MISCEGENATED NARRATION: THE EFFECTS OF INTERRACIALISM IN WOMEN’S POPULAR SENTIMENTAL ROMANCES FROM THE CIVIL WAR YEARS

Connie Beeler, B.A.

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
May 2011

APPROVED:

Ian Finseth, Major Professor
J. Javier Rodriguez, Committee Member
Kelly Wisecup, Committee Member
David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of English
James D. Meernik, Acting Dean of the Toulouse Graduate School

Critical work on popular American women’s fiction still has not reckoned adequately with the themes of interracialism present in these novels and with interracialism’s bearing on the sentimental. This thesis considers an often overlooked body of women’s popular sentimental fiction, published from 1860-1865, which is interested in themes of interracial romance or reproduction, in order to provide a fuller picture of the impact that the intersection of interracialism and sentimentalism has had on American identity. By examining the literary strategy of “miscegenated narration,” or the heteroglossic cacophony of narrative voices and ideological viewpoints that interracialism produces in a narrative, I argue that the hegemonic ideologies of the sentimental romance are both “deterritorialized” and “reterritorialized,” a conflicted impulse that characterizes both nineteenth-century sentimental, interracial romances and the broader project of critiquing the dominant national narrative that these novels undertake.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. INTRODUCTION: REVISITING THE AMBIGUOUS EFFECTS OF INTERRACIALISM IN WOMEN’S POPULAR SENTIMENTAL ROMANCES FROM THE CIVIL WAR YEARS</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. THE SLAVE’S AND MORAL HEROINE’S NARRATIVES: ABOLITIONIST AND FEMINIST CONFLICT IN G. M. FLANDERS’S <em>THE EBONY IDOL</em></strong></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caesar’s Narrative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideologically Dissonant Narratives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary’s Narrative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. THE FORMAL STRUCTURE AND THE HAPPY ENDING: NARRATIVE TRAJECTORIES IN METTA V. VICTOR’S <em>MAUM GUINEA</em></strong></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Narratives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnson’s Story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scipio’s Story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophy’s Story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Narrative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maum Guinea’s Story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. THE BODILY NARRATIVE: CORPOREAL SEMIOTICS, MEMORY, PATHOLOGY, AND IDENTITY IN JULIA C. COLLINS’S <em>THE CURSE OF CASTE</em></strong></td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodily Narratives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Family’s Narrative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Narrative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: REVISITING THE AMBIGUOUS EFFECTS OF INTERRACIALISM IN WOMEN’S POPULAR SENTIMENTAL ROMANCES FROM THE CIVIL WAR YEARS

The Civil War reconfigured the very notion of the Union, of the national whole. Once the “fiction of reconciliation” finally ended and the fragile compromises of the previous decades disintegrated, the competing stories of the national imagined community emanating from both the North and the South could no longer share the same “narrative space”; and, during this critical time “the nation itself was yielding up its ideological limitations and givens” (Stokes 81). As the nation confronted the possibility of wide-scale emancipation, the national narrative—a narrative of the harmonious, egalitarian American community that depended upon the maintenance of constructed, racialized identities—was increasingly confronted by the acts, products, and images of interracialism. Interracialism “came to be a deeply political issue connected directly to the maintenance of racial hierarchy” because it threatened to corrode a carefully crafted American racial ideology which camouflaged the supposedly natural status of whiteness and white supremacy (Hodes 242). That which signifies “interracial” in American

1 See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), for an explanation of my theoretical basis of “nationalism” or “nation-building” as based upon invented or imagined narratives about the nation’s people rather than on real stories.

2 I will borrow my definition of “interracialism” in literature from Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), as “works in all genres that represent love and family relations involving black-white couples, biracial individuals, their descendents, and their larger kin—to all of whom the phrasing may be applied, be it as couples, as individuals, or as larger family units” (3).

3 See also Russ Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995), for his study in the necessary re-interpretation of slavery as simply a temporary aberration from a national investment in the project of liberty, which has been made possible through cultural forgetting or “dominant memory.”
history—the biracial individual, interracial romance and marriage, the act of passing—endangers a narrative of American identity based upon fixed racial boundaries.

While the debate over slavery, racial identity, and American identity escalated to physical conflict during the Civil War, the written war over the racialization of American identity continued in literature.\(^4\) During the years of the Civil War, 1860-1865, there was a proliferation of popular sentimental and romantic fiction written by women that staged interracial relationships, marriage, or sex. Fear over the permeability of American identity appears to have motivated these sentimental, interracial romances of the Civil War years, and these women’s novels respond to a proposed expansion of American identity that would include previously non-American persons. Their fictional resolutions prescribe the American identity to particular individuals via the rewarding or punishing of fictional interracialism.

Motivating this exploration of interracialism within the romantic aesthetic is an apparent desire to shape the national narrative—either to stabilize or to alter it.\(^5\) As a result, the racial boundaries that delineate American identity and constrict the American narrative are analyzed in the era’s fictional attempts to imagine a resolution for the national community, making the Civil War’s sentimental, interracial fiction a fruitful intersection for examining the continuous re-theorization of national identity. In this project, accordingly, I explore the effects of interracialism on the imaginings of American identity in popular women writer’s sentimental

---

\(^4\) See Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, for his comprehensive documentation of interracial literature in Appendix A: A Chronology of Interracial Literature.

\(^5\) See Doris Sommers, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991), for a similar study in the role of the romance in nation creation. Sommers’s objective is “to show the inextricability of politics from fiction in the history of nation-building,” and that it is a matter of degree and even style that makes “all the difference in considering the mixed political and esthetic legacy of romance” in Latin America (5, 6).
romances from 1860-1865; however, the alliance between women’s sentimental anti-slavery romance and interracialism is fraught with ambiguity, and therefore, the relationship between interracialism and sentimentalism must be considered for the ways in which it exposes and also masks the ideological complexity produced in their shared narrative spaces.

During the Civil War, women began publishing in popular forums both to advocate and to challenge the extension of American privileges to non-white and female persons. Both white and black female authors participated in this trend of utilizing popular venues, like periodicals and dime novels, and wrote predominately in the sentimental style. Also called “women’s fiction” or “domestic fiction,” the sentimental literature of the mid-nineteenth century was a particular strain of the romance, the general form that characterizes the American novel from the late eighteenth century on through the nineteenth century. Through the key strategy of sympathetic identification, sentimental authors attempt to affect the moral perceptions of the reader by inducing an ostensibly naturalized identification between the reader and the novel’s character and by seeking to elicit a supposedly proper emotive response to the character from the reader. In what has been termed the “subversion-containment paradigm,” sympathetic

---

6 Cassandra Jackson, Barriers Between Us: Interracial Sex in Nineteenth-Century American Literature (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2004), offers a discussion of the “role of racial ideology in inventing an American identity,” but she looks at literature from pre-Civil War and post-Civil War periods, not from literature produced during the war.

7 Patricia Bradley, in Women and the Press: The Struggle for Equality (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 2005), considers a connection between the rise of the professional female writer and commercial magazines in the nineteenth century. She makes note of the strong connection nineteenth-century feminists had to mass media, using affiliated magazines, brochures, and other more public periodicals to disseminate their views (in some instances more veiled than others).

identification—the naturalization of a sympathetic response to another individual—has been interpreted both as a subversive act that destabilizes the social construction of “identity” and as a “mechanism of social control” that elicits specific emotions to manipulate behavior (Boudreau 17). For many scholars, this troublesome enigma of sympathy and emotionality produces too much uncertainty in the sentimental text, and sentimentality is determined to be too ambiguous an instrument to produce a clearly radical social stance. Thus, the generic conventions of the sentimental novel—the gestures of sympathetic identification, the moral transparency of characters, a reliance on essentialist physiognomic assumptions, the overt moral lesson—are problematic tropes for critics of sentimental, interracial fiction.

Nineteenth-century writers of sentimental anti-slavery fiction utilized the sentimental mode to take advantage of the genre’s intended effect of sympathetic identification, but the sentimental model proves to be a problematic strategy, even for writers of interracial romances. First, because sympathetic identification “infuse[s] individuals with an acute sense of otherwise alien subjectivities,” it would seem that the bifurcated American racial identities of white and black might be undermined by a character of transracial imagination, like the mulatto, who could expose the mutuality of Self and Other (Boudreau 5). If this is true, the sentimental novel and its affect of sympathy should be “a narrative model whereby readers could ostensibly be taught an understanding of the interdependence between their own and others’ identities” (Korobkin ix). However, mulatta heroines are also considered to be concessional stereotypes that merely replace the real slave with a less-threatening sentimental figure. While the light-skinned slave heroine might increase the possibility of sympathetic identification between a white audience and the enslaved heroine, her presumed whiteness may also simply placate the prejudices of the reader.
with a seemingly less offensive, white slave with whom to identify, which accordingly threatens an overt anti-slavery or egalitarian message.

Second, writers of sentimental fiction used the generic qualities of sentimentalism in an attempt to stabilize the social upheaval brought about before and during the Civil War by using sympathetic identification to create a readership that subscribed to the same moral ideology. Driven by a belief in the power of sympathy to guide right conduct, sentimentalism seeks to fashion the readers’ moral senses, in order that all readers would be moved to relieve human suffering—“human” and “suffering” being defined in the fictional narrative. But how can so many individuals’ emotional reactions translate to a monolithic social morality without glossing over ideological interpretations that are outside of the authors’ intended interpretation? How can many individuals all properly determine the seemingly correct narrative definition of “human” and of “suffering,” in a time when the meanings of both terms are fluctuating and being challenged? Sentimentalism’s stake in morality as an absolute, transcendent value that is ostensibly right for all individuals, and its reliance on an individual’s affective response to interpret the correct moral behavior that the author is advancing, is but another paradox.9

Third, sentimental novels are part of a literary form, the romance, which historically has been perceived to idolize a hierarchically organized society rather than challenge it, as exemplified in its glorification of gender roles and veneration of sexual differences via the inevitable marriage at the end. Because the nineteenth-century popular romance requires the obligatory happy ending of marriage, many scholars criticize the hegemonic effects of the compulsory heterosexual, intraracial marriage plot in the sentimental novel. In relation to the

---

9 See Gregg Crane, The Cambridge Introduction to the Nineteenth-Century American Novel (New York: Cambridge UP, 2007), for an explanation of “one of the central paradoxes of the sentimental novel: it values permanence and stasis as signs of transcendent value, but it is full of movement and transformation” (112).
attempts at resolution in sentimental, interracial romances, the standard romantic marriage plot involving white characters is decried as formulaic, while the unsuccessful interracial romance is decried as either a failure of moral imagination or a political maneuver “to advance the white woman’s own political cause” (Ings 4). As such, the romance as a viable political form is censored for its successful marriages and its unsuccessful ones.

I believe such a disappointment in the effects of the popular romance stems from a failure to understand, historically, the increasing stress upon individualism and freedom of choice in these novels.\textsuperscript{10} The restrictive conventions of the sentimental genre and its obligatory conclusion do not negate the positive processes of isolating cultural barriers and exploring individual liberties for female and nonwhite characters in these fictions. It is my contention that anti-slavery, interracial romances of the sentimental mode, which attempt to portray national identity as a democratic experiment in human identification rather than racial identification, can reveal the social construction of race and offer other narratives as revisions to the dominant American narrative.

Understandably, the enigmatic effects of sympathy and the confusing conjunction of the sentimental and interracial generate a common complaint from scholars interested in popular sentimental or romantic interracial fictions from the Civil War era that, despite being staged in the presumably free space of the imagination, these narratives produce conflicting radical and conservative impulses and reinscribe patterns of racist hegemony even while espousing the rhetoric of the anti-slavery movement.\textsuperscript{11} Thus, critical responses to the sentimental genre as a

\textsuperscript{10} See Pamela Regis, \textit{A Natural History of the Romance Novel} (Philadelphia, U of Pennsylvania P, 2007), for her consideration of the role of the reader’s participation in the romance, and her assertion that the romance celebrates the heroine’s freedom, not enslavement.

viable avenue for exploring interracial themes are mixed, and criticism typically focuses on the unsatisfactory, formulaic happy ending. The general consensus appears to be that these female authors fail to imagine a truly transracial America because they are stymied by their own racist prejudices (Ings 6). The imaginative reaches of these conflicted narratives of the nation are unsatisfactorily limited, the argument goes, by the conflict between the image of a benevolent, harmonious, and democratic America and its practice of slavery and racial segregation.

In this project, I propose that these limitations are not as unsatisfactory as has been presumed. I choose to engage popular (noncanonical) or marginally canonical sentimental, interracial literature because these works, 1) “as a result of their conscious identification with whiteness as a structural ideology,” better delineate the shape and the boundaries of my investigation into the imaginative possibilities of gender and racial roles in interracial fiction (Stokes 7);12 2) are valuable for examining how gender and racial ideologies are presented in the confines of a sentimental form preoccupied with marketability and public opinion; and 3) show how the failures of fictional interracial marriages are not necessarily failed imaginings of a future transracial America. Furthermore, this body of sentimental texts written by women featuring interracial themes “offer[s] powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment,” and suggests that writers of popular sentimental fiction are particularly concerned with the national narrative (Tompkins xi). Because the theme of interracialism features prominently in

“attempt to argue against the naturalness of race prejudice, [… only] perpetuates the last barrier to brotherhood by ultimately fearing that inter-racial desire is in bad taste” (9). Also, Lyde Cullen Sizer, “Still Waiting: Intermarriage in White Women’s Civil War Novels” in Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History. Ed. Martha Hodes. (New York: New York UP, 1999), concludes that Childs, Davis, and Dickinson were too hung up on their “abstract abolitionist pieties” and were too dependent upon “some sort of racial order” to offer a viable solution which would bridge the gap of racism through the examples of their fictional interracial couples (255).

12 Stokes’s methodology is based on Richard Dyer’s suggestion in “White” that “close study of ‘images of the white race in avowedly racist and fascist cinema’ might yield a clearer picture of whiteness as a lived cultural and representational form” (Stokes 194).
these Civil War-era texts—a historical time when familiar identities are being destabilized—it speaks to the way these women authors, concerned with abolitionism, and thus with egalitarianism, democracy, and national identity, imagined the reinvention of an American identity and the American narrative. Tompkins writes that “these novelists have designs upon their audiences, in the sense of wanting to make people think and act in a particular way” because sentimental fictions were written “in order to win the belief and influence the behavior of the widest possible audience” (xi). This effort, during the Civil War, to reorganize the national identity and national narrative from a woman’s point of view makes these sentimental, interracial romances by women writers a complex, troublesome, and provocative boundary, one that I propose at once both undermines hegemonic stable states and bolsters the myth of American homogeneity and the nation. Therefore, sentimental stagings of interracial relationships that run contrary to dominant American racial ideologies are prime sites to investigate the staging of the national myth of racial harmony and the reality of American racism.

