women's other "feminine characteristics- purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Stavney 537), DuBois constructs a model for black womanhood that is particularly male-centered; a construct separate from but mirroring aspects from the white woman's cult of true womanhood. This black male identity creation was coined the "true black woman" (537) by author and critic Claudia Tate. This construct painted black women as "nonsexual, devoted, demure" (537) in order to counteract negative sexual stereotype. The problem with this

titling, however, is that “true” denotes an exacting or absolutism. Gender cannot be “true” because gender is fluid and changes depending upon who is performing it. The fact that black women acted in gender nonconformist ways does not make them any less woman or feminine but does indicate that gender has many constructs and no absolutes. Ironically, desexualizing black women makes them the perfect candidate for motherhood; which both black and white men agreed was the quintessential characteristic of womanhood (538). DuBois constantly pushes this “black womanhood equals motherhood” doctrine, asserting,

the first and greatest function of [women’s] lives... was the duty of motherhood. Their second most important function was the ‘spiritual’ duty of homemaking... by becoming good mothers and creating a good home life, they advanced the race. As woman uplifts herself, she uplifts her people. (539)

Male concepts of womanhood were related to racial uplift. Racial uplift had little to do with the social progress of the entire black community and more to do with raising black men to equal status of white men. While DuBois was so accurate in voicing the reality of the African American experience as a “double-consciousness... two-ness- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (DuBois, “Souls” 5), he was not acknowledging the double-consciousness of the African-American as a community problem. He constructed double consciousness as a problem for black men and related it to constructing black masculinity. Therefore, even though DuBois recognizes the difficulties black women are having with identity construction; double consciousness is not inclusive or reflective of the double-consciousness of the

black woman. For black women, with double-consciousness came double task: fighting against the white male patriarchy while fighting for gender recognition.

However, women who embraced DuBois's ideals were not trying to mimic white women's behavior, values, and responsibilities. On the contrary, many black women strongly believed that their role in the home as mother provided for their personal families and the black community as a collective. According to Paula Giddings,

Much of what has been interpreted as mere imitation of white values among middle-class Black women was a race-conscious mission. They saw themselves not just as messengers but as living examples. 'The mother in the home, as the teacher in the schoolroom, and the woman in the church set the standards for the multitude...' (Giddings 99)

Despite the scores of black women who accepted the role of domestic servant to their families, it was a gendered expectation created and pushed by black men onto black women, and there were many black women that did not wish to accept this identity construction and did not personally see themselves as wives and mothers first, or even at all. Anne Stavney first reveals that there was a segment of black women that "viewed motherhood much more ambivalently" (Stavney 551) than black men would have the community believing. While the male Harlem Renaissance writers were spending time constructing literature that painted pictures of idealized maternal representation and images of black women as the stereotypical exotic other, their female counterparts were constructing literature to present counter opinions, self-definitions, and outrage over and rebellion against the projected identity constructions. It is those black women, those who consider "the greatest need of the Negro Woman... is to set up a standard of her own" (White 130) that I am focusing my analysis on, the ones who amidst gender and cultural expectations deviate and make their own path.

Black women saw themselves, and wished for others to see them, in the scope of gender nonconformism; they were moving themselves away from gender expectations, opting out of motherhood, advancing their careers out of choice and preference to work and not necessarily forced slave labor or family financial necessity, and re-defining the core and conduct of black women, starting with their need to rebel against and re-define the act of silencing. These identity re-constructions were written in the essays I am discussing. These essays were not written in isolation but in response to issues raised by other women writers during the Renaissance.

Women have always been expected to suffer in silence at the hands of patriarchy and blacks have been forced to suffer in silence at the hands of racism; therefore, the forced silence of black women is a motif. In my reading of these essays, I see three major ways they use the literature. First, they speak through their texts to make the dominant majority listen to them. Second, they use the literature to give voice to their outrage over racial injustice and forced gender expectations. Third, they fuse their aspects of self-definition into the text, aspects which could be seen as gender nonconformist practice because the manner in which black women wish to define themselves is counter to how society has always constructed them. All of this was no easy task, as silence was seen as a function of both blackness and femininity.

Carole Boyce Davies discusses the “voicelessness” black women were forced into and the opportunities they seized to speak out against oppression (Davies, “Women and Literature” 1). It is not just about the forced silence black women lived, it is also about the willingness, interest, and ability of the oppressor to listen and hear. Davies explains voicelessness as:



... the historical absence of the woman writer's text: the absence of a specifically female position on major issues such as slavery, colonialism, decolonization, women's rights and more direct social and cultural issues. By voicelessness we also mean silence: the inability to express a position in the language of the 'master' as well as the textual construction of women as silent. Voicelessness also denotes articulation that goes unheard. In practical terms, it is characterized by lack of access to the media as well as exclusion from the critical dialogue. (1)

In understanding voicelessness, one understands that silence does not have to be a literal, physical forcing into a stoppage of speech or action. On the one hand, many black women have been silenced, but on the other hand there have also been other women who have seized opportunities and spoke out. It is not just about making black women's voices heard or black women speaking out, it is also about the willingness, interest, and ability of the oppressor to both listen and hear. The inability or refusal of oppressors to hear permits or demands resistance (Davies, "Hearing Black Women's Voices" 3).

There are many women, like Bonner's speaker in, "On Being Young- A Woman- and Colored," who have "reached the point where they say nothing verbally and instead operate from a silence that speaks eloquently" (3). However, one could argue that in these cases, because silence tends to be forced or expected, like with Bonner's speaker, quiet is then chosen. Silence is the complete absence of sound or prohibiting or preventing one from speaking; while quiet is making little or no noise or the absence of noise. Some sound is present and permitted during periods of quiet, usually made by someone or something. Silence does not permit sound. Therefore, some women choose to be quiet within forced silence, in order to use the gendered expectation to her advantage. Since silence is forced, a choice can be made. There is the choice to react in the form of speech or writing or some subversive action meant to "make noise." Or, there is the choice of being quiet. Quiet can provide the interiority necessary for black women

to resist the constant bombardment of racism and sexism, while they wait for their time to rise. McDougald, in agreement with Bonner, also mentions the racism and sexism that black women must endure, quietly. And, as Hinnov states, McDougald writes the black woman as an “inspired yet quietly enduring beacon for her race” (Hinnov 61) who seeks to raise both herself and the black community. McDougald writes:

We find the Negro woman, figuratively struck in the face daily by contempt from the world about her. Within her soul, she knows little of peace and happiness. But through it all, she is courageously standing erect, developing within herself the moral strength to rise above and conquer false attitudes. She is maintaining her natural beauty and charm and improving her mind and opportunity. She is measuring up to the needs to her family, community and race, and radiating a hope throughout the land. (108)

In choosing quiet, her compliance is subversive. Embracing quiet is just as subversive as speaking as it forces a re-definition of silence, especially as it pertains to black women’s self construction. Bonner and McDougald suggest that black women wear quiet as a mask, apropos to poet Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask,” as armor for self-preservation. Critic Emily Hinnov writes that McDougald, and especially Bonner, suggest that quiet is “the best response to the forces of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” serving as a “protective... shell that renders the New Negro woman ‘steely and brittle’ yet mentally astute” (Hinnov 56). Black women can use the “gendered expectation of calm” to resist “dual oppressions of race and gender” as well as to re-establish themselves their identity, shifting gender expectation to something positive and self-promoting (57). It is said that actions speak louder than words and the seditious acts of choosing quiet and writing literature speak enough for black women so that they literally never have to speak. But they must.

McDougald was one of only eight female contributors to Locke's anthology and she stages a little rebellion of her own as she “offers a perspective wholly not congruent with editor Locke’s... McDougald was... the only one to address gender issues” (Wall 13). Jennifer M. Wilks asserts that McDougald links “the fate of the black race to that of the black woman- McDougald leaves the distinct impression that the task of changing that fate rests principally with men” (148). Whereas I find that McDougald’s essay is grounded in protofeminist ideals or desires. The essay does not delude itself or the reader into believing that black women have been accepted into society because they have increased access to education and increase job opportunity and selection. Instead it highlights black women’s efforts and progress in the labor force against ever present social prejudice and contextualizes what that means for black feminism and black patriarchy. The coupling of this essay with Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s essay, “Women’s Most Serious Problem,” firmly establishes that a piece of the black woman’s identity has been re-established as a laborer, but **not** a slave.

Dating back to the period of enslavement, black women worked, oftentimes alongside their men, and for them it may have been empowering. According to Giddings, her identity “as a worker and free agent, except where the master’s will was concerned, developed a sense of independence and a keen sense of personal rights” (Giddings 58). Connecting with black women’s interest in work and social advancement, McDougald divides black women into four distinct groups based on social/class standing, education, economics, and career: The first group consists of the wives and daughters of businessmen and professionals. The second group, professional, college educated women with careers in education, nursing, social work, library work, or office related

jobs, is where McDougald places most emphasis as it mirrors her own class identity. The third group consists of women who work in the trades and factories. The fourth group consists of domestic and casual workers. McDougald elaborates on the status of these women:

A commonality between the second and third groups: Many are wives and mothers whose husbands are insufficiently paid, or who have succumbed to social maladjustment and have abandoned their families... They face the great problem of leaving home each day and at the same time trying to raise children in their spare time- this, too, in neighborhoods where rents are large, standards of dress and recreation are high and costly, and social danger on the increase. (105)

During Reconstruction and even in the Renaissance era, sometimes “black wives were forced to work, most of them as washerwomen, whose meager incomes saved many families from utter destruction” (Giddings 59). However, as women were increasingly moving more towards professional and factory work, “earning a salary, not wages” (Dunbar-Nelson 113), this meant that opportunities for permanent work were on the rise. However, “now that she is more than ever working... she feels a thrill of pride in her new economic status...” (113-114). This personal and financial autonomy was often problematic in interpersonal relationships between black men and women for a number of reasons. First, black men needed to have control over their lives as well as the lives of their families just as whites did. As a result, they expected their wives to stay home. Yet, according to McDougald, “the growing economic independence of Negro working women is causing her to rebel against the domineering attitudes of the cruder working-class husband” (McDougald 107). Black men attempted to mirror the way white men ran their families by working outside the home and relegating their wives to domestic space by not allowing them to work. Especially when there were black women whose

husbands were “industrious, able and willing to support them” yet “voluntarily [left] home and [became] chambermaids, and stewardesses... in all probability to enable them to obtain more fine or costly articles of dress or furniture” (Giddings 60-61). Also, but to a lesser extent, social laws from the 19<sup>th</sup> century “stated that women who worked outside the home, or whose race had a history of sexual exploitation, were outside the realm of ‘womanhood’ and its prerogatives” (49). For black men, their women could not be “true” women if they worked outside of the home and therefore they could not defend their honor nor could they obtain elevation and equality in society. However, in terms of labor opportunities, black men were not permitted to work in many, if any, of the higher paying jobs and in most social cases could not afford to maintain a family on one meager salary. Besides, many black women wanted to work, “to preserve their new economic independence” (Dunbar-Nelson 114). Black women becoming workers re-defined their former identity construction as slaves, but could also be seen as purposefully rebellious, disobedient, and counter to pre-established gender expectation.

McDougald does remind the reader that even though there were many black women in the workforce making strides in professional arenas, thereby uplifting both themselves and the race, the workforce was not “free from discrimination” (McDougald 105), which is the socially authentic piece of the essay. As much career advancement as black women made and as much education as they were able to obtain, “telephone and insurance companies and other corporations which receive considerable patronage from Negroes deny them proportionate employment” (105-106). The abolition of slavery brought black women back into the workforce just as factories became segregated. The segregation of factories lasted for over a century (Giddings 48). Therefore, McDougald’s

professionals and factory workers were less in number because “the better paying jobs [were] reserved for whites” (McDougald 106), making the subaltern larger in number.

Black women’s newly re-defined roles as workers added to their re-evaluation of motherhood. For some black women, motherhood was a personal aspiration; for others, there was a detachment and disinterest, and somewhere in the middle was the DuBoisian rhetoric that conflated black womanhood with motherhood. Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s essay addresses the fact that black women were actively avoiding motherhood, a subversive, gender nonconformist act. As black women moved outside the home and more towards work in the professions and factories, they moved further and further away from motherhood. There were economic influences that caused women to opt out of motherhood. As previously discussed, in most black families, there was an economic necessity for black women to be what Dunbar-Nelson titles “a co-worker with the Negro man” or “a co-wage earner” (Dunbar- Nelson 113-114) otherwise these families could and would fall into economic ruin. Therefore, sometimes “because of poverty of the family, they are compelled to limit their offspring” (114). There were also some women sacrificing motherhood for careers so as not to attempt to split themselves in half pursuing both, resulting in the neglect of one of the areas, more than likely motherhood:

The inevitable disruption of family life necessitated by the woman being a co-wage earner with the man has discouraged the Negro woman from childbearing... The Negro woman is awakening to the fact that the contribution she makes to the economic life of the race is too often made at the expense of the lives of boys and girls of the race- so she is refusing to bring into the world any more potential delinquents. (114)

Dunbar-Nelson also emphasizes an interesting point, “the birth rate of the cultured class is apparently only one-third of the masses” (114). The black intelligentsia decreased their birth rate, and in any race, the top and best parts are the ones that need to

be reproducing, as “no race can advance without them” (115) because the real chance for social growth and uplift dwindles. Dunbar-Nelson is warning and reminding readers there is no growth for anyone without women. But, women must grow too. So what, if any, are the viable solutions?

Marion Vera Cuthbert’s essay, “Problems of Negro Young Women” was published ten years after the other three essays and works to reinforce and tie together previously established viewpoints as well as present them in a new context. Cuthbert reinforces the dual role of black women, as mother and laborer. However, she takes the essay in two different directions. Cuthbert links black women’s work with motherhood, nation building, and wealth, viewing it through the lens of Marxism. First, she conceptualizes the black woman as a laborer by connecting her role as a worker to Marxist theory, evidenced by the lines:

To labor, to look upon one’s self as one who toils and who is justified in asking for adequate rewards for that toil... learning to know something of work and rewards, of the production of goods and their consumption, of the ambitions of wealth, and the self-seeking of nations... The Negro woman knows... she must be a paid worker if her children are to have even half chance at life. (Cuthbert 119)

Second, Cuthbert lobbies for an intra-sex unity with white women, which is counter to the work and ideology of race women. Cuthbert states that for women to get ahead they must recognize themselves as workers and accept “the unity between women as women regardless of race and color” (119). Despite black clubwomen Frances Harper, Marie Stewart, and other race women’s mistrust of white women, Cuthbert believes in a gendered unity:

This feeling of women might spring from something deep in the very biological nature of women. For they who must give birth know the

intimacies of pain. Or this feeling may be the result of woman's long battle for freedom... The Negro woman knows that she can turn to white women, to some of them, for an appreciation of her problems, and that some, they may not be many, but some of them will stand by her in the hour of necessity. (119)

These essayists were some of the first black feminists, pre-dating black formal conceptions of black feminist thought by about 60 years. They expressed the need for a discussion of the intertwining of racism, classism, and sexism and their effect on black women, just as a black feminist of today would had she lived during the Renaissance. As black feminists, they have recognized their history and are working to first erase the negative images inscribed on them and then write their re-constructed selves on a blank slate.



## Zora Neale Hurston

In this matter of sex equality, Negro women have contributed few outstanding militants, a noble instance being the historic Sojourner Truth. (McDougald 107)

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I A Woman?"

Many black feminists recognize Sojourner Truth as the first black feminist.