This project will also argue that these stagings of interracialism provide an occasion for exploring the related constructions of race and gender.13 According to Joane Nagel, understanding the socially constructed nature of ethnicity allows for its deconstruction, and recognizing the gendered/sexual foundations of that construction similarly allows for the deconstruction of gendered sources of ethnic boundary-creation. My project seeks to foreground these female authors’ attempts to uncover the structure of “race, ethnicity, and nationalism” from

---

13 Cassandra Jackson explores other nineteenth-century interracial fictions interested in the intersections of race and gender in relation to national identity. LeeAnn Whites, “The Civil War as Crisis in Gender,” in Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War. Eds. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silbert (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), examines the Civil War as a crisis in gender as well as race. As these women writers are engaging potentially revolutionary ideas through their exploration of interracial themes, their participation in the sentimental genre takes their work into a generic mode that is traditionally thought to be complicit in the perpetuation of the ideology of separate spheres.
the confines of the private, sentimental sphere and to expose its “sexual substructure” (Nagel, “Ethnicity” 125). The exposition of the sexual substructure of race, ethnicity, and nationalism promises to reveal ways of deconstructing those constructs, but for women writing within a genre that ostensibly reinforces gendered identities and roles, their imaginative resolutions are at once both impairing and inventive, much like the unsatisfactory or conflicted resolutions of their novels’ racial conflicts.

As a result, my investigation of interracial themes in sentimental fiction by women authors of the Civil War era necessitates a reconceptualization of the generic limitations of sentimentalism, the presumably acceptable modes of engaging interracialism, and the ostensible challenge to the racial and gendered ideology of the American narrative that themes of interracialism represent, when restructured from a woman’s point of view. Both generic limitations and social investments in the American myth of communion, harmony, and democracy inhibit the resolution of Civil War era interracial romances, and therefore produce a slew of ostensibly unresolved imaginings of a hybrid and harmonious national community in the sentimental anti-slavery romantic fictions of the Civil War decade. But, in light of these sweeping generalizations, the scholarly interpretation of failed interracial romances as an authorial reinscription of “dominant segregated relationship models” needs to be revisited (Ings 6). And, as an academic community, we should question the deft dismissal of nineteenth-century interracialism in sentimental romances as reproductions of the very paradigms of racial and gender relations and monolithic American identity that they were meant to challenge.

I suggest that the intersection of sentimentalism and interracialism enables an exploration of the processes of (re)creating a national narrative, which depends on mapping the effects of interracial matter on the form, conventions, and stylizations of sentimentalism. I propose to
follow interracialism’s “rhizomatic” effects—“rhizome” referring to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s “subterranean stem” (7)—as it traverses the labyrinth of the imagined identity and communal narrative of the United States. For Deleuze and Guattari, a rhizome resists structures of domination, but does so while moving through ongoing cycles of “deterritorializing” and “reterritorializing.” This cycle of de/reterritorialization reflects and explains the observation that these novels exhibit contiguous radical and conservative impulses. In this respect, my analysis of sentimental, interracial fictions reinforces scholarly research that suggests that the infrastructure of whiteness and its partnering with hegemonically empowered, normative heterosexuality is made apparent and thus dissectible through these supposedly failed sentimental, interracial romances, and that the ideology of whiteness as American narrative can be identified as part and parcel of the sentimental form.14 However, rather than only making these infrastructures visible and dissectible, my project is to clarify that the generic and thematic forms of sentimentalism and interracialism are also in the state of “becoming” while in the context of each other, what Deleuze and Guattari would call a “double becoming,” of both the rhizome of interracialism and the form of sentimentalism that the rhizome encounters. In other words, the faux-formulaic pseudo-conventions of the sentimental, interracial form, which my analysis foregrounds, are a result of the residual effects of the rhizomatic movements of interracialism in an altered sentimental narrative. Furthermore, I suggest that the ideology of the sentimental form is also in a state of becoming as it encounters the heteroglossic and

14 This claim builds on a project started by Mason Stokes, The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy (London: Duke UP, 2001), where he suggests that only in taking white-supremacist texts “seriously as richly ambivalent textual productions and by devoting to them the kind of attention too often reserved for ‘serious’ works of literature will these hateful works pay off in the kinds of broadly instructive ways that I think are both possible and desirable” (6-7).
disappropriating force of interracialism (Sutton 6). I understand the form as dynamic, and as such, it is reciprocal with ideology and operates or develops within a larger milieu.

Interracialism as a rhizome allows for “ceaselessly established connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power” (Deleuze and Guattari 7). Thus my thesis is organized around instances of rhizomatic “miscegenation” of sentimental narratives and conventions and the radical racial ideology suggested by interracialism, specifically within three historically popular but now largely forgotten sentimental, interracial romances. “Miscegenation”—literally, “to mix kind”—describes the type of ideological mixing that the residual impressions of interracial themes effect in the more conservative sentimental narrative. While problematic sentimental conventions are not entirely redeemed, neither are they left unchanged in the context of more progressive racial and gender ideology introduced by interracial themes.

In G. M. Flanders’s *The Ebony Idol* (1860), my first case study, I examine the ways in which this pro-slavery novel tries to discredit a fictionalized monolithic Slave Experience ostensibly toted by Abolitionist publishers to stir up public sentiments against slavery, but in doing so, *The Ebony Idol* actually allows for the more important verification of authentic slave stories, namely the story of the runaway slave, Caesar. Furthermore, the privileging of monolithic over individual narrative structures mirrors an ideological privileging of feminist concerns over racial issues, and *The Ebony Idol* exhibits the paradoxes of its proto-feminist, pro-slavery ideology in the conflict that arises over Mary and Caesar’s engagement. I understand the novel’s ideological inconsistency—its proto-feminist, pseudo-pro-slavery point-of-view foregrounded in the interracial experiment—to model for readers a similar dissonance in American racial and gendered ideology.
In my second chapter, I show how interracialism in Metta V. Victor’s *Maum Guinea and her Plantation “Children”* (1861) produces a “miscegenated narrative,” or a multiplicity of narrators and narrating voices, which complicates the sentimental project of sustaining the national narrative. In Victor’s novel, the theme of interracialism—introduced by the novel’s parallel white and slave romances—temporarily deterritorializes the stable hegemonic racial ideology that relies on racial ratios to determine degrees of humanity, by naturalizing a sympathetic identification between the romance of white lovers and the romance between the mulatto hero and heroine. The second effect of interracialism—the mixture of black and white narrators, or miscegenated narration—deterritorializes American identity as defined through the national narrative. In becoming, the national narrative—the project of a monolithic narrative of sentimentalism—is drawn into the territory of the slaves’ narratives in *Maum Guinea*, which challenge the hegemonic power of the national narrative as the ethical enigma of slave rebellion is narrated and dissected within the ideological boundaries of a sentimental plantation idyll that is avowedly white supremacist in theme.

Finally, in the third chapter, focusing on Julia C. Collins’s *The Curse of Caste or, The Slave Bride* (1865), I show how interracialism produces miscegenated narratives of the body in a story of family history preoccupied with bodily fictions. The mulatta protagonist, Claire, and her physical double, her white relative, Isabelle, are strategically paired so as to bring under scrutiny the viability of the body as a sign of monolithic interiority. In theory, the identical female bodies ought to have similar interiors, but they do not. The disconnection between outward appearance and interiority imaginatively deconstructs the physical/metaphysical binary upon which racial constructions are supported and works against an American ideology of binary relationships between white/black, male/female, and good/evil.
Necessarily, these are all relative deterritorializations within the conservative sentimental conventions, and as such, the mixing of these narrators and narrative structures is accompanied by the strong reterritorializing influence exerted by the conservative sentimental ending, by the myth of American identity at stake in the sentimental form, and by the conventions of national narrative mirrored in the monolithic narrative of the sentimental romance. Tavia Nyong’o explains that the egalitarian potential of racial hybridity has been “a longstanding object of concern and fascination;” however, the historical “insistence on the practice of race mixing reflected a conviction that egalitarian possibilities entertained in thought would prove unendurable when actually experienced” (14). The fictional displays of the undesirability of “race mixing” through the recurrent narrative failures result in “a constant reenactment of the impossible, a loquacious speaking of the unspeakable, and a continual reduction to practice of the impractical heresy of amalgamation” (Nyong’o 14). The deterritorialization of racialized identity structures in moments of interracial sympathetic identification liberates identity exploration, and yet these fictional moments are often portrayed or staged as destructive or dangerous. Certain actions are considered to be distasteful within the sentimental, romantic novel even though they are possible in a cohesive national narrative and identity.

Nonetheless, the treatment of interracialism in sentimental romances cannot be reduced to either the simplistic racial frameworks of the nineteenth century or the swift condemnation of those frameworks in modern critical discourse. Rather than reiterate the reterritorializing forces behind failed fictional interracial unions, my project seeks to find what work has been done by the very imagining of these staged interracial relationships in spite of the fictionalized ending, and to examine the process of interracial stagings for interracialism’s deterritorializing forces, however temporarily those forces exist. I turn my focus to interracialism via the recurring
strategy of miscegenated narration, which works itself into the very fabric of the fiction, temporarily transforming or making useful some of the most problematic facets of the sentimental mode. My aim is to examine the ways in which literal or contemplated race mixing in fiction influences or changes other negative or problematic sentimental tropes such as the conventional plot, and the happy conjugal conclusion, and the moral heroine.

Most critics of white women’s sentimental fiction from the Civil War claim that the interracial stagings in these fictions fail to live up to their radical potential because the authors never seem willing to sacrifice their gender interests for an egalitarian, race-free “American-ness.” And, conversely, black women’s interracial romances fail to live up to their radical potential because the authors are unwilling to sacrifice their bid for racial equality to gender interests. My work is to demonstrate that these fictions are not always already failures, and that these nineteenth-century narratives can be redeemed and made useful to the project of more fully theorizing an ostensibly static American national identity.

15 In the past, critical scholarship has seemed to stagnate upon a singular recognition of the “miscegenation” of generic forms that takes place when interracial themes are present, such as in Ings’s dissertation and by Russ Castronovo, “Incidents in the Life of a White Woman: Economies of Race and Gender in the Antebellum Nation” in American Literary History 10.2 (1998).

16 See Ings, Sizer, and also Celia R. Daileader, Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth: Inter-racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), who claims that the bifurcation of women’s abolitionist writing in successful or failed stagings of inter-racial marriage was split between gender or racist binaries. Daileader argues part of this bifurcation is due to female authors’ navigations of a predominately hostile white male audience, and therefore the women found it necessary to temper their radical liberal messages with “sexual conservativism” or by playing into acceptable racial prejudices.
CHAPTER 2

THE SLAVE’S AND MORAL HEROINE’S NARRATIVES: ABOLITIONIST AND FEMINIST CONFLICT IN G. M. FLANDERS’S THE EBONY IDOL

In 1845, Mr. A. C. C. Thompson published a letter in the Delaware Republican asserting that the details of a popular slave autobiography had been either falsified or entirely invented by the fugitive slave narrator. In his accusation, Thompson claimed he personally knew both the slaveholder and the ex-slave, and that the white man’s character had been so misrepresented and disparaged in the account that he claimed to find “the glaring impress of falsehood on every page” (88). Thompson’s attempt at invalidating this slave’s testimony is but one historical instance of many in antebellum and Civil War America. In fact, it was “because other slave narratives had been shown to be ghostwritten or fabricated” that much controversy surrounded this particularly well-written and widely disseminated account (Lee 4).

However, in answer to Thompson’s accusations concerning the authenticity of his international bestseller, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845), Frederick Douglass published a reply in the Abolitionist newspaper, the Liberator, in February 1846. Ironically, Douglass “thanked [Thompson] profusely for proving that he had been a slave and that the people he wrote about were not fictitious” (Blassingame xxvi). According to Douglass, Thompson’s testimony against Douglass’s narrative actually verified that the persons of the narrative truly existed, in turn verifying Douglass’s story. Douglass appropriates his accuser’s claims by recognizing that, in his act of trying to morally justify the master, Thompson actually answers the more important question of the truth of Douglass’s identity. And, in response to the lesser charge that the narrative misrepresents his owners’ character, Douglass quips, “The cowskin makes as deep a gash in my flesh, when wielded by a
professed saint, as it does when wielded by an open sinner” (95). According to Douglass, his body can be offered as a locus of experience that can yield up meaning if “read” properly, similar to how his accuser’s narrative can provide evidence of Douglass’s identity, if read “properly.”

In G. M. Flanders’s *The Ebony Idol*, the New England townsfolk of Minden reflect this historical anxiety over the authenticity of Abolitionist literature and the slave narrative. *The Ebony Idol* commences with a description of the recent split between the townspeople of Minden, who are divided in their loyalties to the pastor, Rev. Cary, after his fervent conversion to the cause of Abolitionism. In order to raise awareness and stir up sympathy for the Abolitionist cause in Minden, Rev. Cary arranges for a runaway slave, Caesar, to take up residence in the town and to be an object for worship—hence the title, *The Ebony Idol*—for the townspeople. The runaway slave, Caesar, conducts a circuit of trumped-up anti-slavery lectures in all of the towns around Minden, but is taken advantage of by his tour’s organizer, David, who reaps the financial benefits of Caesar’s pathetic speeches. Caesar’s lectures are organized by David in “a kind of Yankee speculation” on the economic and sympathetic values of the slave narrative (Flanders 275).

Caesar ultimately alienates most of his supporters in the town except for the most uncultivated and selfish: Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs. Minden’s aspiring second representative, Mr. Hobbs, takes up a radical anti-slavery position similar to Rev. Cary’s, in order to capitalize on the town’s recent abolitionist fervor, and in order to demonstrate his new convictions, forcibly engages his adopted daughter, Mary Hobbs, to Caesar. Upon discovering Mary’s engagement to Caesar, even the estimable Rev. Cary finds his position on unconditional and instantaneous emancipation to be a shaken. Eventually, the town’s sweetheart, Mary, is saved from her engagement to Caesar, once Rev. Cary is finally willing to admit his radical abolitionist beliefs
are a threat to white womanhood, and Mary is removed from the Hobbses’ home to take up residence in the home of Squire and Mrs. Bryant, who reject the Reverend’s original radical Abolitionist stance. Eventually Rev. Cary, aided by the Bryants, helps Mary escape her engagement to Caesar by turning public opinion in Mary’s favor and restoring her reputation, which had been tarnished by her presumable acquiescence to Caesar’s advances. As the novel closes, the reader is left to assume that the restored Mary is now free to marry her true love, the son of Caesar’s former master and white Southern slave-owner, Frank Stanton.