Authors Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen have also been credited with influencing other modern black women writers and the first essayist in this work, Elise Johnson McDougald, is described as "an important precursor of black feminist theory" (Kalaidijan 89). McDougald recalls Truth's feminist efforts in her "Task" essay, and along with the writings of her female contemporaries, sets the stage for dialogue on black women's lives. Increased discourse could now occur, even if only amongst themselves, where there was previously silence. These women writers addressed black feminist concerns such as reproductive rights, abortion, child care, violence against women, labor issues, just not name a few. These same issues are still important, just as they were to the black feminists of the 1970s and 1980s. Overall, the connection between the modern black feminists and the Harlem Renaissance predecessors is their commitment to developing a sense of self that recognized and handled the effects of the interlocking oppressions over black women's lives. Although the Harlem Renaissance writers wrote it first, they are not credited by the black feminists for laying the groundwork. The closest anyone has come to crediting Harlem Renaissance black women writers is various black feminist

literary critics, namely Ann duCille, Michael Awkward, and Cheryl Wall, crediting Zora Neale Hurston's importance and impact on black women's literature:

... reclaimed by contemporary black feminist writers such as Alice Walker, Hurston is widely recognized today as the essential black literary foremother, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is pointed to as the enabling text of a canon of African American women writers. According to Cheryl Wall... 'the developing tradition of black women's writing nurtured now in the poetry and prose of such writers as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker began with the work of Zora Neale Hurston.' Wall goes on to note... 'she was the first to create a language and imagery that reflected the reality of black women's lives.' (duCille 80)

Zora Neale Hurston is credited by many black women authors as not only highly influential, but also as the main architect of black women's literature. For me, Zora's literature is the most complete and quintessential example of black women's lives; this is what differentiates her from the other essayists. Her voice and content contrast the others, perhaps because hers is the self-assured identity the other writers are hoping that all black women are able to achieve by shedding gender expectations, embracing new identities, and becoming themselves. Hurston's essay, "How It Feels to be a Colored Me," is a personal essay which is unabashed, authentic, confident, and celebratory. It is explicitly Zora and how she sees herself as a black woman. In analyzing this essay, I noticed that, as Bonner discusses, "Hurston does not seem to care whether we like her" because she likes herself, she likes the self she has constructed, she has "dignity, honesty, our privileged self-esteem, affirmativeness, and self-assertion- all, and more, without rancor or bitterness or arrogance" (Douglas 222-223).

She is Zora first and will always be Zora first because she can "remember the very day" (Hurston 1) she became colored. Obviously there was a time and identification before "colored" when Zora was simply Zora, a girl who liked to, wanted to, and was

informally paid to “speak pieces and sing... and dance the parse-me-la” (1-2). In spite of the undiscussed “changes” (2) in Hurston’s family at age thirteen, Zora’s environment changes from the all black town of Eatonville, FL, where she was born, to Jacksonville, FL. She moves from the country to the city, shifting from identity to label. Socially, she is seen as “a little colored girl” (2). She remarks, “I found out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown- warranted not to rub or run” (2). “Ways” she avoids sharing with the reader, possibly because they’re associated with negativity, tragedy, and stigma and she refuses to let her blackness, her identity, be consumed by such elements:

BUT I AM NOT tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it...No, I do not weep at the world- I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife. (Hurston 2)

Wall, having read and explicated Zora’s autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*, is able to shed light on the ambiguities surrounding Zora’s environment change; the death of Hurston’s mother and subsequent dissolution of family life lead to the move to Jacksonville. And I suspect, as does Wall, the “ways” which Zora omits are directly related to Hurston’s move to the city which possibly put her in scenarios that recognized and sought to exploit her “puberty” (26). Zora acquired a new “recognition of the limitations and dangers to which her womanhood made her vulnerable” (26). Just as she became aware of her racial identity, she became “aware of her gendered identity” (26). Society tries to bring her down and discriminate but Zora has so much race pride, self-control, self-importance, that she nonchalantly disregards the racists and their attempts to negate her identity:

Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register deep within me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you... (Hurston 2) Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me. (4)

The tone of Hurston's essay is controlled, she maintains "control of tone, control of feelings" and "keeps her anger held in check" (Douglas 221-222) in instances where she could offer society and circumstance a verbal thrashing, because she feels discriminated against (Hurston 4). Ultimately, Hurston is able to find that "me-ness," that blend and balance of black and female that the Harlem Renaissance women writers and race women were seeking. Zora celebrates and owns blackness and femininity but also transcends it, her self-confidence and self-control evident here:

At certain times I have no race, I am me. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street library, for instance... (3) The Cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race or time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads. (4)

According to Wall, it is at the point where "The Cosmic Zora emerges" that Zora "draws the distinction between a racial or 'colored' identity and 'me.' 'Me' is at one point associated with the 'eternal feminine,' but its definition is never fixed" (Wall 29).

Cheryl Wall further writes that Zora figured out that race has no biological significance, it was all socially constructed and this is evident in this 1928 essay (25). While her contemporaries were caught up with racial constructs she was busy constructing herself. I agree with Wall that Zora does something different with this essay; she constructs herself in response to an identity developed at "home" in a time and place before she encountered social prejudice, instead of in response to racism and sexism (25, 27). Other black writers of this time had developed racial identity based on

either responses to the deep seated racism of the South and Jim Crow segregation or the liberally-masked, “benign,” institutional racism of the North (25). Zora constructs her identity from neither template.

Priscilla Wald discusses Hurston’s pronoun shifts within the essay from “I” to “she” and “I” to “me,” showing how the pronoun switching signals Zora’s recognition of a change in her identity. Wald states that “identity... is mainly a function of perspective, and in her discovery of blackness... shifting pronouns signal altering perspectives” (86). In the following paragraph, Wald concludes that the pronoun shift is evidence that Zora has to consider the way in which she constructs identity versus how society constructs it:

... when I left Eatonville... a Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl. (Hurston 2).

For Wald, the pronoun shift is layered: “The first ‘I’ is clearly a narrative ‘I,’ but the ‘I’ who disembarks simultaneously embodies the signifying (narrative) and signifier (cultural object) ‘I’s’: The ‘I’ means that, for the first time, Hurston had to question the illusion of a ‘coherent’ self called ‘Zora’” (86). However, I see the pronoun shift simply as a recognition of the internally constructed Zora, “everybody’s Zora” (Hurston 2) and her demise because of the exposure she had to the “real” world complete with southern segregation, prejudice, and sexism, all meant to destroy blacks. Wald also discusses the subjectivity of being “colored” and the idea that in

declaring herself independent of her race... Hurston identifies herself with and by her gender, proclaiming, ‘I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.’ Her ‘sea change,’ which initiates her contemplation of her difference, compels her to consider attributes other than color that connect her to others. (90)

Barbara Johnson adds to the discussion of Zora's composition of color, starting with the notion that "if one can become colored, then one is not born colored, and the definition of 'colored' shifts" (280). My interpretation of the pronoun shift is similar to Johnson's, "in this sea change, the acquisition of color is a *loss* of identity: the 'I' is no longer Zora, and 'Zora' becomes a 'she.' 'Everybody's Zora' had been constituted not by *an* Other but by the system of otherness itself, the ability to role-play rather than the ability to play any particular role" (281). Color not only changed Zora and her self-perception, it created feelings of "the denial of sorrow and anger... and... the affirmation of strength and excitement" (282). Interestingly enough, Hurston never actually answers the question she poses in the title.

Zora is often described as an eccentric woman who disregarded convention in both life and literature, which made her stand out as different. The content of this essay disregards race in a time when life and literature were heavily racialized, which was an intentional piece of her agenda. Similarly, Angelina Weld Grimké, another Renaissance stand out, also lived her life against convention and wrote literature that had an agenda. While Hurston's "How to be a Colored Me" unconventionally disregards race, Grimké's *Rachel* also disregards convention, but race is central to the work.

## Who is Angelina Weld Grimké?

*Fragment*

I am the woman with the black black skin  
 I am the laughing woman with the black black face  
 I am living in the cellars and in every crowded place  
     I am toiling just to eat  
     In the cold and in the heat  
             And I laugh  
 I am the laughing woman who's forgotten how to weep  
 I am the laughing woman who's afraid to go to sleep

Angelina Weld Grimké

The question... is: What did it mean to be a Black/Lesbian poet in America at the beginning of the twentieth century? First, it meant that you wrote (or half wrote)- in isolation- a lot which you did not show and knew you could not publish. It meant that when you did write to be printed, you did so in shackles- chained between the real experience you wanted to say and the conventions that would not give you voice. It meant that you fashioned a few race and nature poems, transliterated lyrics, and double-tongued verses which- sometimes (racism being what it is)- got published. It meant, finally, that you stopped writing altogether, dying, no doubt, with your real gifts stifled within- and leaving behind (in a precious few cases) the little that managed to survive of your true self in fugitive pieces. (Hull, "Under the Days" 20)

Angelina Weld Grimké was born on February 27, 1880 to Archibald Grimké, a former slave, related to the famous abolitionists Angelina Grimké Weld, whom Angelina is named after, and Sarah Grimké, and Sarah Stanley, a white woman of high social status. She was a woman of mixed heritage and lived amongst the high society because of the social status and influence of her aunts. Her parents separated during Grimké's childhood and she was reared by her father but kept in contact with her mother through letters until her death. She was always being pressured by her father to "be good, study hard, be a lady, make him proud of her" (Hull, "Grimké" 110) as well as to live up to the family name and standards, in addition to the added pressure of having to prove oneself as an educated black person. Her father was a steady constant in her life, even though they were often separated by his career and her education, he was an individual she held

in the highest esteem and his opinion mattered a great deal. The book *Color, Sex, and Poetry* contains copies of letters between Grimké and her father which show the depths of her attachment to him and her need to impress him and prove herself to him.

Grimké was a professional black woman, a teacher like McDougald, as well as a writer. Her beginning works were mostly written in verse, her first radical, racial poem was titled “Beware Lest He Awakens.” “El Beso” was one of her best poems to date. After the success of “El Beso,” Grimké shifts to drama and writes *Rachel* her best known work. Grimké’s goals for writing *Rachel* encompass appealing to white women to impact their conservative views, to counter the stereotypes that surround blacks by presenting the “best type” of blacks: educated, well mannered, well spoken, middle class, and lastly of my own inference, to present protofeminist ideals (118).

Motherhood is a major theme of her drama and fiction, evidenced by the fact that all of her female characters have loving mothers or mother “stand in” characters i.e. Mrs. Loving from *Rachel*, even though Grimké herself grows up sans her mother’s direct presence (Hull, “Under the Days” 18). A question of autobiography has been raised in the analysis of Grimké’s work, mainly *Rachel*. Grimké, like Rachel, decided early on that she would not marry and have children, evidenced from a September 6, 1903 journal entry: “I shall never know what it means to be a mother, for I shall never marry. I am through with love and the like forever...” (Hull, “Grimké” 124). Critics who have written on Grimké, mainly Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith, surmise that these lines are the aftermath of a disastrous love affair with an unnamed lover (124). Whatever was the catalyst for such an outburst, true to her word, Grimké lives out her days alone. After the death of her father in 1930, Grimké moved to New York but produced next to no



literature. According to fellow Renaissance writer Arna Bontemps, Grimké “spent the last years of her life in quiet retirement in a New York City apartment” (149). There was also talk of mental instability, which intensified with the passing of her father.

Gloria T. Hull summarizes Grimké’s life by stating, “despite the superficial socializing, Angelina Grimké lived her life in virtual isolation” (“Under the Days” 24). There were letters between Grimké and Harlem Renaissance playwright Mamie Burrill that document a lesbian relationship and a portion of Grimké’s poetry contains “raw feeling, feminine pronouns, and womanly imagery” (21) which indicate that for all she wrote, her life was being lived in the unsaid parts of her literature, between the lines and stanza breaks. Barbara Smith writes “because of psychic and artistic constraints, the ‘lines she did not dare’ went as unwritten as they were unspoken... She was triply disenfranchised. Black, woman, Lesbian, there was no space in which she could move” (23).

Despite the country’s relaxed attitudes about homosexuality during the Progressive Era, roughly the years between 1890-1920, and the rumor of rampant homosexual liaisons between many male Harlem Renaissance writers, the black bourgeoisie appointed itself the police of the race, particularly in Harlem. They were all about social mobility and essentially emulating whites, and sought the respectability that had been denied them since slavery, especially pertaining to black female sexuality. They were the establishers of what was considered deviant behavior and actively fought to keep it from penetrating the black community, and single, black, migrant females and lesbians threatened the social mobility and racial equity goals of the black bourgeoisie. Lesbians “were viewed as particularly deviant” and very problematic (Schwarz 17).

Schwarz writes, “According to bell hooks, the ‘prevailing assumption was that to be a lesbian was ‘unnatural’ because one would not be participating in child bearing’” (17-18). The science of this time also stated that “lesbianism signified ‘a retreat not only from adult female sexuality but from the maternal and marital roles and responsibilities conventionally attached to it’” (18). Lesbians either did not, would not, or could not conform to the gender expectations of marriage and motherhood making lesbianism both problematic for the black bourgeoisie yet a gender nonconformist action, which is how black women were re-defining themselves.

Heterosexuals painted homosexuals, especially lesbians, as degenerate disease spreaders and perceived that their goal was “to convert other women” (18-19). Both of which were untrue; however, with all the social animosity and stigma surrounding lesbians, despite varying lax attitudes about homosexuality, trying to partake in a same gender relationship would have been socially unacceptable at this time. And Grimké’s “privileged class position as a comfortable, educated, racially-mixed Black woman buffered her from some of the harsher indignities of being Black in America during her time” (Hull, *Under the Days* 24), but would not and could not spare her the maliciousness from her bourgeoisie peers if it were discovered that she identified as a lesbian. Grimké is often ignored by scholars and *Rachel* and other works fall in and out of style to study, some critics say this is because Grimké did not publish enough work for consideration.

## *Rachel*

Grimké raises a dilemma which informs much of African-American women's writing: How is one to find words expressive of the silenced lives of black women? (Hirsch 459)

Like their male counterparts, early black female playwrights were writing against the stereotypical portrayals of blacks on stage by white playwrights... for black women there were the sexless domineering mammy types, the loose trollops, and the tragic mulattoes... It was the work of black women dramatists, however, which captured the lives of black people as no white or black male playwright could. They created a reality that brought in the dynamic of gender in addition to the focus on the race in their works. Black women playwrights wrote about the negotiation between race and gender in order to demonstrate that they could not separate their race from their gender, rather their blackness was inextricably linked to their femaleness. (Hester 249)

*Rachel* is one of Grimké's most well-known literary creations. It is the first play to be considered "all- black," as it was written, published, and performed by an all-black cast. For the most part, *Rachel*, as a performance piece, was well received and both friends and the media told Grimké how impactful and insightful the play was. Grimké's drama is the oldest surviving play written by a black woman, it is one of the few full length plays written by a black woman during this period, as many such dramas were only one act plays and *Rachel* has three acts (McKay 154). The production of *Rachel* was the NAACP's first attempt at using drama to focus national attention on racial oppression, which led to a fury of controversy because of the individuals that felt that black drama and other forms of black literature should only deal with artistic issues and not political ones. Prior to Grimké and *Rachel*, black women only wrote in this fashion. Grimké set a precedent with *Rachel*, evidently black women playwrights that succeeded Grimké and *Rachel* began writing about authentic black life and realistic problems experienced by blacks, especially black women (154-155).

However, Hull writes that *Rachel* needed to be published in order to be the "consciousness-raising instrument" (120) that Grimké intended it to be. In print, "*Rachel*

commanded considerably more attention” (121). Some criticism the play received was that “it advocated genocide,” “Grimké had overdrawn- if not misrepresented her characters,” the play was “pitched in a highly emotional key,” “morbid and overstrained” and “pictures the negro’s life as sad and his efforts to rise as unavailing,” but for the most part, the reviews were favorable (121). Despite this being one of my favorite literary works, I agree with Gloria T. Hull when she writes, “Even though one may be sympathetic towards Grimké’s heroine, and, of course, convinced of the truth of her message, Rachel still comes across as ‘extreme.’ Perhaps she is too sensitive, too good, too sweet... she is also sentimental to the point of being melodramatic” (123).

Literary critics often review *Rachel* as a social commentary on racism during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the drama can also be seen as an early example of a protofeminist text. I find the play to be the quintessential picture of how racism and sexism work in tandem to completely and negatively impact black women’s lives. *Rachel* is written with that “me-ness,” that authenticity that black women were seeking in order to express their dual identity as black and female. The play’s intertwining of racism and sexism displays black women’s need for feminist action, a rejection of the gender expectations of marriage and motherhood, establishing herself as a worker, and a dialogue about these things, are what makes this specific play ripe for examination and explication in many areas. Not only does Grimké discuss aspects of gender nonconformism within this play, but also by writing it, she is going against a gendered practice, as it was believed that playwriting was seen as a male profession and women should stick to writing poetry. Grimké did begin her literary career writing poetry, but

she herself stepped away from gendered expectations by writing dramas; it stands to reason that her protagonists could and should be as rebellious as she was.

In analyzing *Rachel*, I found some of the same issues present in this work as in the essays and modern black feminist literature and theory: motherhood, labor, the effect of interlocking oppressions, relations with black men, and identity construction. However, what stands out and what I will focus on are connections with Christianity and self-determination in how black women are in charge of their own lives and make their own decisions.