*The Ebony Idol*’s suspicion of the genuineness of Abolitionist literature and African-American testimony is an example of the “socially and commercially validated literature” from the Civil War period that “arises as a reaction to black autobiography and fiction and displace[s] and discount[s] black narrative expression” (Castronovo, “Incidents” 239). Flanders’s novel is symbolic of a broader trend in nineteenth-century white women’s literature that attempts to either subdue or subvert the slave narrative. Most scholars understand *The Ebony Idol* as a reactionary, pro-slavery response to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s bestselling anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.1 And, while I agree that Flanders’s romance is responding to white anxiety over Abolitionist fraudulency in slave narrative production and the anti-slavery movement’s growing aggressive fervor to which Mr. A. C. C. Thompson responds,2 I suggest that the novel’s predominant anti-abolitionist rhetoric and its exploration of interracialism conceal deeper layers

---


2 *The Ebony Idol* considers such “abuses” of radical Abolitionism, which may have used anti-slavery sentiment for political gain. Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs exemplify this penchant for Abolitionist “abuse;” they are the only characters who would exercise “practical amalgamation” and would sacrifice their own flesh and blood “upon this altar of his [political] ambition” to become “the second representative of Minden” (166). As another type of “abuse,” Rev. Cary’s Abolitionist position is based upon a messy syncretism of religion and politics. As the narrator laments: “They [the clergy] insult the audiences that go up to the high places for religious instructions, by forcing upon them political rantings which they would not presume to utter in the streets! […] A political priest is a social and moral evil” (236, 237).
of ambivalence and complexity than is characteristic of the pro-slavery literary genre to which it has been relegated. In particular, I argue that if the narratives told by the narrator and the characters are read properly, in relation to each other, *The Ebony Idol* offers evidence contrary to its supposed ideological thrust.

First, I make a distinction between a critical view of *The Ebony Idol* as a narrative that appropriates the ostensibly real slave narrative and my understanding of the novel as a narrative that instead allows for authentic slave stories. This distinction is necessary because it seems that Flanders constructs Caesar as a proverbial straw man and that the faux-history David concocts for Caesar’s anti-slavery lectures is an attempt at illustrating Abolitionist penchant for subversion of the authentic slave narrative. However, I believe that *The Ebony Idol* portrays a genuine slave narrative—Caesar’s unique, but concealed, story—and ultimately rejects the monolithic Slave Narrative, an imagined narrative of abuse and graphic violence that all African-American slaves presumably share. Even though the supposed ideological thrust of *The Ebony Idol* is to disparage Abolitionist accounts of the universality of brutal slave experiences, the novel offers Caesar’s authentic slave narrative, which differs dramatically from the Slave Narrative, and yet, still necessitates an evaluation of its probability from the reader. My project foregrounds Caesar’s narrative, a composite of his actions and reactions to the characters he encounters in Minden, in the predominant narrative of anti-Abolitionist anxiety that has been the focus of most critical interpretations of *The Ebony Idol*.

Furthermore, my foregrounding of Caesar’s narrative differs from a view of *The Ebony Idol* that would understand the novel to be a romantic narrative that subverts the slave narrative for white interests. Russ Castronovo writes of *The Ebony Idol*: “the resulting text of inauthentic black expression serves the white woman, in this instance a foundling named Mary, by spelling
out the threats to gender posed by racially inflected class contexts” (“Incidents” 255). In contrast, I emphasize that *The Ebony Idol* does provide the reader with an authentic black expression through Caesar’s narrative, which I understand to be the story of his thoughts and actions in the novel. *The Ebony Idol*’s examples of “inauthentic black expression” do not come from the character, Caesar, but from the stories that the other characters’ tell of Caesar. The inauthentic expression that serves the white woman, Mary, originates from Mary, herself, not from Caesar. Again, this distinction is important because it separates Caesar’s narrative from other narratives about him, and returns to Caesar the power to articulate his own complex identity within the novel. Like is evidenced in the Douglass/Thompson debate, Caesar’s narrative resists the appropriative claims of the Slave Narrative and of the characters’ narratives of Caesar.

Second, like the Douglass/Thompson exchange, *The Ebony Idol*’s conflicting narrative perspectives provide opportunities to uncover how a conflicted novel—preoccupied with anti-Abolitionist politics and with prioritizing feminist ideology over racial politics—can be a useful example of how staging ideologically oppositional stories in the same narrative space produces deterritorializing effects. I understand the novel’s conflicting radical and conservative impulses to be a product of the relative, or temporary, deterritorializations of hegemonic racial and gendered ideology. In *The Ebony Idol*, Flanders attempts to reconcile feminist ideals with the novel’s anti-Abolitionist stance, and in light of the novel’s dominating pro-slavery leaning, *The Ebony Idol*’s narrator wrestles with prioritizing gender interests over race interests, particularly in light of the rhetorics of the body and biology that feminist arguments raise, which are also vital to issues of racial equality. One of the novel’s clearest articulations of this conflict of

---

interests is Mrs. Cary frustrated explication: “I do not know […] which is the most to be dreaded, domestic or national bondage; both are bad enough, certainly. Let us not overlook the evils of one in our misguided zeal for the other!” (70). However, in this criticism of Northern white Abolitionist men who would presumably fight for racial emancipation and yet defend “Northern slavery” (67)—a husband’s tyrannical rule over his wife— _The Ebony Idol_ affects an antithetical movement that exposes the codependent ideological structures of patriarchy and whiteness. Mrs. Cary’s statement correlates racialized and gendered hierarchies, exposing the codependent relationship between sexism and racism that maintains the rule of white men, and it reifies the power structure of white patriarchy that those fictions serve. In my understanding, this antithetical work goes beyond an interpretation of _The Ebony Idol_ as a demonstration of “white male-prescribed stereotypes of both the black ‘child/savage’ and the angelic, unsullied ‘true woman’ [that] create the iron cage which racism and sexism conspire to keep locked” and which Flanders is unable to circumvent (Jordan-Lake 54). Instead, I propose that _The Ebony Idol_’s narration of the threatening gendered consequences of radical Abolitionism actually undermines the pro-slavery impulses of the novel, contrary to the novel’s supposed ideological leanings.

The novel’s exploration of the gendered consequences of emancipation is exhibited in the conflict over the interracial engagement. As stated before, Mary and Caesar’s engagement brings the conflicting impulses of feminist and pro-slavery ideology together into a shared narrative space, and produces (unintentional) imagining of new avenues of gender and racial identification. Even though those avenues are supposedly not navigated successfully by the novel’s conclusion,⁴ as suggested by Douglass’s narrative, essentialist readings of monolithic

---

⁴ In fact, those avenues seems to dead-end in inactivity or dissolution. As such, _The Ebony Idol_ struggles allocate the responsibilities of emancipation. For example, in order to discover whom to hold responsible for the ramifications of Caesar’s emancipation, the women of Minden form the Carean African Friend Society. However, it
racialized and gendered narratives are shown to be unreliable as indicators of interiority in the novel’s articulation of the slave, the white woman, and their narratives. Thus, more important than the novel’s failed ending is *The Ebony Idol*’s inadvertent verification of these existent possibilities for self-identification for slaves and women alike. And, it is in fact the novel’s foray into themes of interracialism that expands the landscape of sentimentalism’s possibilities to include the presentation, if not the actualization, of modes of self-emancipation and identification for women and slaves. Both men and women, black and white, are free to assume more complicated and dynamic modes of identification, liberating the individual to define his or herself as complexly as necessary, rather than be defined by hegemonic, static social constructions.

To recover this sentimental romance from critical rejection as stereotypical racist propaganda, *The Ebony Idol* must be valued for its ideological inconsistency and the conflict it models between feminist ideals and racialized essentialism. *The Ebony Idol* is not simply a pro-slavery story of the impossibility of interracial romance. Rather, *The Ebony Idol* is concerned with navigating the potential consequences of emancipation via an investigation of the interracial theme, which could ironically lead some readers to conclude the very opposite of the novel’s presumed pro-slavery meaning: emancipation, based on the abdication of body fiction and the master narrative, implies freedom for both slaves and women.

ends in confusion, apathy, and finally, dissolves. In another example, the families of Minden pass Caesar around from home to home, because they cannot fit him in their picture of the domestic ideal, and eventually Caesar ends up simply “perambulating the country, spending his time between lecturing and lounging” (282). Finally, to wrestle with the question of responsibility after emancipation, the narrator asks: “If you [Northern Abolitionists] are sincere in your profession of equal rights [for whites and blacks], cannot you perceive that these strangers [Southern slave-owners] have rights also, which, if you violate, you make yourselves amenable to the law which protects the North and the South alike?” (262).
Caesar’s Narrative

While David’s version of the Slave Narrative, which Caesar presents in his speeches, is certainly suspect, the other narrative articulated by Caesar—his lived experiences the reader gets piece-meal—should be carefully considered for the way in which it allows the ex-slave to tell his own story, one that departs from images of violence and aggression characteristic of the monolithic Slave Narrative fronted by dubious Abolitionist editors. As a deterritorializing force, Caesar’s narrative exhibits qualities of the rhizome as a “subterranean stem,” as a hidden identification that must be mapped out for its effects on the novel’s terrain (Deleuze and Guattari 7). For my purposes, it will be helpful to reproduce the terrain, as exhibited in the characters’ positionings around Caesar because the white characters’ narratives for Caesar exemplify the deracializing and sentimentalizing of the slave narrative and showcase how the authentic slave narrative is repopulated with a Slave Narrative so that Caesar’s presence might be conducive to the imagined white identity of each of the characters.

As I alluded to earlier, part of the ideological inconsistency of the novel is evidenced in the multiplicity of narrators offering versions of Caesar’s life, or the ex-slave’s experience, based solely upon the value of that version for articulating their own subject positions. For example, Rev. Cary’s populates his version of Caesar’s narrative with images of Caesar as “a specimen of the total depravity of man” (Flanders 144). For the Reverend, Caesar is “but one of the vast family of that unfortunate race whom [the Reverend] ha[s] undertaken to rescue from bondage. Their salvation must be effected individually, and perhaps to [him] is to be given this man’s [Caesar’s] most precious soul for keeping” (144-145). Rev. Cary’s narrative for Caesar is the story of the barbaric heathen who must be saved, and as such, Rev. Cary is able to position
himself as a religious and social activist. Caesar’s Slave Narrative is the heart of Rev. Cary’s self-identification.

David’s revision of Caesar’s story imagines the ex-slave as a naïve, ignorant slave stereotype. Because he is the town’s clown, David is unworthy to court his secretly beloved Mary, and can only imagine his maturation in the presence of Caesar, whom he perceives to be the only individual less worthy of Mary. David tells Mrs. Hobbs that he has a plan to use his fabricated narrative of Caesar in order to “enable us [he and Mrs. Hobbs] to bring ourselves before the people—favorably, you understand” (195). While he tricks Mrs. Hobbs into believing he has her interest in mind, David, instead, uses this plan to humiliate Mrs. Hobbs and position himself even more favorably to Mary. Through his revision of Caesar’s narrative, which closely conforms to the monolithic Slave Narrative, David can identify himself as a worthy suitor for Mary—financially, through the monies he gains from Caesar’s lectures, and in social status, as a suitor more acceptable for Mary than Caesar.

Caesar’s arrival in Minden threatens the fictitious identity that Frank Stanton projects to the townspeople. Stanton positions himself as a pensive scholar and Northern theologian, living in the home of Squire Bryan. When Stanton realizes that Caesar’s presence might undo that fictional identity, the son of Caesar’s owner asks the runaway, “To whom have you revealed your master’s name?” (123). Once Caesar affirms that Stanton’s true identity has not been unveiled, Stanton allows Caesar to go free, but with this warning: “it is only upon this one condition, you shall never confess or betray to living man that you have ever known me or my father. If by any accident you should do so, I shall at once inform my father where you may be found” (125). Furthermore, Stanton administers these words of caution to Caesar:
There is hardly one man in a hundred of all these who have encouraged your desertion of my father, who would put his hand into his pocket and give you a dollar, if it was to save you from the gutter! While the excitement continues, they will take you into their homes for a few days, and then cast you adrift, to sink or swim. (124)

Stanton’s ideological identifications as protector of white patriarchal rule depend on his narrativization of Caesar as an immature child in need of the master for guidance and well-being.

Miss Julia Dickey reads her own narrative as a sexually and socially repressed person into Caesar’s story. She uses her abridged version of the monolithic Slave identity to justify her sexual advances toward Caesar, in order that she might test her new identity as a desirable partner, in contrast with her identity among the townspeople as an old maid. When Caesar comes to live in Julia’s home, “she felt her virgin heart fluttering with pleasing expectation,” but Caesar’s mannerisms conflict with Julia's “predilections,” and she kicks him out secretly to hide her indiscretions (155, 157). Rather than compromise her old fictional identity as a pious and pure maiden, Julia must hide the true experiences of her own life with Caesar and continue to operate in ignorance of Caesar’s true experiences or his narrative. For Miss Dickey, Caesar’s authentic identity must be substituted for the Slave identity/stereotype as sexual predator, in order to disguise Miss Dickey’s own predatory behaviors.

Ironically, the only characters that treat Caesar fairly are the antagonists, Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs. Caesar is received by the Hobbses as a field-laborer, and he worked “side by side with the master of the house, mingling freely with the family, sitting at the table, and sharing the chit-chat of the sitting room […]]. He was considered their equal, and treated as such” (163). However, Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs also invent a narrative for Caesar, so that they might position themselves as suitable candidates for town leadership. Their version of Caesar’s life depends
upon his presentation as a sympathetic object, whom they have graciously and piously taken in
and to whom they have offered their adopted daughter’s hand in marriage. Without narrativizing
Caesar’s story in a pathetic manner, Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs have no grounds for offering
themselves as worthy political candidates.

Each of the characters has an imagined narrative for Caesar that stems in some way from
the monolithic Slave Experience, which serves their own social or ideological positioning. The
characters’ positionings around the subject, Caesar, might suggest that Caesar functions as an
empty Signifier around which all the characters position themselves,\(^5\) but that has no meaning in
and of itself. If this is true, then Caesar is simply a flat, static stereotype. However, I proposed
before that Caesar does tell his own narrative, in fragmentary segments, throughout *The Ebony
Idol*, and only Caesar’s narrative is reliable as an indicator of his authentic interiority. Through
his actions, speech, and thoughts, the reader gets descriptions of the real character, Caesar, and
even though it is free of egregious violence, Caesar’s narrative still focuses on his desire for
freedom, while David’s, Mary’s, and other characters’ narratives for Caesar suspiciously do not.

In his dialogue with Frank Stanton, Caesar explains that he was a “rascal” at home on the
Stanton plantation, always “kickin’ up debbil ob a muss, an’ keepin’ civil niggers in a ‘roar’”
(121). He was a trickster, always stirring up the slaves and causing chaos, which is revealed
through Stanton’s reversal of his initial conviction that Caesar should return to his father.
Stanton supposes that “your [Caesar’s] loss is his [Stanton’s father’s] gain” because Caesar is no
longer around to cause trouble (122). In Minden, Caesar practices the same exercise of troubling
the master, and troubles specific people in Minden whom he perceives to be the most prejudiced

Reading*. Eds. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988), for an
explanation of my reference to the “empty Signifier;” in Lacan’s essay, Poe’s letter is a “pure signifier,” in that it
has no meaning but orders the positioning of the subjects around it.
against him. For example, Caesar “intuitively comprehend[s] the contempt and pity of the mute expression” which Rev. Cary gives him after Caesar accidentally breaks Mrs. Cary’s chair (144). As punishment, Caesar is made to listen to Rev. Cary’s pontifications that the narrator describes as “an eloquent dissertation upon the blessings of liberty, and closed by a most fervent religious exhortation, beneath which Caesar groaned and squirmed out his impatience in vain” (149). Caesar retaliates by stealing a family heirloom from Rev. Cary’s desk, of which Rev. Cary was not aware until little Lucy Cary caught Caesar with it. And, in another example, when Caesar’s playful affection towards Lucy is returned with disgust, Caesar exacts revenge based upon her already existing prejudicial fears of him, and exploits Lucy’s fears by exaggerating the African “features,” which he understands that she finds disturbing (141-142).