Grimké's *Rachel* contains Christian biblical references, the play's protagonist, Rachel, symbolically represents Rachel, Jacob's wife, from the book of Genesis. Rachel, who was originally considered barren, compared to her sister Leah, who was also married to Jacob and bore him six sons, is famous for saying, "Give me children or I shall die!" (*The New American Bible* Genesis 30.1) Rachel bore sons for Jacob, two through her maidservant Bilhah and two on her own. Grimké's Rachel echoes her biblical counterpart's sentiments with the words, "... if I believed that I should grow up and not be a mother, I'd pray to die now" (Grimké 195). This line is multipurpose, first, some say it is a woman's natural maternal instinct to have children. Second, this is an insertion of the gendered expectation of women to become mothers. Lastly, Rachel's thoughts on motherhood first surface at this point in the play, thoughts that evolve into something different by the end of the drama. Grimké takes Rachel, and therefore, the audience, on a three-act journey through Rachel's evolution from a naïve and ideal teenager to a hardened, cynical, and depressed young, but old woman. For Rachel, the play is one continuous moment of enlightenment, starting when she discovers the truth about the

deaths of her father and older half-brother. Subsequently, she begins to understand how the world really works for blacks and how these workings affect gender roles and negatively impact black motherhood. Her mood changes throughout the course of the play, ultimately deteriorating, as her innocence fades, her happiness disappears, and her opinions shift as she matures and realizes that motherhood, specifically for black women, certainly is not the happy, emotional, meaningful experience that society describes it as. The only constant in Rachel's personality is her treatment of the little children she cares for and befriends. She is the quintessential picture of motherhood, warm, caring, gentle, child-like, with just a dollop of seriousness and discipline. She identifies with her young audience, which is what makes her so effective and such a favorite of theirs.

Bookending her evolving opinion on motherhood are the voices of Mrs. Loving, her own mother, and Mrs. Lane, a guest who shares the horrific story of her seven-year-old daughter's dealings with racism. Mrs. Loving, on one end, both ruminates over knowing the evils of racism that her children will inevitably face and being unable to save or shield them from these evils. Yet, she still remains hopeful that God will prevail in the face of opposition. Mrs. Loving never actually verbalizes or intimates that she fears Rachel becoming a mother. She just communicates her life experience and knowledge gained from motherhood.

RACHEL. Why, Ma dear, I never saw tears in your eyes before. Is it- is it- because you know the things I do not understand? Oh! It *is* that.

MRS. LOVING. (simply) Yes, Rachel, and I cannot save you. (...)  
(Grimké 195)

MRS. LOVING: ... when you are little, we mothers can kiss away all the trouble, but when you grow up- and go out- into the world- and get hurt- we are helpless. There is nothing we can do. (206)

Mrs. Lane, on the other end, is completely devoid of hope, in turmoil over racial relations in society and anguish over her daughter's mistreatment. She exclaims her frustration over the entire racial situation, motherhood, and marriage, "it's all rather useless... if I had another- I'd kill it. It's kinder... Don't marry- that's my advice" (217). And then there is Rachel, sandwiched in the middle:

RACHEL. ... Ma dear, I am beginning to see- to understand- so much... the dear, little helpless babies, being born today- now- and those who will be, tomorrow, and all the tomorrows to come- have *that* sooner or later to look forward to? (...) Then everywhere, everywhere, throughout the South, there are hundreds of dark mothers who live in fear, terrible, suffocating fear, whose rest by night is broken, and whose joy by day in their babies on their hearts is three parts- pain. Why- it would be more merciful- to strange the little things at birth. (203)

Both Mrs. Loving and Mrs. Lane are mothers and can speak to the negative effect racism has on motherhood and child rearing, which is why their opinions so perfectly encapsulate Rachel's. If their opinions were drawn on a scale, Mrs. Loving would be on the far left, Mrs. Lane the far right, with Rachel teetering just right of center, because of the fact that "Mrs. Loving remains hopeful that things will get better in time and where Rachel is becoming increasingly resigned, Mrs. Lane no longer believes that life can get any better" (Hester 253). In the end, Rachel echoes her biblical counterpart again, with the lines,

And my little children! My little children! I shall never see.- Your dimples- everywhere- your laughter- your tears- the beautiful, lovely feel of you here. Never- never- to be. But you are somewhere- and wherever you are, you are mine! You are mine! All of you! Every bit of you! Even God can't take you away. Little children, My little children!- No more need you come to me- weeping-weeping. You may be happy now- you are safe. Little weeping, voices, hush! Hush! (Grimké 226)

Whereas biblical Rachel says,

A voice was heard in Ramah,

Sobbing and loud lamentation;  
Rachel weeping for her children,  
And she would not be consoled,  
Since they were no more. (*The New American Bible*, Matthew 2.18)

In both passages, there is a denial of motherhood and the resultant crying over unborn children as a because of the decision not to enter into motherhood.

As mentioned earlier, womanhood, especially for black women, became conflated with motherhood for reasons of racial uplift and gender construction. Grimké's inclusion of infanticide signals a killing of motherhood, thereby killing womanhood, because the two are conflated. According to Michelle Hester, because motherhood is a symbol of womanhood, Grimké's placing infanticide in the play shows "that motherhood, which is supposed to be this great and wondrous thing is a source of pain for black women" (Hester 253).

While Alice Dunbar-Nelson's essay discusses the gender nonconformist practice of opting out of motherhood as an outcome of increased work opportunities/career exploration, economic necessities, and/or independence, and not wanting to split time between work and motherhood, Grimké's *Rachel* offers the notion that black women are not entering into motherhood because of the social and emotional effects racism has on both mother motherhood and childhood. A frequent and literal outcome of racism was lynching, a constant fear for black mothers and their children, regardless of age. Dunbar-Nelson does not consider, or at least, does not include in her essay, the fact that "some black mothers may have been so appalled at the system of racism into which they were bringing their children that they made a conscious choice not to have them. Racism as well as poverty motivated their decision" (Meier 125). Especially worth mentioning



again, “The birth rate of the cultured classes is apparently only one-third of the masses... The sharpest peak of the decline... is the birth rate of the more cultured and more nearly leisure classes” (Dunbar-Nelson 114-115), this being the elite, high society wives and daughters of professionals and businessmen. In other words, smart, middle and upper class blacks probably recognized the threat of both racism and poverty and decided not to have children, as Rachel did, and Grimké’s protagonists are educated members of the black middle class.

Professor Jana Evans Braziel outlines the functionality of lynching as it pertained to blacks, particularly below the Mason-Dixon line:

*First*, to maintain social order over the black population through terrorism;

*Second*, to suppress [or] eliminate black competitors for economic, political, or social rewards

*Third*, to stabilize the white class structure and preserve the privileged status of the white aristocracy. (Braziel 1)

She also relays the function of mob violence against blacks during the lynching era:

1. To eradicate specific persons accused of crimes against the white community;
2. As a mechanism of state sanctioned terrorism designed to maintain a degree of leverage over the African American population;
3. To eliminate or neutralize competitors for social, economic, or political rewards; and
4. As a symbolic manifestation of the unity of white supremacy. (1-2)

While the focus of this paper is not lynching, it is absolutely worth examining the function of lynching in Grimké's *Rachel*. The inclusion of the lynching of Mr. Loving and George, Rachel's older half-brother, first exposes a racist social practice of systemic violence against black people that allows for the perpetrators to act in violent ways and not receive any sort of criminal or legal repercussions for their actions. Lynching was a silencing tool used by whites over blacks, used most often as a threat. A white mob would lynch one black person to send a message to the black community to stay in their place and maintain a pre-established and preferred social order. But Grimké uses it to speak out against silence over these horrific racist practices. According to Brian Russell Roberts, "For the mob in *Rachel*, lynching is a threat at silencing black protest. And when Mr. Loving refuses to retract his protest, lynching moves beyond the realm of threat and becomes a physical method of silencing him" (Roberts 97).

Grimké uses lynching, a silencing act, to give voice to the horrors of these violent practices, as well as to show how lynching affected black motherhood. As evidenced by lines within the play, black mothers could not shield or combat the racism and threats of violence that their children would inevitably face, therefore, through maternal connection, black mothers suffered right along with their children. This then makes the gender nonconformist practice of avoiding motherhood a viable possibility. Brian Russell Roberts writes, "Rachel's decision to remain childless functions... as a means of escaping the horrors of US racism" (111). Racism cannot be passed on by white heirs and inherited by black heirs if there are no black heirs. The cruelties and violence of racism should not be permitted to destroy the innocence of childhood. Therefore, many black women reconsidered motherhood, a gender nonconformist act, and spared both

future offspring and themselves the pain of racism by simply not having children. Grimké, through Mrs. Lane, says, “It’s kinder” (Grimké 217).

Throughout the history of enslavement, the slaves had a deep devotion to Christianity, which happened to be the religion of their enslavers. Grimké’s *Rachel* offers much in the way of commentary against “this nation- this white Christian nation- [that] has deliberately set its curse upon the most beautiful- the most holy thing in life- motherhood!” (Grimké 203). Rachel as a protagonist is connected to religious history yet she questions and rejects of God and religion. Both the murder of her father and older half-brother “by Christian people- in a Christian land... all church members in good standing- the best people” (201) and the looming threat of violence and hardship surrounding racism, it all, as Rachel remarks, “makes- you doubt- God!” (203). Tom’s attitude is beyond doubtful as he evolves into a hardened cynic who loses his faith. Mrs. Lane outrightly rejects God:

MRS LANE. God! It’s all a lie about God. I know.- This fall I sent Ethel to a white Sunday-school near us... Her being there nearly broke up the school. At the end, the superintendent called her to him and asked her if she didn’t know some nice colored Sunday-school. He told her she must feel out of place and uncomfortable there. That’s your Church of God! (217)

Mrs. Loving is the only one in the play that still believes God is at least working in the background and has managed to maintain some semblance of belief in God, like some slaves did. “Rachel, sometimes- I wonder- if, perhaps, God- hasn’t relented a little- and given me back my boy,- my George... Yes, God’s ways are strange and often very beautiful; perhaps all would be beautiful- if we only understood” (206). While Rachel echoes the opinion of the slaves, remarking, “God seems to have forgotten us” (217).

In many of Grimké's lines throughout the play, she exposes the racism and double standards of both the English language and society by comparing the actions of certain racialized events to the complexion of the individuals committing the acts. According to an excerpt from the article, "Racism in the English Language," "the definition of black includes 'without any moral light or goodness; evil, wicked, indicating disgrace, sinful,' while that of white includes 'morally pure, spotless, innocent, free from evil'" (Moore 1). When Mrs. Loving relays the true story of her husband and oldest son's death to Tom and Rachel, a lynching by an angry, vengeful, white mob over the defensive and honorable actions of Mr. Loving, she describes them in the following way, "There never lived anywhere- or at any time- any two whiter or more beautiful souls. God gave me one for a husband and one for a son and I'm proud" (Grimké 202). Mrs. Loving's description and the deceased's actions match the dictionary and social definitions of the color white. However, these are black people being described. Yet, interestingly enough, Mrs. Loving uses black to describe the negative here, "... I've been where you are now and it's black..." (208). Also, in Tom's outrage, he says, "When I think- when I think- of those devils with white skins- living somewhere today, living and happy-I-see red!" (202). Now appropriately, "Red is the color of... violence, danger, anger... and blood" (Color Matters 1) so Tom seeing red, however figuratively, is the correct idiomatic expression for him to use to communicate his feelings. Yet, his verbal combination of "devils with white skins" is ironic and counter to the dictionary and social definitions of devil, black, and white.

Roger Moore tells us "angels are white and devils are black" ("Racism" 1) while Grimké tells us the opposite. Anything black, especially devils, are "without any moral

light or goodness; evil, wicked... sinful" (1), but these devils were white, "morally pure... free from evil" (1). With this color and world play, obviously, the devils cannot be the blacks as they were "spotless, innocent" and the whites were "evil, wicked... sinful" (Grimké 202). A racist might say, despite their blackness, they managed to do the right thing. While despite the murderers' whiteness they were able to commit murder, and still, the labels of wrong and right switch places and the honorable end up dead at the hands of the villains. In another instance where Tom is lamenting on social injustice and the brutal murders of his heroic family members, he states, "in the South today, there are white men- (...) their [hands] are red with blood- red with the blood of a noble man- and a boy" (208), stating that their whiteness is stained by the red blood they deliberately spilled in murdering his father and brother. But, on a larger scale, whites purposely and vengefully spilled black blood without reproach or remorse. Often times their actions were celebrated as noble. Rachel attaches a tragic quality to the colors black and brown and connects these qualities to black people both foreshadowing and commenting on the plight of blacks and the tragic and wicked outcomes of racism, "I love the little black and brown babies best of all. There is something about them... pathetic? (...) I feel that I must protect them" (195). Grimké's wordplay exposes the racial double standards blacks perpetually fought against.

Grimké allows her characters moments where they complain and comment on the futility of black existence, especially pertaining to acquiring education, obtaining suitable work, and establishing careers in something related to their course of study. In a way, McDougald and Dunbar-Nelson both glamorize and generalize black women's

educational achievements and wage earning opportunities while Grimké provides a response that exposes the other side of success.

TOM. ...Rachel is a graduate in Domestic Science; she was high in her class; most of the girls below her in rank have positions in the schools... It seems our educations aren't of much use to us: we aren't allowed to make good because our skins are dark... (207) Today, we colored men and women, everywhere- are up against it. Every year, we are having a harder time of it. In the South, they make it as impossible as they can for us to get an education... (208) In the North, they make a pretense... they give us a good education, and then- snuff us out. Each year, the problem to live, gets more difficult to solve... (212)

STRONG. Rachel, do you hear anything encouraging from the schools? Any hope for you yet? (213)

RACHEL. No, nor ever will be. I know that now. There's no more chance for... any of us with dark skins. It's lucky for me that I love to keep house, and cook and sew. I'll never get anything else... (213)

MRS. LANE. I can't afford to take this flat here, but I'll take it. I'm going to have Ethel educated. Although, when you think of it,- it's all rather useless- this education! What are our children going to do with it, when they get it? We strive and save and sacrifice to educate them- and the whole time- down underneath, we know- they'll have no chance. (217)

Despite Rachel's middle class education, albeit in domestic science, she cannot get work as anything other than a domestic. She cannot make the social and career climb from the subaltern to become a professional. While McDougald discusses the mobility and opportunity for black women in education and career development with minor mention of racism's presence in the workplace, *Rachel* addresses racism's hindering of black women advancing as workers. She may define herself as a worker, but what kind of worker?

Interestingly enough, Rachel's "luck" over preferring domesticity shows its duality, in its empowerment and enslavement of black women. In act one of the play, Rachel discusses a dream in which "a voice said... 'Rachel, you are to be a mother to little children'" (195). Here is evidence of Grimké's use of the overdramatic. On the

other hand, this “voice” also works as the voice of gender expectation echoing over black women’s need to discover and establish their own identity. It works as a subtle reminder that motherhood is conflated with womanhood and that motherhood is the foundation of the black woman’s identity, according to black men. However, the entire plot of this play dismantles that rhetoric.

By condemning Rachel to the inevitability of domesticity as both a career and gender function, Grimké, through Rachel, is protesting the gender limitations and expectations of women (Hester 254). As a woman, Rachel’s gender function would have been to remain in the house and submit to a life of domesticity. Moreover, by coloring Rachel black, “she’s further relegated to the house because black people are not afforded the same employment opportunities as whites” (254). In most cases, as it related to employment, despite education, most black women worked in the home as domestics. Rachel’s double restriction to domesticity is consistent with the way things are for black women during the Progressive Era (254). Nonetheless, Grimké’s protagonist puts the issue on the forefront. Also, *Rachel* is grounded in domesticity as the play’s setting is the Loving living room. Rachel literally never leaves home. Expanding upon this point, the play’s setting relates to a common theme in black women’s literature, and that is the theme of mobility. Women, but particularly black women, were unable to travel either due to being “literally tied down to her children [or husband] and thus to a particular place. Or she is ensconced in her community...” (Tate xx). Or, as Bonner describes:

...You hear that up at New York this is to be seen; that, to be heard. You decide to the next train will take you there. You decide the next second that that train will not take you, nor the next- nor the next for some time to come.

For you know that- being a woman- you cannot twice a month or twice a year, for that matter, break away to see or hear anything in a city that is supposed to see and hear too much.