In the same vein, the reader discovers that Caesar is also a man of many faces and personalities; he is a trickster, taking many forms according to his desire. For the reader alone, he stages three distinct tableaus, playing the “fop,” the “man of the world,” and the swooning “lover” (126-127). Caesar’s thoughts also expose that he intuitively comprehends the predilections of the people around him, and he uses those biases for his benefit through these sort of acting skills. For example, when Mrs. Hobbs picks Caesar up to bring him to Minden,

Caesar, who was not slow in perceiving her readiness to give full credence to his most absurd relations, and was not reluctant to have himself considered a hero, poured into her willing ear a most lavish account of his sufferings. His deprivations and personal corpulency might have seemed incongruous to a physiological listener, but Mrs. Hobbs was no skeptic, and was prepared to believe in any evil that traced its origin to slavery! (117)
Exhibiting a keen sense of people’s predilections for the Slave Narrative, Caesar uses the Slave Narrative to his advantage. Early on during his time in Minden, he discovers that he is “expected to gratify their curiosity to the fullest extent, and that he was petted in proportion to the magnitude and marvellousness [sp] of the falsehoods he invented” (137). With these stories, Caesar tricks the white men, playing into their bias in exchange for a career in rhetorics, while fully aware of the exchange being made. He delivers those desired stories, on purpose, and he is valued in the town for his oratory abilities. Likewise, when David approaches him with the fabricated speech/narrative, Caesar demonstrates that he understands the point of the experience he is supposed to recite and the sensation that would follow the recital, explaining: “Oh Lor’, Massa David! when dis chile take an attumtude, and ‘scribes dat ar lickin’, if de graby don’ run den, Mass’ Dave, guess ‘twill be coz dey is short of de raw material!” (206). Caesar is not simply a pawn, or an empty Signifier, in relation to whom the white characters of Minden articulate their subjecthood. He actively participates in creating the illusion of the Slave and his Experience for the characters, while the reader’s attention is drawn to the artifice necessary in sustaining the Slave Narrative.

Furthermore, a proper reading reveals that Caesar wants to be free. Frank Stanton asks if Caesar wants to be free, and Caesar replies, “‘Free, Marse Frank.’ And, as if there was magic in the little monosyllable, he murmured over and over again, ‘free—free’” (125). The narrator confirms Caesar’s awareness of the generosity and cost involved with Frank’s abdication of Caesar’s enslavement, which suggests that Caesar understands the value of freedom. However, Caesar application of his newfound freedom does not coincide with the white characters’ application; to Caesar, “freedom” indicates a freedom in choice to labor, in addition to the freedom to profit from labor, while the white characters’ predominantly focus on the latter
consequence of freedom, taking for granted that laboring is a choice. The narrator explains that Caesar believed that people in the North only work when they want to, which ironically is true, but it angers the townsfolk who perceive his aversion to physical labor as an indicator of his supposedly innate inability to function properly as a free citizen in the Northern free market economy. Furthermore, when Caesar does labor, he refuses to do the kind of labor that the people of Minden are expecting of him. For example, Caesar is appalled that Mrs. Cary would stoop to clean her house and work in the small garden, and is flabbergasted that she takes pride in her own performance of these menial tasks. But his adverse response to Mrs. Cary’s domestic labor is a result of the cultural values he imbibed from the South, rather than from his own personal work ethic. Caesar explains: “Gor, de Yankees all niggers! Dis chile like for to see his ole missey working round in dat-are way. De Soufern ladies am ladies as is ladies!” (138). When Caesar chooses to labor, he chooses to labor as the town’s entertainer or story-teller, a respected position in the Southern slave community. Caesar takes the Southern framework of success to the North, expecting that he will be free to reach for the pinnacle of success, indicated by those who no longer have to physically labor. As such, the plantation model influences Caesar’s definition of “freedom.”

From Caesar’s narrative, the reader acquires insight to the lived experiences of the only black character in The Ebony Idol, and Caesar’s narrative is markedly different from the monolithic Slave Narrative because Caesar’s lived experiences depart from images of aggressive violence, ignorance, helplessness, and threatening black sexuality. His narrative also suggests that Caesar exhibits a stronger sense of agency than has been acknowledged, as he uses both his sharp self-perception and his intuitions of the characters he encounters to navigate the town’s ideological milieu and trick, trouble, or take advantage of the townspeople. And, from Caesar’s
narrative, the reader understands that Caesar’s most offensive characteristic—his laziness—results from a difference in cultures’ economic consequences of freedom. Therefore, Caesar’s narrative provides him with agency and possibilities for self-identity.

Ideologically Dissonant Narratives

As I suggested earlier, *The Ebony Idol*’s opposition to Abolitionism threatens its feminist interests, and in order to maintain its proto-feminist thrust, the characters prescribe ways of prioritizing gender interests over race politics. For Mrs. Cary, the story of slavery is akin to “Northern Slavery”—the “connubial servitude” of white women (67, 68). Her ideological move demonizes the Slave Narrative as a tool used by white Abolitionists to abdicate white men from their responsibility for the oppression of white women. She feels threatened by her husband’s parading of Caesar through the town and by Caesar’s story of inestimable suffering as a slave, as she perceives it to overshadow her story as oppressed, abused housewife. To emphasize gender interests over race politics, Mrs. Cary uses her neighbor, Mrs. Brown, as an example:

Now I will defy you [Mr. Cary] to name a single act in which that woman [Mrs. Brown] is a free agent. […] Mr. Brown] keeps his tyrannical heel upon that woman, as if she were a scorpion! She has told me repeatedly, that since the moment she married Mr. Brown, she has been fettered day and night. Her domestic arrangements are all made subservient to Mr. Brown’s inclinations; she can neither leave home nor receive friends, without first obtaining his permission. (67)

Mrs. Cary views the Slave Narrative as an empty form that can be populated with what she perceives to be a similar story of “slavery.” But, Caesar’s real narrative interrupts her attempts at prioritizing women’s rights over human rights, and makes her attempted appropriation of his authentic story, which differs greatly from the Slave Narrative, more problematic (69). She
laments, “We have Northern Slavery, too, if nothing but slavery is adapted to the talent of these
reformers” (67). Ultimately, Mrs. Cary attempts to position herself as the slave’s Northern equal
in oppression and abuse, but Caesar’s narrative, the story of the individual slave, disrupts that
easy, but inequitable, equation. As Karen Sánchez-Eppler writes, “the alliance attempted by
feminist-abolitionist texts is never particularly easy or equitable. Indeed […] although the
identifications of woman and slave, marriage and slavery, that characterize these texts may
occasionally prove mutually empowering, they generally tend toward asymmetry and
exploitation” (29).

The disruptions to the novel’s attempts at marrying feminist and pro-slavery ideologies
reveal the dependency of both gendered and racialized hierarchies to the maintenance of white
patriarchy. These disruptions, like Caesar’s narrative before, are instances of dissonance in the
characters’ actions and professed beliefs when they must respond to the challenging of Minden’s
ethnosexual boundaries, which Mary and Caesar’s engagement represents. In Race, Ethnicity,
and Sexuality, Joane Nagle claims that “ethnosexual boundaries”—“the cross-section of ethnicity
and sexuality”—provide examples of the sexual dimensions of race and racism, of ethnic
identity, and of nationalism and national identity (4). Thus, an examination of the ethnosexual
boundaries presented in The Ebony Idol reveals how the “hegemonies and regimes of sexuality
shape ethnic relations, conflicts, boundaries,” and exposes the social constructions that sanction
gendered institutions (Nagel, Race 10). The engagement is an infraction of the community’s
prescribed ethnosexual boundaries; the characters’ myopic responses and the articulation of
Minden’s dissonant race and gender ideologies that are raised by the interracial engagement are
meant for use by the sympathetic reader in determining the validity of particular responses in the
real world or to dismiss those responses as inauthentic to the sympathetic goal.
Mary and Caesar’s interracial engagement divides the people of Minden. Interestingly, the characters who resist Mary and Caesar’s relationship, a representation of the most radical implications of anti-slavery politics, pointedly remind the reader that they, in fact, presume to have the same anti-slavery views as the characters who encourage Mary and Caesar’s interracial relationship. Likewise, the characters who instead celebrate their engagement exhibit similar flaws in their ostensibly Abolitionist beliefs. The characters’ professed ideologies and dissonant responses to Mary and Caesar’s models for the reader some of the inherent shortcomings of the sort of practical Abolitionism and ideal feminism of the nineteenth century and begs an imagined reconciliation.

Flanders’s portrays the characters that support Mary and Caesar’s engagement as uncultivated, selfish, and greedy—the opposite of ideal, educated and refined Northerners. Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs “from the first espoused Mr. Cary’s amalgamation theories with the utmost sincerity. They believed the negro to be their equal, physically and mentally. [However, they did so because] [t]hey had no fastidious refinements to be shocked by his [the slave’s] peculiarities” (Flanders 163). Because the Hobbses are uncouth, they are unaware of Caesar’s uncouthness. As the narrator continues: “Mr. Hobbs, although a trifle more cultivated than his wife, was yet incapable of seeing any impropriety in the association of these two [Mary and Caesar]” (165). The impropriety the narrator bemoans is primarily the consequence of the incongruous levels of refinement and culture between Mary and Caesar, rather than simply racial incompatibility. Here, class and respectability, determining factors in white women’s gender roles, are shown to be prerequisites for conservative racial politics. The Hobbses’ Abolitionist ideology and their expectation that Mary ought to adhere to nineteenth-century gender roles in her submission to Caesar produce a dissonance that the reader senses.
Squire Bryant and his wife, Nannie, possess the opposite ideological beliefs of Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs. The Bryants’ response to the novel’s interracial relationship is a recognition of the abstract principles of abolitionism, that slaves are humans and not property, but they do not act as though equality should be translated to an acceptance of ex-slaves as partners in marriage. Squire Bryant’s behavior toward Abolitionism is much more passive than progressive; he tells Rev. Cary: “I presume our views upon the real nature and influence of slavery are exceedingly similar. […] But] there are many things beside abolitionism that may have truth as its basis, that are equally unsuited to [radical presentations of those ideas]” (74). Bryant’s protection of Mary, his desire to shield her from the supposed advances of Caesar, are not surprising in light of his theoretical, rather than practical, belief in Abolitionism. In this example, the reader is confronted with the incongruities of Bryant’s pro-slavery/feminist ideology, which is similar to the narrator’s operative ideology.

As I have shown in earlier examples, the Carys model two opposing ideological stances, which mirror the other characters’ responses to the interracial engagement. Rev. Cary advocates for immediate and unconditional emancipation of slaves, but he also believes in traditional gender roles for women. However, when he realizes that Mary is engaged to Caesar, he takes a much more liberal approach to marriage and proposes that Mary’s inability to choose Caesar as her husband of her own accord was indicative of some sort of unacceptable exercise of power by Mr. and Mrs. Hobbs. In a radical shift, Cary suggests that romantic love ought to be the basis of marriage, and that equality should be a governing facet. As such, Rev. Cary’s ideology is show to be dynamic, and he is able to change and respond to situations that challenge his beliefs. Mrs. Cary initially supports more equitable relationships between husband and wife, but she seems threatened by the contemporary focus on slavery in Minden and tries to pass off her story of
womanly oppression in the framework of the Slave Narrative. Her continued disgusted attitude toward Caesar demonstrates the static and immovable way that her beliefs cannot dynamically respond to situations and circumstance that challenge her personal ideology. Both husband and wife exhibit a dissonance between their professed beliefs and their reactions to Mary and Caesar’s engagement, and the incongruities are acknowledged in the narrative, in order for the reader to ascertain which character is most deserving of sympathy.

Miss Dickey, who appears to be Mary’s foil, is the only cultured white woman in the town who would take her radical amalgamation theories to a practical level. Miss Dickey also espouses the same rash Abolitionist rhetoric that characterizes the Hobbses. As I previously discussed, Miss Dickey privately recants her radical Abolitionist practices, but she saves face by keeping it safe from public knowledge. While the narrator does not address Miss Dickey’s direct reaction to Mary and Caesar’s engagement, Miss Dickey’s own interest and experimentation with interracial attraction is another example of reaction to interracialism that the narrative examines. The consequences of Miss Dickey’s behavior, if not kept private, would threaten her social acceptability by redefining her as a sexual deviant. Through this example, the reader must evaluate the narrative’s suggestion that society, not nature, ultimately governs the supposed acceptability of interracialism.

Because most of the characters’ ideological dissonances are brought out by their reaction to the Mary and Caesar’s engagement, or to a similar ethnosexual infraction like Miss Dickey’s, “[s]exuality can be seen as a set of boundaries dividing a population according to sexual practices, identities, orientations, desires” (Nagel, Race 46). Mary and Caesar’s engagement transgresses the town’s ethnosexual expectations, for a time, and even though Mary was known as a pious, pure, virtuous girl from a young age, her forced engagement to Caesar changes her
public identity, much like Miss Dickey feels her social identity is threatened by her private encounters with Caesar. Mary laments to Rev. Cary: “I am sorry that my past life should not have refuted this scandal without the necessity of denial,” revealing how the townspeople assume white women’s (Mary’s and Miss Dickey’s) identities are tied to their (presumed) sexual practices (192). According to The Ebony Idol, society, not nature, constrains and governs Minden’s ethnosexual boundaries.

Mary’s Narrative

It is my understanding that the staging of ethnosexual boundaries represented by the novel’s interracial subject matter delineates and exposes the ways in which whiteness and patriarchy gain their power. In an attempt at rescuing The Ebony Idol from being relegated as a white-supremacist and, therefore, useless text in the American literary oeuvre, I devote the remainder of this chapter to an analysis of how the novel’s staging of the permeability of ethnosexual boundaries reveals the power of white patriarchy to interpellate sexual identity, and, as such, public identity, and how a more proper reading of these themes offers hints at reinvention, regardless of the novel’s ending. The Ebony Idol, as a text with a pro-slavery narrator, is a prime site for this revelation because, as Mason Stokes articulately explains,

[F]ocus on avowedly white-supremacist texts forces into relief the alliances on which white supremacy depends. [An author’s] concern with racial purity, for example, makes his novel a better place to understand how gender and sexuality make whiteness a literary and cultural possibility. [An author’s] single-mindedness on race exposes things about sexuality […] that might be left unseen in another work lacking [that author’s] polemical drive. (13)
Thus it is my aim to engage *The Ebony Idol* beyond a typical dismissal of the generic formula as indicative of imaginative failure, and instead, to uncover the ways that the heroine overcomes the barriers of whiteness and patriarchy and reinvents her destiny and her identity.

Historically, the romance novel is perceived to be a formulaic and oppressive genre, but this negative interpretation of the romance “rests on the assumption that because marriage is the ending of these romance novels, it is [their] governing element” (Regis 13). The critical community has predominately rejected the romance novel because it “extinguishes its own heroine” by ignoring “the full range of her concerns and abilities […] and den[y]ing her independent goal-oriented action outside of love and marriage;” thus the romance ostensibly “equates marriage with success and glorifies sexual difference” (Regis 10). However, the conjugal ending is not the most significant indication of a novel’s ideological bearings. The ending simply fulfills readerly expectations, while the barrier and the heroine’s successful overcoming of the barrier are the more significant structures of the romance. Pamela Regis explains:

In overcoming the barrier, the heroine moves from a state of bondage or constraint to a state of freedom. The heroine is not extinguished […]. Quite the contrary. The heroine is freed and the reader rejoices. […] The heroine of the romance novel, then, undergoes […] great liberations. She overcomes the barrier and is freed from all encumbrances to her union with the hero. […] Her freedom is a large part of what readers celebrate at the end of the romance. Her choice to marry the hero is just one manifestation of her freedom. This state of freedom is the opposite of the bondage that feminists claim is the result of reading romance novels – both for heroine and reader. (15-16)
In *The Ebony Idol*, the barrier and the ethnosexual boundaries coincide. Therefore, if the ethnosexual boundary is transgressed, even provisionally, the barrier has been overcome for that moment. Even an imaginative or suggested infraction is an important moment of liberation from social constraints and proves the permeability of that boundary, however temporarily it may exist in the end. In other words, the ethnosexual boundaries expose how sexuality shapes ethnicity and ethnicity shapes sexuality in *The Ebony Idol*, and the staging of those boundaries reveals modes of reinvention in spite of the novel’s formulaic ending.

While *The Ebony Idol* is marked by its problematic ideological preference for whiteness and patriarchy, by a preference for conservatism that leads to inactivity, and by the conflation of racial and sexual narratives, the novel still demonstrates a dangerous staging of the permeability of social class and race, the impermeability of which are the very foundation for social hierarchy in the South. It illustrates the performativity of ethnicity and sexuality that are merely sustained by social codes. In the romance, “[t]he female protagonist achieves freedom […] as she rejects various encumbrances imposed by the old society to arrive at a place where society stops hindering her” (Regis 30). In *The Ebony Idol*, Mary is able to slough off the hindrances of society because of her psychic integration and empowerment.

As Andrews notes in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and as I similarly perceive to be characteristic of Mary in *The Ebony Idol*, Douglass arrives at “the climactic moment of self-liberation” when the narrative “shifts the import of […] heroism from the realm of the physical […] to the sphere of the psyche” (Andrews 8). When Douglass, in the “breakthrough scene at the end of the *Narrative*, speaks his mind before whites,” he is “integrated intellectually and psychologically by this empowering speech act” (Andrews 8). Likewise, Mary becomes aware that the “keys that should unlock the treasures she coveted” lay
within her power, but her speech-act necessitates a “mental metamorphosis,” a kind of transference from lacking agency to possessing agency (Flanders 248). While the significance of these transformations differs greatly in their racial politics, the avenue to agency is strikingly similar.

In *The Ebony Idol*, Mary is confronted with the “fearful alliance” between her and Caesar without the aid of her hero, Frank Stanton (177). In order to save herself, she undergoes a “painful metamorphosis,” becoming “more self-reliant, less timid, […] mingl[ing] more freely with her acquaintances” as she becomes “conscious that the fearful alliance […] could and should be avoided” (177). She awakens to a sense of Self, and she is able to claim a greater sense of agency in her situation. She confesses to Rev. Cary: “I speak for myself, Mr. Cary; so far as I am personally concerned, I deny all that you may have heard!” (192). Mary’s denial of Minden’s social coding of her as “sexual deviant” allows a reading of sexuality as based in performance; her decision to determine whom she will marry gives her agency to exercise personal choice and separates her from the interventions of the public sphere which define her choice as an “ethnically loaded public act which others in the community claim the right to define, judge, and punish” (Nagel, *Race* 20).

Mary effects her own physical move to the Bryant home, once she is finally able to speak her mind and to articulate the threat to her own marital choice via her adopted parents’ actions. She trains in the ways of domestic womanhood at the Bryant home, and as a result of her performance, she transcends her previous social status and public image. Mary’s metamorphosis makes her worthy “to receive the courtesies of a common acquaintance” from Frank Stanton, and the reader is left to assume that she is now worthy to and presumably will receive Frank’s proposal of marriage (249). But, Mary permeates the upper-sphere of the social stratum only
based on the performance of a different kind of sexuality, which gestures to the performativity, not some essential identity, of sexuality. Mary’s performance of sexuality is much like Caesar’s ethnic performance, in that each one benefitted from their understanding of the permeability and performativity of these social constructions. By understanding the constructs and functions of race and gender, ultimately Mary and Caesar are able to permeate previously inaccessible social classes.

As such, this novel is not necessarily a failure of imagining a viable biracial American future, as has been traditionally posited about similarly problematic and rather embarrassing racist American literature. *The Ebony Idol*’s ideological dissonances outline the codependent power structures of whiteness and patriarchy, which are reflected in the aporias of proto-feminist, pro-slavery beliefs of many of the novel’s key characters. But, the novel also reveals how the hero and heroine resist these hegemonies by signifying to the performativity of ethnicity and sexuality. By glimpsing at the shape these ideologies take in the real world and investigating the ways in which hegemony can be troubled, the reader better understands the form of white, patriarchal hegemony and might combat it more effectively.

As previously mentioned, this project situates Flanders’s work as part of the American literary landscape that is constituted in part by “white supremacist texts,” but that also deserves to be taken “seriously as revealing and ambiguous textual productions” (Stokes 5). Like Douglass, who recognized that his accuser verifies the more important fact of his identity in the act of trying to morally justify the master, *The Ebony Idol* (inadvertently) stages opportunities for self-identification and self-liberation for women and slaves in the act of morally justifying anti-Abolitionist policies of a presumably free Northern city. In the narrator’s ironic final accusation that “the blood of a white man in Minden is now considered as valuable as the blood of a black,”
the narrator’s claim inherently suggests the more important fact that the value black man’s blood and the white man’s blood should be considered equal in value (Flanders 283). If Flanders’s novel seems to be both anti-slavery and pro-slavery, both feminist and sexist, both in support of crossing ethnosexual frontiers and yet anti-miscegenistic, it is, much like American society at large. By pressuring “the dissonances within white-supremacist literary representation,” *The Ebony Idol*, perhaps unwillingly, forces readers to participate in a larger dialogue about the constitution of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Stokes 5). After all, “to undermine patriarchy is to yank the scaffolding from black bondage; to elevate lower-class whites is to suggest the intellectual potential of slaves” (Jordan-Lake 52). An attack on any part of the method compromises the whole structure.

*The Ebony Idol* is a testimony to the historically complex, oppressive matrix in which race and gender in America functioned and still function. *The Ebony Idol* appears to be at once both anti-slavery and pro-slavery, both progressively feminist and yet advocates traditional gender roles because it reveals to the reader the limits of progressive thought in its entanglements with the status quo. It is my hope that the contradictions of an ideologically complex and, at times, ambiguous text, such as *The Ebony Idol*, might offer up much about the past, as well as affect the present. In no way does the current status of race relations in America indicate that the nation has become some sort of de-racialized, de-sexed utopia. If we aim to interrogate the ways in which the past might hold information for the present, *The Ebony Idol* cannot be dismissed simply as racist literature that is unworthy of critical interpretation because of its pro-slavery leanings or because it ends unhappily for the biracial couple. It must be engaged in such a way that it brings to light the codependence of race, gender, and class in order to understand the
power of white-supremacy in sustaining patriarchy and vice versa, even as they bear on the present.
CHAPTER 3
THE FORMAL STRUCTURE AND THE HAPPY ENDING: NARRATIVE
TRAJECTORIES IN METTA V. VICTOR’S MAUM GUINEA

As I suggested in the previous chapter, gender and racial interests are not necessarily mutually exclusive in popular, interracial romances from the Civil War years. I also proposed that the Civil War romance’s racial and gender-specific interests are challenged when interracial themes are explored in the text, regardless of how the author fulfills the prescribed happy ending. Often, critics of interracial romances conclude “these works celebrate the possibilities inherent in interracial unions, even though they tend to reinscribe the dominant segregated relationship model” (Ings 6). Fictional attempts to create hybrid identities or stage interracial love or marriage are usually thought to reproduce those dominant archetypes, rather than deconstruct the “racial and gendered paradigms they ostensibly meant to challenge” (Ings 4). In contrast, I maintain that the interaction between romance and interracialism within a shared narrative space creates tension, meaning that the conventions of interracialism—like authentic slave narrative, an anachronistic understanding of history/narrative, and complex interiorities/identities—are at odds with the constrictive tendencies of romantic conventions—like the stereotyped narratives of the slave and the moral heroine, History as chronological mythology, and the reliance on body fictions to create physical/metaphysical binaries, also called “corporeal semiotics, that system of signification that our bodies represent to others who read them as texts unauthored by ourselves” (Hines 38). The product of this tension between interracialism and the conventions of the romance results in the adaption of romantic conventions into ideologically mixed conventions because the themes of interracialism appear to infiltrate the conventions of the romance, modifying some of the most problematic facets of the romance genre. And, an identification of
the changes in these conventions is beneficial to the project of challenging the racial and gendered paradigms of hegemonic ideology because these very public, sentimental exercises were conditioning a communal definition of national identity.¹

In this chapter, I would like to continue to examine the ways in which interracialism in fiction alters negative or problematic romantic tropes. In my first chapter, The Ebony Idol foregrounds moments of agency for the black hero and the white heroine in the dissonances of the character’s ideological aporias,² and, in Metta V. Victor’s Maum Guinea and her Plantation “Children,” or, Holiday-Week on a Louisiana Estate: A Slave Romance (1861), I show that the histories of the Other—a byproduct of interracialism in the narrative—result in the same effects of narrative tension and generic/thematic complications that are produced in The Ebony Idol. In Maum Guinea, the narrative tension is a result of the paradoxical mixing of the slave narratives as the histories of the Other, within the constrictive, master narrative of the dominant romantic plot and its inevitable happy ending. What I am searching for in this chapter is how the marginalized, objectified characters tell their histories through the dominant narrative and produce similar ideological dissonances.

Many historical examples of the conflicting interdependence between the marginalized narrative and the dominant narrative exist. One example is from a historical account of the slave uprising dubbed the “Nat Turner Revolt.” In August of 1831, Nat Turner led a slave insurrection in Southampton, Virginia that horrified the Southern pro-slavery states. In that same year, an

² Southern plantation romances, like The Ebony Idol, are assumed to imprison white women in their “whiteness.” For example, they cannot marry a black hero because it would be “beneath” them, but if they marry the white hero, they have lost their potential for subversion and bid for freedom. However, in The Ebony Idol, Mary is given agency to choose her mate because she undergoes a mental transformation, or psychic re-integration. The romance ought to be understood as a celebration of the heroine’s triumph over the barrier and reclamation of the heroine’s agency to make her own free choice. In The Ebony Idol, the heroine capable of dynamic change is white; in Maum Guinea, the heroine is biracial.
account of Turner’s testimony titled *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was assembled and published by a white lawyer and slave owner, Thomas R. Gray (Greenberg 8). In *Confessions*, Gray necessarily occupies a potentially powerful position as the white editor of a slave’s narrative, and he utilizes his strategic position to put a negative spin on Turner’s account.³ Gray’s distorted framing of the Turner confession attempts to establish the ethical ramifications of slave rebellion as a benchmark for evaluating the Turner uprising’s significance and meaning. At stake here is control of the symbolic order of American society, because while “technically, only the rebel slaves (and a few free blacks) stood trial[,] […] Virginians swiftly realized that Nat Turner and his followers had put their state and the institution of slavery on trial” (Davis 4).

Gray defines the events of Turner’s rebellion by dividing and reducing the participants to representations of racial difference, and by allegorical extension, moral difference; thus Gray uses physical/metaphysical binaries as his ideological and narrative *modus operandi*. However, Nat Turner’s own narrative problematizes Gray’s version of the history of the American South because if Turner’s Revolt is a justified revolution and not the workings of a madman, then the American concept as a democracy and an idealized, egalitarian society are revealed to be illusions. As such, *Confession*’s conflict between oppositional narrative voices puts whiteness and its racialized symbolic order on trial, as well as American-ness and its symbolic order.

With this trial in mind, Gray’s attempt at redefining Turner’s rebellion as something other than slave insurrection is radically important to the hegemonic power of the master narrative. Gray’s arrogation of Turner’s confession in an effort to maintain social control via symbolic narrative control rests on the satisfactory reinvention of the historical events. Gray must explain

³ Kenneth Greenberg, in *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s P, 1996), points out several instances of Gray’s editorial “distortions.” As an example, in his Introduction, Gray characterizes Nat Turner’s revolt as the “offspring of gloomy fanaticism,” which, according to Greenberg, indicates the “hostile” ways in which Gray frames Turner and his accomplices (9).
that “madmen” revolts, not ordinary slaves, in order to maintain the South’s ethical and ideological justification of slavery. Therefore, Gray’s text vividly illustrates that race interests appear to be at odds with American national interests, similar way to how race and gender interests appear to be mutually exclusive, and as such, threatening narratives must be reinterpreted, reframed, and reabsorbed into the official account.

My objective in addressing this much-maligned account of Turner’s insurrection is to compare it with the editorialized slave narratives in Maum Guinea, so as to foreground the literary battle for control of the symbolic order in nineteenth-century American society as a battle over voice and historical recognition.⁴ Evidenced in Gray’s framing of Turner’s Revolt, the histories of the Other that are included in the American narrative exemplify “the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphysical, but always choked” black symbolic (Morrison 17). I propose that, in Maum Guinea, the narrativization of alternative histories reifies an American fear of the Other’s subversion of official, historical notions through those histories’ subversion of official representation, symbol, and text. Furthermore, Maum Guinea’s miscegenated narration, the product of narrative tension between dominant and marginalized voices, reveals that the happy ending of the romance does not render powerless the renegade narratives of the marginalized Other. In the narratives of the Other, although ventriloquized in white women’s interracial romances like Maum Guinea, are threads of the “Africanist presence” through which can be traced the very formation of an American white identity (Morrison 17).