That's being a woman. A woman of any color. (Bonner 110)

Because women are restricted to specific, pre-determined, usually domestic space, and their movements controlled, the black woman's journey is stationary, interior, and conducted on land, often times within "the four walls of a room" (Tate xxi). Deborah McDowell states, "the Black female's journey... though at times touching the political and social, is basically a personal and psychological journey. The female character in the works of Black women is in a state of becoming 'part of an evolutionary spiral, moving from victimization to consciousness'" (157). Rachel's only physical travel occurs within her apartment, from bedroom, to bathroom, to living room, she never leaves her apartment; however, her consciousness is in a constant state of consideration and evolution throughout the play, which signals interiority. The play's action happens out of her, and the audience's sight, and is relayed to her. She is then able to process, consider, and make her own decisions. Her journey is one of maturity and social consideration. She evolves from a naïve girl to a self and socially aware woman all without ever leaving home. A male protagonist would have had to leave home, and been permitted or expected to leave home, in order to figure out the things that Rachel did within herself. This is ironic given that the play's setting and publishing date are both at the end of the Great Migration era. Rachel herself serves as a tool to introduce theories of protofeminism and women's empowerment by completely disregarding gender expectations and making decisions for her own love life, reproductive organs, and future.

MRS LOVING. ... I wonder if you are going to grow up and be ladylike.  
(...) (Grimké 190)



RACHEL. ... I can't; Ma dear stopped me. (sighs) I've got to grow up it seems.

STRONG. (evidently amused) It is rather hard being a girl, isn't it?

RACHEL. Oh, no! It's not hard being a girl. That's the trouble; they won't let me be a girl. I'd love to be. (Grimké 193)

First, what does it mean to grow up? In the context of the play and the reality that they play comments on, Brian Russell Roberts writes "growing up means living a life 'blasted by the white man's prejudice,' becoming subject to epithets, employment discrimination, and lynching" (Roberts 111). Growing up equals a certain expected misery, depression, and perpetual frustration throughout the life of a black person. However, growing up for Rachel and for women particularly, means being "ladylike." But, what does being ladylike mean? What does being ladylike look like? Being demure, coquettish, dependent, and polite in the company of a potential gentleman suitor? Rachel displays this behavior several times throughout the drama in the presence of John Strong, her brother's friend and her romantic love interest. Moreover, being ladylike is also conforming to the tremendous gender expectations society has placed upon women. Girls don't entirely have this pressure to conform to women's gender expectations. Therefore, Rachel wants to remain a girl and not have to grow up and conform to what is considered ladylike or face pending racism.

It is not acceptable that Rachel wants to remain a girl, but it is acceptable that Strong wants to keep her a girl. Part of the function of masculinity is infantilizing women, part of the expectation of femininity is to submit to masculinity. At least four times within the play's third act Strong calls Rachel "Little Rachel" or "little girl," in the same manner that Rachel calls the little children in her care little. "Secular Patriarchy" provides a possible explanation as to why men tend to infantilize women:

A man will naturally view a woman in a similar way to how he views a child when a man is romantically oriented towards a woman because the romantic feelings in a man tell a man to care for and protect and control a woman similarly to how an adult (male or female) will naturally feel a desire to care for and protect and control a child under their care. (“Secular Patriarchy” 1)

The gendering of men, the constructions of masculinity, and dictations of patriarchy instruct and permit men to act in ways that control and reduce women to less than equal.

Their belief is that

The woman actually has a reduced capacity in the masculine realm compared to the man just like a child has reduced capacity overall compared to the adult. It is not only the man’s role to provide for protect and control the woman; the woman actually has an inferior capacity to provide for herself, to protect herself, and to discipline herself compared to the man’s ability to provide for her, protect her, and impose an orderly environment on her. (2)

Therefore, John’s attempts to infantilize Rachel are quite normal; overbearing, but normal, and acceptable by society’s standards. His actions also serve to make her less than equal in his eyes because he truly believes she cannot live without him. Her protofeminist assertions against his insistence not only shows “the unique way in which sexism and racism affect the black woman,” (Hester 254) but also show that Rachel, is not just a girl who refuses to grow up and accept gender expectations, she is a competent and capable woman able to make her own life decisions.

STRONG. Perhaps- if you had- a little more fun in your life, your point of view would be- more normal. I’ll arrange it so that I can take you to some theatre, one night, this week.

RACHEL. You talk as though I were a- a jelly-fish. You’ll take me, how do you know *I’ll* go?

STRONG. You will.

RACHEL. (sarcastically) Indeed! I wonder if you know how- how-maddening you are. Why, you talk as though my will counts for nothing.

It's as if you're trying to master me. I think a domineering man is detestable. (Grimké 213)

Rachel's unwillingness to conform to the gender expectation of allowing the man, the dominator, to make decisions for her, the dominated, evidenced by her use of words and strong emphasis, demonstrates another gender nonconformist practice of expressing outrage over gender expectations. Rachel's unwillingness to be dominated and her rejection of Strong's assertions prove this. Continuing with Grimké's inclusion of protofeminist ideals, she juxtaposes Strong's hyper sexist marriage proposal to Rachel's rejection.

STRONG. Rachel! There's a little flat on 43<sup>rd</sup> street... Once I remember you saying you liked it... That same day I rented it... It's completely furnished now and waiting do you know for whom? (...) It's the prettiest, the most homelike little flat I've ever seen... On the sitting room floor is a beautiful, Turkish rug... it's soft and rich and do you know for whose little feet it is waiting? There are delicate curtains at the windows and a bookcase full of friendly, eager, little books... There are comfortable leather chairs... a beautiful piano... in the kitchenette are pans and kettles... all kinds of knives and forks and spoons on the door a roller-towel. Little girl, do you know for whom they are waiting? And somewhere there's a big, strong man with broad shoulders. And he's willing and anxious to do anything everything... Little girl, is it to be yes or no? (Grimké "full text" 92)

RACHEL. ...you see- it can never be- all the beautiful, beautiful things- you have told me about. No- they can never be- now. No,- John dear,- you- must not- touch me- any more. Dear, this-is- 'Good-bye.' (Grimké 226)

Strong's proposal is dripping with the swagger of domination and assumptions that masculinity makes in believing that women are incapable of decision making and self-care and require guidance and maintenance by men, in essence, gender inequity. It outlines a future that relegates Rachel to domesticity and infantilizes her; Strong essentially constructs a doll house for a little girl, her, to move into and provides nice things for her to play with. Also, he is either caught up in his own fantasy or his egotism

gets away from him, or perhaps a little of both, but he places himself in the center of Rachel's world through the hackneyed imagery of the "knight in shining armor" (Hester 255) ready to save her from not only herself, but all the ugliness of the world outside of the perfect dollhouse/flat. Protofeminism reappears when Rachel decides for herself that as much as she loves Strong, she loves herself more and the life he describes can never be and rejects his proposal. Rachel refuses a life of infantilization and domesticity. In rejecting Strong's proposal, a gender nonconformist action, she refuses to enter into marriage and live as women dominated by gender expectations of marriage and subordination. Also, through Rachel's decision, Grimké reminds her audience that "as black people the protection and safety of black women and their children is not something a black man or woman can guarantee... a black man cannot protect her and her children from the assaults of a cruel world" (Hester 255). Because, as much as it is a "man's world," more specifically it is a **white man's world** and blacks, although no longer slaves at this point, were still at the whim of the white man.

Expanding on the point of the rejection of Strong, connecting it to the theory that elements of Grimké's literature are autobiographical, a question to consider is: is Grimké's image of self so counter and subversive that with *Rachel*, she writes her protagonist in her own image? Rachel rejects Strong's proposal, marriage, and motherhood altogether, in her early 20s, as does Grimké. Truth be told, despite black women of this time embracing self-definition and some even shifting to protofeminist beliefs, the vast majority of these women would have accepted Strong's proposal and figured out how to deal with his ego and attitude during their marriage. Very few women would have rejected him, and those who did would not have rejected him and love.

Grimké and Rachel reject both, and Grimké is heavily theorized to be a lesbian. Is Rachel then, a black lesbian protagonist? Is part of the function of *Rachel* then a commentary on or picture of what life is like for a middle class, educated, black lesbian, such as Grimké living during the Harlem Renaissance? Is the audience looking through a window into Grimké's life?