⁴ Recent work on the impact of Gray’s account of Turner’s rebellion in the nineteenth-century imagination includes Mary Kemp Davis’s Nat Turner Before the Bar of Judgment: Fictional Treatments of the Southampton Slave Insurrection (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 1999); Davis combs through the centuries of fictional treatments of Turner’s Revolt, noting that “all of the novelists in [her] study derive their most fundamental information about Nat Turner from Gray’s overdetermined text” (5). Her project focuses on six novels that feature Turner, but Victor’s Maum Guinea is not one of them.
Metta Victor’s *Maum Guinea*, a Beadle dime novel, has been called a Chaucerian “antebellum romance of the southern plantation” (Stokes 51). Victor’s narrative technique mixes several internal past-tense slave narratives within a present-day frame narrative that revolves around a “dual romance plot” (Stokes 52). In the framing romance narrative, two pairs of lovers are temporarily denied their plans for marriage: the two mulatto slaves, Hyperion and Rose, fall in love but their plans to marry are thwarted by their respective owners, Philip Fairfax and Virginia Bell, who are also engaged. Virginia’s father, Judge Bell, owes a debt that creates one of those “hateful financial difficulties […] which disturb so many matches” (Victor 46).

Although Judge Bell cannot pay his bill, he plans to sell Virginia’s waiting maid, Rose, to his sinister creditor, Mr. Talfierro, in order to finance his daughter’s wedding. Distraught, Hyperion and Rose run away with Maum Guinea, an old slave woman whose story of her own interracial love affair with her master, Dudley, and the story of her octoroon daughter’s ostensibly doomed interracial affair are relayed to the reader during the lovers’ flight. Maum Guinea’s daughter, Judy, and her white husband, Ephraim Slocum, are the narratively buried third pair of lovers; in the North, Slocum keeps his wife’s ethnicity a secret in order to allow their interracial marriage to be successful. Their relationship’s conflict is presumably resolved when Ephraim Slocum, the white captain – who assisted the fugitive mother, Maum Guinea, and daughter, Judy, during their failed escape to the North—shows up at the Fairfax plantation and buys Maum Guinea from Philip Fairfax. Slocum takes Maum Guinea back North to reunite with her daughter and grandchildren, whom also presumably pass as white, and Guinea’s identity as slave grandmother is kept secret. The remainder of the frame narrative concludes when Philip Fairfax purchases Rose from Judge Bell and re-gifts the waiting maid back to his fiancé, thus resolving the
financial difficulties of the Bell household and neutralizing the sexualized threat of Mr. Talfierro.
The two pairs of lovers are married and live happily ever after.

Mixed Narratives

*Maum Guinea* presents the reader with several narratives: the unnamed, frame narrator relates the major plot of the romances of Hyperion and Rose and Virginia and Philip, Maum Guinea relays the romantic sub-plots of Maum Guinea and Dudley and Judy and Ephraim, and several different slave narrators tell the various stories of the internal slave narratives. *Maum Guinea*’s narrative modus operandi relies upon this particularly complex narrative organization that mixes voices and subject/object positions, which for my purposes I call “miscegenated narration,” in reference to the sort of unofficial slave narratives that are mixed with the official or mythologized romantic Narrative of the textual form.

In his critical interpretation, Mason Stokes believes that Victor’s “white-supremacist vision” blinds her to “the obvious asymmetry of power relations between the incomparable black/white [romantic] doublings” (64). He assumes that Victor is unaware of the discrepancy between her internal and frame narrators, which he believes is evidenced by how “the narrative conscience flits back and forth from master to slave, always eager to show the reader that all opinions on the matter, even those based in passion and irrationality, are at least understandable” (75). For Stokes, this penchant for empathy results in the moral enterprise of sympathetic identification in *Maum Guinea* becoming “the lynchpin in a cyclical, closed, and ultimately narcissistic circuit of reflections” (64). In contrast, I understand the flitting of narrative conscience to communicate how any readerly prejudice or preexisting bias can be, in some varying degree, disoriented by the ironic revelation that the sentiment of the reader can be easily manipulated to offer support for either side. In other words, in *Maum Guinea*, miscegenated
narration destabilizes the reader’s taken-for-granted subject position, or his or her comfortable relationship to the text. Moreover, *Maum Guinea*’s narratological and ideological confusion expresses the absurdity of a national narrative that offers a theory of natural social hierarchy in support of both democracy and racialized/sexualized oligarchy.

Due to the multiplicity of narrative voices, *Maum Guinea* puts forward an anti-slavery message from its slave narrators alongside its white characters’ and narrators’ racist logic. A disorienting mixing of different ideological positions results from the presence of different narrators within the same textual space. For example, the implied narrator often speaks in rather racist descriptions for an ostensibly anti-slavery narrative. At the story’s beginning, the narrative voice describes the slaves as,

Uncouth creatures, most of them, even the younger ones; while the old seemed more like caricatures of humanity than realities. Yet all of them – the young and the stout, and the old, distorted by hard labor beyond their natural ugliness, branded by servitude, withered by years – were as gay and free from care as a meeting of chattering apes in a Bornean forest. (Victor 16)

Here, the narrator offers an image of the slaves and their “bodily narratives,” the body being a temporally extended loci of experience that can yield up meaning if read properly, such that the history of the body, the total sum of its physical experiences in a variety of environment, produces a kind of legibility that is analogous to other kinds of narrative. This particular bodily narrative of the slaves, presented to the reader via the narrator’s voice, produces an amalgamation of pro-slavery rationale and anti-slavery rhetoric. The pro-slavery ideology postulates a natural social hierarchy necessitated by inevitable inequalities between human master and animalized slave (rhetorically as “creatures” and “apes”) and stabilized through the
institution of slavery. The anti-slavery rhetoric draws attention to the “hard labor” of slaves and the literal and figurative branding “of servitude;” as such, the power of racist ideology is challenged by its encounter with the bodily narrative of the slaves in the narrator’s voice. Furthermore, the novel’s multiplicity of narrative and ambiguous ideological positioning appears to be an ideological strategy in and of itself.

In another example, the narrator’s complicated description of the biracial body of Rose, the mulatta heroine, produces another moment of ideological amalgamation. The narrator describes Rose as “a kind of half-in-half, gold-colored soul, seeing there was so much white blood in her veins” (25), and attributes her “indescribable grace, which no thoroughly Caucasian blood could ever emulate” (43) to her “African blood.” The narrator’s original physical/metaphysical binary logic is later challenged by the narrator’s own descriptive narration of Rose as not simply “a creature – a slave – […] but a] beautiful woman” (44). Stereotyping Rose as the “African” beauty sets the reader up to expect a narrative with a pro-slavery stance; only, the obligatory stereotype is then tested by the romantic compulsion to create sympathy for the romance’s heroine. The narrator’s description of Rose paradoxically affirms both the nonwhite, subhuman slave as the “African” beauty, while upholding her as an example of true “womanliness,” as she is both the novel’s damsel-in-distress and heroine.

In this southern plantation romance, fictional encounters with the bodily narratives of the plantation’s slaves also produce ideological ambiguity. That ambiguity challenges not only the force of American racial ideology but also gestures to the hegemonic power behind the codependent racial and national ideologies. If the objective of sentimental romance is to cause the reader to “feel right,” Maum Guinea’s sentimental thrust obscures the presumed ideological one.
In her Introduction, Victor assures her audience, “The several slave-stories are given as veritable historical transcripts. That of Nat Turner’s insurrection is drawn from the most reliable authorities” (iv). However, it appears that Victor actually relies on slave stereotypes popularized by minstrel tropes and performances to inform her supposedly veritable accounts of slave stories, more so than she utilizes more reliable, historical sources, which I will address shortly. What I am particularly interested in, here, is examining how Maum Guinea’s internal slave narratives both inhabit and resist the frame narrator’s articulation of their (in)humanity through minstrel performance, tropes, and songs. I see the slave’s stories violently resisting appropriation into the master narrative, both literally and literally, thus making the internal slave narratives of Maum Guinea useful for examining how “black writers resist, revise, and retaliate against minstrelsy’s and [slavery’s] various aggressions” (Richards, Whites in Blackface 117). Jason Richards identifies several embedded slave narrators from a group of novels contemporary to and published after Maum Guinea, who, as part of a growing character type, “tap minstrelsy’s revolutionary energies to challenge a white, hegemonic nationalism” (Whites in Blackface 117). 5 Maum Guinea’s embedded slave narrators also retaliate against the hegemonic racial ideology that minstrelsy helped develop, revealing the inconsistencies and disjunctions of national mythology or History—used to support both anti-slavery and pro-slavery ideologies—by rewriting and reevaluating the history of slave violence. According to Richards, these counter-histories serve “as an impetus for rebellion,” because “much as violence was used to enforce slavery and black performance, it is also needed to change the slave system” (Whites in Blackface 140, 142). Like Gray’s attempted appropriation of Turner’s story was meant to neutralize the threat that Turner’s counter-narrative presented to the History of slavery in the

---

5 Jason Richard’s identifies Hannah Crafts’s The Bondwoman’s Narrative, Frank Webb’s The Garies and Their Friends, and Martin Delany’s Blake as works that use minstrelsy to challenge white, hegemonic nationalism.
American South, the slave narrators of *Maum Guinea* threaten the stability of the novel’s official ideological stance and the national narrative that *Maum Guinea* engages.

**Johnson’s Story**

In *Maum Guinea*, one of Fairfax’s field slaves, Johnson, tells how his mother and her mistress were pitted against each other by the master/husband, as a response to minstrelsy’s image of “the plantation as one big happy family, with masters and mistresses as parents and the slaves as their children” (Toll 75). Johnson is the biracial son of the master, “a Member of Congress,” and because of the master’s favoritism toward Johnson’s mother, a “fifteen year ole” house-servant, the “missus hated her” (Victor 28, 29). Johnson muses: “Ef he hadn’t favored her beyond the rest, and give her presents, and sot her up ‘fore his own wife, I don’t s’pose missus would ‘ave got so bad” (29). Johnson also reveals that despite the master’s sexual violence, by the time “she were more’n twenty year ole,” Johnson’s mother has grown to love her master/partner (30). Thus Johnson’s mother’s “unvirtuous” activity is symbolically complicated by the assertion that an act of adultery or rape could be called “love”—“love” understood to be convoluted by the particular relational restrictions of American slavery.\(^6\) While Johnson’s mother does not appear to have invited the master’s sexual relationship, Johnson’s narration of their love story transforms the relational power dynamics by renaming it as (interracial) “romance,” and by offering such a relationship as an acceptable nineteenth-century romance since his mother is more accurately a loving, virtuous woman and worthy partner.

Johnson’s narrative act of revision serves as an impetus for rhetorical rebellion. He renames a sexually assaulted black woman as virtuous and resists the stereotype of the licentious black woman. This trope was also perpetuated in minstrel shows, where mulatta characters were

---

\(^6\) Also demonstrated in the novel’s other complex exploration of interracial love between the title character, Maum Guinea, and her master, Dudley.
“almost always described as extremely beautiful and highly desirable” like white women, and only black women had “undesirable traits” (Toll 76). And while Johnson’s story challenges the pro-slavery myth of the unvirtuous black woman, it also problematizes the anti-slavery myth of the universal female experience, which sentimental anti-slavery writers often relied on to foster sympathetic identification between their white audience and the black or mulatta heroine. Often, anti-slavery rhetoric in romances attempted to conjure up sympathetic identification between white and black women via the supposedly shared obstacle to freedom of choice in partner and in marriage; however, Johnson’s articulation of the mistress’s jealousy reveals the perceived necessity to sustain racial hierarchy, even between women, and the violence used to maintain it.

Johnson is telling his story to the group of Fairfax slaves who have all decided to sit around and listen to each other’s stories, one story being shared during each day of the Holiday Week. Johnson’s story has a direct implication for Rose and Hyperion, as Victor has set up the internal slave narratives to act as commentary on the frame romance of Hyperion and Rose. Hyperion and Rose serve as surrogates for the novel’s reader who could model the correct emotional and ethical response to Johnson’s narrative, and practice applying that “right feeling” to the more complex and convoluted ideological thrusts in the frame narrative’s romantic plot. Therefore, when Johnson’s story challenges the pro-slavery myth of the licentious female slave, it is done so in order that the reader might conclude that the promiscuous stereotype is a trope used to justify the sexual assault of black women and the general devaluation of black womanhood.\(^7\) When the frame narrator states, “the idea of modesty and virtue in a Louisiana colored-girl might well be ridiculed; as a general thing, she has neither; and who is to blame for it we do not propose to argue;” the implication is that the reader would already know who is to

\(^7\) See bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End P, 1981), on the general devaluation of black womanhood during and after slavery.
blame by virtue of previously “experiencing” Johnson’s challenging narrative (120). Likewise, the narrator suggests that Rose has learned the fashion of virtue but has no true virtue, because Rose ostensibly copies the virtue of the white women with whom she has grown up. The narrator implies Rose only possesses the aura of virtue, which ironically her master, Judge Bell, cannot entirely separate from the authentic virtue he believes that the white women of his home possess. And while it does not occur to Bell that perhaps all womanly virtue is a performance, the reader has learned from Johnson’s story that sort of virtue is simply rhetorical power play.

The frame narrator also attempts to conjure up sympathetic identification between white and black women via this shared obstacle to an equitable marriage. The narrator describes Hyperion and Rose as having, “very much after the fashion of whiter and freer lovers, […] solemnly promised to marry each other—provided they were allowed” (20). Unfortunately, their unwilling owners thwart their plans for matrimony and the pitiful Rose is distraught. The narrator explains: “almost for the first time in her life, she wished she were not a slave—which was very unreasonable in her, for there are many free white people who cannot marry whom they please nor when they please, nor have a silk tissue dress to be married in” (21). However, Johnson’s story reveals the dissimilarities in romantic conjugal obstacles for black women and white women. The missus tortures, whips, freezes and starves both young Johnson and his mother in effort to be rid of the humiliating memories of her husband’s continual infidelity. Under duress, Johnson’s mother flees, with Johnson in tow, only to freeze to death in the woods in an act of self-sacrifice. The consequences of the ostensible romance between Johnson’s mother and her master—cast in the abusive and violent rhetoric of slavery: “scarred up with whipping,” “feet froze wid bein’ kep’ out one col’ night,” and “a-whippin’ and a-starvin’” (30)—serve as a warning for the hero and heroine’s aspiration to marry “after the fashion of whiter and
freer lovers,” reminding both his listeners and the reader that racial interests are not always secondary to gender oppression, and that real violence often sustains racial hierarchy between women (20).

While Johnson’s narrative reveals much of the violence needed to sustain slavery and racial hierarchy, it also proposes that slave insurrection or violence is at least one possible answer to the violence of slavery. Returned to his master’s house, Johnson works up a plan to avenge his mother’s death by killing the mistress. Johnson explains, “You see, I felt so, and you can’t expect poor, ignorant black folks feel t’ings right; ‘twas wrong, berry wrong, but fact is, ebery t’ing was wrong, and I couldn’ get it right, nohow,” which articulates a moral confusion that the reader also feels from encountering the ideologically mixed narratives (32). But, Johnson relies upon the reader to interpret his story’s ethical confusion, rather than taking the narrator’s initiative to moralize. Two other times in the short chapter, Johnson explains: “I don’t blame Missus Jonsing now so much as I did once—but ‘twas wrong, all round, and dat’s a fact” (29); “‘twas all wrong all ‘roun’, anyhow” (30). Johnson’s narrative actually draws power from the ambiguities and the disguises of partial explication by forcing the reader to practice sorting out the complex responsibility for violence—whether responsibility lies in the white man’s sexual violence, the white woman’s violent harassment of the slave mother, or the intended violence of the biracial son, who is a human testament to the abuses allowed under patriarchy and slavery. In signifying on the master’s violence, the mistress’s violence, and on his own violence, Johnson’s narrative indicates the violence needed to perpetuate and to change the system. His story causes both his slave listeners and the reader to reevaluate what they know of the history of slave violence and insurrections’ ethical credibility.
Scipio’s Story

Continuing an examination of the ways that the internal narratives both inhabit and resist minstrel tropes, performance, and song, I move to Scipio’s story. Scipio prefaces his audience—the same group of slaves from the Fairfax plantation, with particular emphasis for Hyperion and Rose—with the explanation that he is generally pleased with his lot in life, provided he has “‘nuff to eat,” that he is not injured while working, and “nuthin’ don’t happen to [his] banjo” (Victor 49). He reflects the stereotype of the contented slave, explaining, “All I know is, might as well laugh as cry. I’s a happy nigger, naturally” (49). However, “the myth of the contented slave, a stereotype that minstrelsy helped develop” is a façade that Scipio uses to disguise the violent and rebellious insinuations of his narrative (Richards, *Whites in Blackface* 140).

Scipio’s narrative begins with how, as a boy, he was always playing tricks on his master and getting in trouble for it. He defines himself as “onlucky” for upsetting the order and peace of the plantation (Victor 51). As a young man, he is sold for being such a bother, and although he has a nice master, who hardly beats him, he cannot refrain from playing tricks on him as well. In the meantime, Scipio falls in love with the neighbor girl, Dinah, and finds himself in competition with a “dandy” for her affections. After a month of competition, the lovers’ triangle is broken up; the other fellow wins Dinah’s hand, but also receives a beating from the sore loser, Scipio. Scipio’s slave audience, and presumably the reader, agrees with him that a banjo is the better alternative to a wife; after all, “w’at’s the use o’ wife or chil’ren, w’en you don’ know w’en dey may be took away” (54). He is then requested to play a song called “Uncle Gabriel,” one of the Fairfax slaves’ favorites.

Scipio’s narrative, more overtly than Johnson’s, appropriates the minstrel mode to challenge the slave stereotypes that were created in part by minstrelsy. In brief, nineteenth-
minstrelsy has two major black figures: Zip Coon and Jim Crow. “In basic terms, Jim Crow represented the plantation slave, while Zip Coon parodied the urban black dandy;” rural Jim Crow was poor, silly, and generally incompetent, while the aspiring aristocrat, Zip Coon, was more ostentatious and, at times, almost arrogant (Richards, *Whites in Blackface* 7). In his preface, Scipio would appear to be a Jim Crow-like figure; however, Scipio’s story signifies on the trope of the contented slave. Scipio’s “troubles” and the “tricks” he plays are, he claims, part of his innate character—being “born onlucky” (Victor 51). But, it is not simple clumsiness that results in his troubling of the master. Scipio’s metonym of being “onlucky” is made to represent all of the ways that he actively troubles the master. He hides the intent of his troubling actions by renaming those resisting behaviors as something familiar to the master, and spreads information to his audience about how to trouble the white master and get away with it. For example, he “couldn’t raise no chickens, ‘cause [he] ‘tole so many eggs” and he “kept de little pigs squealin’ awful, and lame de turkies t’rowin’ ‘tones at ‘em,” or he would “kindle de fire in de liberary wid de paper [his master had] been a-writin’ on,” “teal his newspapers w’at he put away berry karful to make kites of,” and “puts massa’s cologne on […] and tries to shabe myself wid his razer, and get found out by cutting my face orful” (50, 51). Scipio reminisces: “I got lots of w’ippins, and dey made me smart—dat’s so—and I hain’t got ober it yet” (50). Scipio actively participates in a resistance of the master narrative by signifying on that narrative’s usual tropes of slave contentedness, silliness, and incompetency. However, he names the subversive rebellion in words that fit within the master’s schemata, which disguises his rebellion. Scipio convinces his master not to punish him, for it would be unjust to discipline him for his very nature. Scipio understands what his master expects from an inferior being, and utilizes the symbolic order to his

---

own advantage, much like Caesar; Scipio states, “but it didn’ prevent my keeping fat and
comfo’table, ‘kase, as I said, it’s better to laugh dan cry” (51). Scipio’s laugh signifies his
response to his jokes or “tricks,” not contented happiness. And by playing into the ideology of
slavery, Scipio is able to speak more publicly, but to his own audience, of slave rebellion.

Another significant way that slaves passed along subversive information was through
song. Scipio concludes his narrative with a famous minstrel song, “Uncle Gabriel,” which
recounts two slave insurrections, including Nat Turner’s revolt. Scipio’s takes this minstrel
song, already a white parody of slave’s plantation songs and another instance of white
editorializing of slave history, and turns it into a battle cry, a song of insurrection. William John
Mahar describes “Uncle Gabriel” as “a mock heroic tale” that “distorts the history of Turner’s
insurrection so much that the significance of the slave revolts is trivialized” (246). Mahar
understands the minstrel song to be “purposefully contrived to treat history humorously” (250).
Thus, in Mahar’s point-of-view, Scipio would have been called upon to sing a song that mocks
slave history, seeks to alleviate white anxiety, and produces History from rewriting the events of
Nat Turner’s rebellion.

In contrast, I interpret Scipio’s singing of “Uncle Gabriel” as an elegiac refrain. “Uncle
Gabriel” tells the story of the “chief of the insurgents, / Way down in Southampton” who was
hung for his rebellion, not the story of a massacre of white families and the ensuing fear of a
madman/slave at large that would have been characteristic of how the master narrative explains
slave rebellion (Victor 54). Also, each chorus ends with the refrain “Hard times in ole
Virginny;” the “hard times” reference Nat Turner’s hanging, not his rebellion. As I understand,
“Uncle Gabriel” is the lyrical lament of the hanging and death of the “Gineral;” thus, the song’s
purpose would be to remember the tragic death of one of the most popular slave insurrection leaders in the nineteenth century (55).

Scipio’s song is bookended with the observation that a wife and children are undesirable for a slave man and the literal articulation of insurrection. Prior to Scipio’s singing, Maum Guinea mutters: “Better stick to yer banjo,” and her sentiment is echoed by “a woman of middle-age” who concurs: “Ho! yes! ye'd better stick to yer banjo” (54). By sticking to his banjo, Scipio rejects the prescriptive social order of the family, instead choosing the banjo as a weapon to protect him from having to enact the heartbreaking performance of the slave’s ostensible family, as all the slaves agree that they cannot have permanent families. After all, “w’at’s the use o’ wife or chil’ren, w’en you don’ know w’en dey may be took away” (54). Seemingly inspired by Scipio’s singing, Rose asks one of the other slaves if she ever heard of “black folks rising up and murderin’ their masters?” (55). She is promptly hushed, and told “our massas wouldn’ like to oberhear sech talk—we’d all be punished, like enough” (55). Rose’s direct question concerning the existence of slave violence is immediately silenced, but Scipio’s signification of slave subversion and insurrection still communicates the very thoughts that Rose articulates. Thus Scipio’s narrative and his song draw power from the ambiguities of his significations, his metonymic re-naming, and his reclamation of the significance of revolutionary violence at the literary and literal levels.

Sophy’s Story

A narrative of slave rebellion, Sophy’s story examines her husband’s participation in one of the most famous of all slave insurrections, Nat Turner’s revolt. In the wake of Hyperion’s realization that Rose could be sold away and his powerlessness to sop it, Sophy tells to her audience—Maum Guinea, Hyperion, and Rose—the story of how she and her husband, Nelson,
had their children sold away. Nelson’s breakdown, a result of his helplessness in the face of grievous heartbreak, precipitates his involvement with Nat Turner and his historical revolt.9 Interestingly, Sophy’s story supports Gray’s claim that madmen led Turner’s rebellion, but Sophy points to slavery and its brutal violence as the true initiators of Nelson’s psychic break. Sophy blames slaveholders, not slaves, for the violence of slave rebellion because it is those who practice slavery who affect the psychological madness that leads to insurrection and murder. Nelson joins the accomplices, helping to plan the violent Southampton uprising, but is eventually sentenced to death by hanging along with the rest of the conspirators.

Sophy suggests that Nelson was in some way predisposed to a violent response to the abuses of slavery because he “wasn’ like some niggers; he couldn’ b’ar everyt’ing, and nebber seem to feel it. He couldn’t laugh and sing, and take t’ings easy, no matter what happen. He didn’ like knocks and whippins, and raising chil’ren for market, like as they was chickens and pigs” (89). In these rhetorical expositions, Nelson appears to embody the opposite temperament of the “contented slave,” as represented by Scipio. Scipio brags of being able to bear every inhumanity of slavery with a smile; Nelson cannot. Scipio laughs about everything—the good and the bad; Nelson cannot. Despite their differences, though, the slaves’ responses give rise to revolution. Scipio said whippings only made him smarter, and he utilized his knowledge of the master’s temperament to his advantage. Nelson’s beatings prompted the unhappy slave to seek out a means of overthrowing his master. Thus, Scipio describes to other slaves a way to subversively trouble the master, while Nelson’s rebellion is more overt and violent.

Also in the narrative, Sophy’s act of rhetorical revision serves as an incentive for rebellion. Sophy pointedly asks for her audience’s opinion on the morality of violent rebellion,

---

as she considers the consequences at large for the American community. She articulates the anxiety white people felt, waiting for Turner to be found, and how he was found and hung. Sophy explains: “When he was hung and dead, dar was rejoicing in de land. De white folks breafed free ag’in” (98). However, she frames the relief that Turner’s death brought to the white community with a reminder to Hyperion and Rose that “in Virginni dar’s plenty of white blood mixed wid ours, you all know. Dey murdered der own fadders, der own brudders and sisters, no doubt, many times; but w’at were dese, more dan oders, ‘cept to make ‘em feel more spiteful” (93). Resonating with the fratricidal rhetoric of 1861, the year of the novel’s publication, Victor’s slave narrator reminds her listeners that the slave’s history is already replete with fearful stories of fratricide. The white community’s anxiety and restlessness, brought on by the threatening presence of inter-regional war, stems from a fear of intra-familial violence that had been a realization of the American slave community for decades. Slaves lived with an ever-present history of “‘hundreds and hundreds’” of blacks who were shot, hanged, whipped, burned or “‘butchered’” “‘widout judge or jury’” (Victor 95, 96). White Americans had been murdering their (black) relatives for over a century, and it is that fratricide which “Sophy’s story” articulates. Sophy’s story rewrites the insurrection of Turner’s rebellion as a Southern fratricide necessitated by decades of oppression and fear.

Sophy’s pointed consideration of the ethics of insurrection illuminates another complex ideological point navigated by a slave narrator in the novel’s sub-plots. And, again, Hyperion and Rose’s reactions serve to inform the reader’s response to the novel’s convoluted impulses, while the sub-plots of the slave narratives give opportunity for the reader to practice applying that “right feeling” so that the more complex and convoluted ideological thrusts in the frame narrative might be more correctly determined. When Sophy concludes the story of Nelson’s
capture and eventual hanging by questioning the ethics of her husband’s violence, she muses:
“All de dark spots slaves hide ‘way in de’re hearts, and say nuthin’, come to light den—all de
fires break tru’ de ashes den, and blaze up turrible. Do you t’ink it was right, my friends?” (93).
Hyperion answers in the affirmative and Rose in the negative, reflecting the problematically
ambiguous ethics of insurrection. As such, Hyperion and Rose still model the desirable ethical
and affective response to Sophy’s narrative for the reader, which is deliberately complex, as
slave insurrection and Civil War are also rather ethically obscure.

By refusing to choose if slave insurrection is a viable, ethical response to the violence of
slavery, Victor signifies a more authentic response to a very complex issue. Sophy’s narrative
also complicates an interpretation of Nelson’s, and by extension Hyperion’s, responses as
justified revenge. Historically, the white master would justify violence against the slave,
presumably blinded to the ties of nature, or their familial ties, by his prescriptive belief in
American race ideology. But, the slave who would bring violence against the master must also
justify the morality of his aggression. If insurrection would be called “revenge,” the slave bases
his justification on the natural right of revolution. However, if insurrection would be called
“fratricide” and “murder,” the intertwined, interrelated history of black and white Americans is
more accurately articulated, but at the risk of losing a sympathetic cause. Sophy’s narrative
illuminates the interdependency and interrelatedness of slave history and white American
History through her rhetorical play on “insurrection” as “fratricide,” but Sophy’s story refers to
insurrection as fratricide at the risk of losing readers’ sympathy for slave rebellion. To wax
poetic on the ethics of revolution would jeopardize the authenticity of the slave narratives, slave
history, and slave narrators. As a result, Maum Guinea can answer both “yes” and “no” to the
question of the slave’s right to insurrection, while still retaining the authentic voices of the slave characters and also satisfactorily acknowledging the ideological complexity of insurrection.

Therefore, Sophy’s story is another example of how miscegenated narration works to oppose the generically mandated overt moral clarity of the sentimental novel. Sophy’s story challenges the kind of white hegemonic nationalism expressed in Thomas Gray’s version of Turner’s rebellion, by signifying the multifaceted ethical ramifications of slave insurrection. Evidenced as fratricide, insurrection challenges History’s hegemony and the exclusive white claim to American/familial identity at the expense of a moral justification to revolution. But Sophy’s story never overtly attempts to justify insurrection as ethical fratricide, which salvages the authenticity of the slave narrator and the radical ideological thrust of the slave narrative. As such, Sophy’s narrative draws power from the ethical ambiguities of pro-slave ideology, while resisting appropriation into the master discourse.

The National Narrative

As I mentioned earlier, Stokes categorizes Maum Guinea as a sentimental romance, “firmly embedded in a literary tradition that demands a ‘happy ending;’” he suggests that Victor remains imaginatively imprisoned by the generic (unsuccessful) conclusion because “the two main slave characters remain happily in slavery” (56).10 Disappointed with Victor’s ostensible inability to mold or transcend the formulaic genre within which she participates, Stokes proposes that the modus operandi of the sentimental form forced Victor to create a “warped” pro-slavery ending for her main slave characters, and it is “her eager participation within that genre or her failure to rise above it” that Stokes particularly faults (80). However, I propose that the frame

---

10 Victor exposes her own difficulty with generically categorizing her novel, explaining that the “guise of romance” is necessary to “reproduce the slave […] with historical truthfulness” (iii). Victor’s preoccupation with verifying the “truthfulness” or “that [which] is real in the narrative” calls attention to her desire to substantiate the reliability of the “real” slave narratives and to defend the romantic fiction of the frame story (iii).
story’s ending is in no way indicative of the novel’s conclusion, because not all of the multiple narrative threads are complete or resolved. While I accept Stokes’s explanation of *Maum Guinea*’s “schizophrenic generic identity—a pro-slavery/anti-slavery ‘romance of fact’—[as suggestive of] the difficulties in containing or diffusing the social conflict that it narrates,” I would argue that the novel’s “warped” generic ending allows the reader to grapple with the still-unresolved racial issues which the unanswered internal interracial narrative—“Maum Guinea’s story”—generates (Stokes 57). As an illustration of the imagined viability of a biracial community, the unresolved interracial relationship of Maum Guinea is much more speculative and fragmentary than the ostensibly didactic frame story’s happy ending.