Children play a huge role in the play's central plot and social commentary. For the audience seeing the performance live on stage, there would have been many little children on stage at various instances throughout the play. Reading the play makes it a little harder to conjure the visual imagery the children's presence created. Either way, the positive portrayal attached to the children's presence in the play serves to deconstruct the pickaninny imagery of black children. According to Robin Bernstein, "the pickaninny was a dehumanized black child who was typically depicted semi-naked, outdoors, eating watermelon, and merrily accepting (or even welcoming) comic violence" (Bernstein 64). Bernstein recognizes Grimké's attempts at presenting "Jimmy and other African American children as loving and lovable, needing and deserving protection" (72). The affection, correction, attention, and guidance they receive from all the members of the Loving family serves to humanize them, while the racism that Little Jimmy and Little Ethel experience shows that racism is damaging to black children as well and "renders a black child a source of pain and vulnerability to African American families" (70). It is damaging enough for black adults to have to endure the emotional scarring of racism, but for racism to penetrate the bubble of childhood, to have their innocence destroyed, is a cross no child should have to bear and no parent should have to watch. Grimké's child characters are all "well-behaved, respectful, and respectable" (71) both deconstructing the

pickaninny stereotype, making them likable, and products of respectable middle class upbringing. In humanizing black children, making them “thinking, feeling, human beings” she puts them on display as the innocent victims of cruel, white racism by exposing the fact that “they cannot be fully protected from racism’s physical or cultural violence” (75). Grimké also exposes the fact that even though the Loving family is a middle class, educated family, racism does not distinguish class boundaries. Ericka Miller’s analysis of Grimké’s literature emphasizes this point, “black middle-class mothers live with the same fear for their children as do poor black mothers” (Miller 85).

Just as Harriet Ann Jacobs intentionally uses devices from the sentimental fiction genre in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in an attempt to appeal to the emotions and connection to motherhood with white middle class, northern women in order to affect change, Grimké’s *Rachel* also draws from the sentimental in order to target the now daughters and granddaughters of those same white women (MacKethan 3). Grimké states the following on appealing to white women:

A white woman is more conservative than a white man. They [sic] are many reasons for this. Since the sex question is mixed up in it her prejudice is wrapped up in it her prejudice is perhaps deadlier than the white man’s. There is, however, one- that ought to make all women sisters and that thing is motherhood. If the white woman can be brought to see what this prejudice is doing to the mothers of black children, if she can be brought to see just what this wicked, and – thing is doing to the souls of her black sisters everywhere, it is possible that she may arouse herself to help in the betterment of conditions under which we the submerged 10<sup>th</sup> have to live. (Miller 57)

Grimké’s goal is to display the similarities between blacks and whites in order to convince whites, specifically white women, that lynching was wrong and reveal the effect that it has on upstanding blacks and constructs of and prospects for motherhood (Mitchell 10). Jacobs and Grimké knew if they could reach the emotions of white women and help

them recognize the connection between black and white women through motherhood white women could implore their law making husbands to make changes in society. Both Grimké and Marion Vera Cuthbert recognized the significance of having white women as allies. They also recognized that despite class, race, and political differences, women across ethnicities shared two commonalities: motherhood and patriarchal oppression. They believed that those are the connecting points for women and by recognizing and strengthening those bonds there were at least a minority of white women that could and would assist black women in their quest for racial liberation because they could identify with the pain and suffering mothers experience when their children are emotionally or physically injured or harmed.

## Conclusion

But I have no civilized articulation for the things I hate. I proudly love being a Negro woman; [it's] so involved and interesting. We are the PROBLEM—the great national game of TABOO. - -Anne Spencer

How do black women get heard? By assertively and bold-facedly transgressing the imposed boundaries; by being insistent, supportive; by speaking constantly directly or indirectly, through multiple forms but always demanding hearing; by challenging the pretended disabilities of hearing; by constantly creating. (Davies “Hearing Black Women’s Voices” 9)

One must remember that “the general female populace- to whom the Renaissance was an unknown or unheeded phenomenon- was maintaining the basic foundation of the world, as usual” (Hull 4). The Harlem Renaissance did not affect the “ordinary, working blacks,” regardless of gender. So, all the race work and racial uplift rhetoric was only benefitting those engaged in it. Yet, the black women of this time, whether they were aware or not, were making social, racial, and gender progress despite being victims of interlocking oppressions. The black women writers of this period used their literature as a tool to re-define themselves, shed gender expectations, rise above silence, ultimately finding a voice for self-expression and self-determination. Black women found that they did not have to be who black men or whites determined, they had control over who they wanted to be and how they wanted to be seen in society. The black women Harlem Renaissance writers created a foundation for the black feminist movement and the opportunity to study a topic formally classified as black feminist literary theory and criticism.

It is evident through examining the works of black women Harlem Renaissance writers that we can understand their need for self-identification. They achieved this by speaking out and becoming gender nonconformists that make decisions to live certain lifestyles that allow them to choose to work, to not become mothers, and to marry or not



marry whomever they wish. Such literature expresses these new aspects of self, addresses the intertwining of racism and sexism on their lives, lays the groundwork for future black feminist movements, influences other marginalized black female writers across the diaspora, and enters into feminist dialogue. The essays provide a lens in which black women of the Harlem Renaissance saw themselves and wished for others to see them. *Rachel* discusses the effects of racism and sexism on black women's lives and the choices made as a result of interlocking oppressions. Together these works portray black women Harlem Renaissance writers as the first black feminists. Zora Neale Hurston is the glue between these black women Harlem Renaissance writers and the black women authors who wrote during and helped to construct the U.S. black feminist movement of the 70s and 80s. Her work serves as the official voice of black women's literature and is recognized in the canon as such. Zora wrote in the Harlem Renaissance era but serves as the marker for what black women's literature should be and is today. Works written by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker show how Zora links the two literary periods. Our work with these writers is not done, more unearthing, research, and scholarly criticism is necessary in order to bring these women's texts from margin to center, reshape the black literary canon, and recreate the way we interpret and teach both Harlem Renaissance and black feminist literature.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Author Alain Locke began the New Negro discourse and urged blacks to re-build and re-present themselves through the black aesthetic; however, he omitted black women from the identity construction.

<sup>2</sup> It is no secret that Alain Locke only included eight literary contributions written by women in *The New Negro* anthology. But with the exception of McDougald, whose gender viewpoints were not in accord with his, “he only included women writers whose works supported his notion of the development of a ‘New Negro’ in early twentieth century America” (Lucky 29). Preceding Locke’s actions, in 1922, James Weldon Johnson edited *The Book of American Negro Poetry* and only included seven women out of a total of forty contributors. In 1927, Countee Cullen published *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets*, which housed literature by 13 woman poets. In 1929, Victor Francis Calverton edited the *Anthology of American Negro Literature* which included six woman poets, a novelist, and a playwright (25). I assert that their actions of omission demonstrate that black men largely were not interested in what black women had to say unless they were agreeing to occupy domestic space and be defined in the ways in which black men found favorable and beneficial to them. They wanted women’s reach and voice to be as limited as possible, only to function in roles they designed for their uplift, because it was synonymous with racial uplift.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, most of the essays within the “New Negro Woman’s Number” issue of *The Messenger* are all worthy of critical analysis yet have been virtually ignored. For the purposes of my research, I am only focusing on the previously mentioned four essays but such titles as “The Negro Woman in the Trade Union Movement” by Nora Newsome, “The Negro Working Woman What She Faces in Making a Living” by Mary Louise Williams, “The Negro Woman in the Nursing Professions” by Elizabeth Jones, “The Negro Woman in the Professions” by Anna Jones Robinson, “The Negro Woman Teacher and the Negro Student” by Elise Johnson McDougald, and “Closed Doors A Study in Segregation” by Ruth Whitehead Whaley give special attention to areas in which black women are engaged in and how, positively or negatively, they have impacted certain areas of the workforce. With exception of Whaley’s “Closed Doors” and McDougald’s “Negro Teacher” being directly quoted in Ernest Allen, Jr’s “The New Negro Explorations in Identity and Social Consciousness. 1910-1922,” these essays have been reprinted in anthologies but untouched by scholarship.

<sup>4</sup> A specific footnote in the book *Making Marriages Modern: Women’s Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II* by Christina Simmons mentions that Dunbar-Nelson’s essay is the only example of a “race suicide” (Simmons 261) within the canon. While I disagree that Dunbar-Nelson is pushing for race suicide, I do believe that she writes from a place that combines concern for racial uplift with of black women’s gender nonconformist ideals and identity re-defining behavior.

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