By staging interracial romances, *Maum Guinea* takes on the consequential endeavor of imagining a feasible biracial community; thus the likelihood of various imagined possibilities should include an analysis of the narrative lines that remain unresolved. The reader must see each of the subsidiary narratives as independent (not dependent), individual (not communal), and peculiar (not repetitive) experiences. This interpretive position, in contrast with Stokes’s point-of-view, exposes the frame story’s supposedly happy ending as contrived or warped because of the paradoxical presence of other narrative threads with similar conflicts but without similarly happy endings. By offering competing narrative perspectives within the same temporal and narrative space, Victor’s fictional community expresses the cacophony of ideologically produced narrative that plagues the national narrative as a conceptual whole. As a model for exploring the national narrative, *Maum Guinea*’s ostensibly happy ending is but a signifier of difference by indirectly gesturing to the unraveled, unresolved endings of the marginalized narratives.

I choose to read the text out of its internal chronology because, without fragmenting the chronologically driven plot, the hegemonic ideologies of the novel might appear to dominate.
However, the subsidiary narratives’ troubling effect is always already appropriating, while being appropriated by, the nationalistic impulses of the romance. An anachronistic interpretation of the novel reveals the fluid fluctuation in stances produced by ideological mixing. As a consequence, the novel is more clearly shown to be at once both pro-slavery and anti-slavery, both in support of the interracial couple and in opposition to them, both feminist and traditional in its gender politics. These competing impulses are in fact part of a continuous dynamic of forming, un形成ing, and reforming ideological patterns and positions. These conflicting impulses both “resist and conform to various aspects of national identity while they test various catalysts to psychic fragmentation” and “racial [and gendered] barriers to self-making” (Richards, “Imitation Nation” 204). Because only Hyperion and Rose’s happy ending satisfies the generic formula, the framing narrative’s conclusion is not simply an impulse to contain or diffuse potential conflict, but instead, is a sign of the possibilities of miscegenated narration. Miscegenated narration appears to resist the myth of the national narrative, which seeks to appropriate, unify, and absorb all narratives into the official story, or into a happy ending. By virtue of comparison, the disconcerting, contrived happy ending of the frame romance actually makes the unresolved endings of the internal narratives even more apparent.

Maum Guinea’s Story

These conflicting ideological impulses converge in the final slave narrative, the story of Maum Guinea. If stagings of interracial romance and the fictional success of interracial marriages indicate the viability of a biracial community, Maum Guinea’s narrative signifies a difference in the slave’s perception of the value of interracial marriage. The novel paradoxically interprets marriage, interracial and intraracial, as both a signifier of freedom and liberty and an obstacle to the possibility of freedom. Stokes argues that, in the novel, “marriage simultaneously
obliterates the possibility of freedom and, more ominously, makes that possibility no longer a moral necessity,” but he focuses on the ending of *Maum Guinea’s* frame narrative, the romance of Hyperion and Rose (80). In contrast, by examining Hyperion and Rose’s narrative thread in relation to the internal interracial romances told in *Maum Guinea’s* story, the internal narrative reveals a much more conflicted and complex concept of interracial marriage in the novel.

In *Maum Guinea’s* story, successful, desirable marriages are rooted in a freedom to choose one’s mate, rather than some imagined racial compatibility. *Maum Guinea* stages several successful and unsuccessful intraracial and interracial relationships; the strategic combination of partners, which are paralleled according to their racial identities, would suggest, in the novel’s experiment with racialized variables in marriage, that race is less significant than might be supposed. The paralleled interracial and intraracial romances imply that free choice predicts the success of marriage more so than racial compatibility. However, *Maum Guinea’s* story reveals that the free, unrestricted pursuit of any presumably more desirable heterosexual relationship initiated by a woman is a myth. According to *Maum Guinea*, no woman—black or white, slave or free—is free to pursue any sexual relationship she desires; for a woman, the selection of a mate necessitates a successful navigation of class, race, and gender paradigms, the chief of which is the economic barrier of class. *Maum Guinea* portrays the limited access women have to the power of self-determination as a problem of a limited right of entry to participate in the economic sphere.

In *Maum Guinea’s* story, the trafficking of black women is exposed as economically based transactions between men. When Hyperion wishes he was white, so that he could enjoy the economic ability to marry Rose, *Maum Guinea* says, “‘Oh, yis!’ scornfully, ‘you’d be a human bein’ then, you know’” (Victor 73). Hyperion understands economic power to be the power
necessary to determine one’s mate, and he bemoans that power to be the sole privilege of white men. However, Rose is the currency of the economic exchange that Hyperion would seek to make and that Talfierro has made. Hyperion’s jealousy for the white man’s economic power or capabilities causes his frustration. His concern for Rose is not concern for her safety or well-being, so much as it is jealousy over his inability to possess her himself. She is a part of the financial economy, and possessing her would signify a rise in a man’s economic status.

Furthermore, it is not only women with “African blood,” but white women as well, who are trafficked in and at the mercy of economic exchanges between men in the novel. According to the narrator, if Talfierro had expressed interest in Virginia, Judge Bell probably would have given his own daughter in exchange for the forgiveness of his debt (100). Thus, not only is Rose’s value expressed in financial terms and her purity or attractiveness put out for sale, but Virginia’s is as well. Furthermore, it might be logical to assume that Virginia should be more of an equal by virtue of her more privileged race; however, Virginia acknowledges her own exclusion from economic power in her eventual acceptance of Talfierro’s pearl necklace, which is her presumed acquiescence to his claim on her waiting maid. She cries, “I wish Mr. Talfierro had never seen us! I wish he had his necklace back,” articulating her own powerlessness to do other than accept it (121). And while it appears that Virginia, as the prototypical rich, white Southern belle, should weld the freedom to determine her conjugal partner, Virginia is so deeply invested in the slave economy that only in acquiescing to Rose’s sale can she finance and thus have her lavish wedding and desired husband, Philip.11

---

11 As such, “barrenness” in Maum Guinea’s story describes the unproductive feminine (sympathetic) feeling from the Mistress—that womanly feeling which should have protected the vulnerable female slave from sexual harassment—and the unproductive land, which was the Mistress’s means of financial capital and way of accessing the economic sphere. The centripetal force of moral, virtuous femininity emanating from the white women’s domestic sphere, which hypothetically protected the female slave, is compromised in such an exchange.
In *Maum Guinea*, the women cannot be financial equals because they are excluded from meaningful participation in the public/economic sphere. Only Maum Guinea is able to transgress the boundaries of the domestic sphere, which works to bar all women from economic opportunity, and she also shows skill in navigating a public sphere that was thought to be the purview only of men. As a young woman, Maum Guinea gets involved in a sexual relationship with her master’s son Dudley, and their forbidden relationship quickly evidences all of the abuses historically endured in interracial plantation “romances,” real and fictional, by black women: violence, neglect, sexual harassment, and character defamation. However, Maum Guinea understands the power inherent in accumulating money, and she believes she will be able to give her daughter a chance to be saved from the dual horror of being “a woman, and a slave” (157). Ever conscious of her daughter’s timely journey towards womanhood, Maum Guinea obsesses over the kind of husband she wants for Judy. While Maum Guinea wishes her daughter’s future marriage to resemble that of “happy white lovers,” she only does so under the impression that she can buy for Judy a marriage that would be “as fine and as happy as [those white lovers’ marriages]” (157).

Maum Guinea’s foray into the economic sphere through her procurement of gainful employment produces jealousy and envy in Missus Dudley, Maum Guinea’s mistress and master’s wife. Through her own skills, Maum Guinea raises capital; she explains: “I sewed nights for rest de serbants: I raised chickens and vegetables of my own dat I never tasted—I sol’ ‘em in de market, and laid de money way” (157). Her possession of money symbolically represents her possession of self—as to be human is to be able to possess property. And while Missus Dudley displays economic ignorance, Maum Guinea exercises economic prudence. When questioned about the money she has managed to save up to buy Judy’s presumably happy
marriage, Maum Guinea tells Missus Dudley that her money is “out at interest” (171), and despite the fact that Guinea is lying about where her money is, she still shows some financial suavity in recognizing the financial possibilities of her new economic influence. Putting her money out at interest is a financial skill of patient waiting that seems to be a weakness of her imprudent, impulsive rival, whose only response is, “‘Oh!’” (171). Once Missus Dudley discovers that Maum Guinea possesses more economic power than she does—a rare reversal of women’s racial and economic stations in the nineteenth-century South—she decides to find out the source of Maum Guinea’s financial acquisitions. Missus Dudley questions Maum Guinea: “‘you’ve got a t’ousand dollars have you, cook? Rea’ly, you’re richer dan I am. W’ar do you keep it’” (171). Missus Dudley’s acknowledgement of Maum Guinea as cook signifies both Guinea’s position, as a uniquely skilled slave within the plantation community, and Guinea’s possession of an exchangeable commodity within the market economy, while Missus Dudley possesses no such desirable skill. Even in the power dynamics between women in the domestic sphere, Missus Dudley specifically lacks the ability to engage in power transactions because she cannot even produce children. Miss Dudley is barren and must buy products because she herself is not productive. Just like Virginia is subjected to the sale of her waiting-maid in order to raise the funds for her wedding to Philip, Missus Dudley’s only access to the power of the economic sphere is through procuring finances by way of the only transaction available to the Southern woman, the sale of slaves.

A new financially empowered black workforce is not the only threat to a more competitive market faced by Northern and Southern whites; as Maum Guinea demonstrates, there is an understanding of the power and influence of money and transactions in the market economy that the scrupulous slave and/or woman can use as an advantage. When a female slave
has managed to participate in the market economy, the reaction by white competitors is dubious surprise. When Judy is put up for sale and Maum Guinea offers to pay for her, the Dudleys and their buyer, Raleigh, find themselves uncomfortably forced to participate in a free market auction for Judy with Maum Guinea. Raleigh, although he laughed “at de joke of bidding ‘gainst a nigger” (167), finds himself irked and irritated at the competition that Maum Guinea presents in an economy normally monopolized by white men. He exclaims, “now my blood’s up, bidding agin a nigger” (168). His affective response is anger at having to participate in a market that has been made more competitive with the addition of another participant. The emotive reaction to the realization that the free economy supplies a black workforce with financial power in exchange for their labor is incredulous fear. The Northern economic system threatens the foundation of slavery and of the white aristocracy paramount to the slave economy.

Finally, Maum Guinea’s story reveals that the Southern plantation is not primarily an agricultural economy, but fundamentally an economy that relies upon women’s reproductive potential for its future. In Hyperion’s monologue, “slavery” is defined by economic oppression, and “marriage” is defined by economic ability or permission (Victor 37). Hyperion’s jealousy reveals the economic basis of his love and his envy. In the examples of Scipio, Dinah, and the dandy, and Johnson’s mother and the Congressman, the women are valued as economic possibilities. Maum Guinea claims that the southern plantation land is growing barren, but “de proud ole Virginn planters could raise a good crop of niggers” to offset the loss of production from the plantation (162). It is not the plantations that are productive; the women of the South are (re)productive.

Maum Guinea’s story reveals a much more conflicted and complex interpretation of the value of interracial marriage, because her story about Judy signifies a difference in the slave’s
perception of interracial marriage. Her paradoxical interpretation is that marriage for all women can be both a signifier of freedom and liberty and an obstacle to the achievement of freedom. If stagings of interracial romance and the fictional success of interracial marriages indicate the viability of a biracial community, *Maum Guinea* relies “on the social power of the Others’ narratives” via miscegenated narration to “inform distinctions among the complex subject-position(s) of white women, differences revealing the illusory nature of much ‘privilege’” (Taylor 71). *Maum Guinea* does not obliterate the possibility of freedom by proposing marriage for Hyperion and Rose as the prototypical happy ending, but mixes differing interracial romances and marriages to put them in conversation and to examine ways in which women gain and lose agency in marriage, namely through access to financial power, rather than by marrying up or down a supposed racial hierarchy.

The sentimental genre often attempts to move the feelings of its readers in a favorable way, and often does so quite overtly. In *Maum Guinea*, the frame narrator certainly fulfills the generic penchant for assertive moralizing, while the slave narrators of the sub-plots would appear to be rendered invisible, unbiased, and unimplicated in framing readerly interpretations. However, the absence of overt moralizing by the slave narrators maintains the feeling of goodwill between reader and character, as opposed to a readerly response of suspicion that the moralizing narrator incites. In *Maum Guinea*, miscegenated narration puts the narrators’ opposing ideologies in conversation, and the authority of the hegemonically inclined frame narrative voice is shaken.

The constrictive narrative conventions of the sentimental form, such as its overt moral clarity and its happy ending, are strained by the interracial subject matter of Victor’s novel. And, the consequence of the novel’s miscegenated narration is a reconceptualization of the sentimental
narrative mode. The vying stories produce a kind of narrative cacophony fraught with ideological confusion; as such, Victor’s sentimental novel breaks from the typical overt moral clarity of the genre. Victor’s mixed narrative voices require a readerly reexamination of the social divisions of good/evil, self/other, and black/white through their very incoherency within the novel.

Furthermore, the competing narrative perspectives of the novel confront both the ideology of slavery and the fantasy of achieving a harmonious and felicitous national identity. *Maum Guinea*’s miscegenated narration illuminates the conflict between the sentimental novel’s Historicizing, the pro-slavery frame narrator, and the individual memories of the novel’s internal slave narratives. This novel’s miscegenated narration, and thus narrative hybridity, resists appropriation and neutralization by the master narrative, much in the same way Tavia Nyong’o suggests that racial hybridity resists the mythology of the national narrative. To free interracialism’s subversive potential from the neutralizing effects of the national narrative, Victor’s competing narrative perspectives affect ideological confusion and expose the contradictions between history and History, which is symptomatic of the battle for control over the symbolic order and the narrative of the nation. Ideological confusion emerges from the confrontation between the concessional form of the novel’s generic qualities and the reality of the slaves’ stories, while national identity is also revealed to be but a trope of white, patriarchal hegemony.
CHAPTER 4

THE BODILY NARRATIVE: CORPOREAL SEMIOTICS, MEMORY, PATHOLOGY, AND IDENTITY IN JULIA C. COLLINS’S THE CURSE OF CASTE

As I have argued in the previous chapters, when the sentimental romance is coupled with interracial themes, the genre’s investment in the malleability of national and individual identity is exposed. But, paradoxically, the sentimental romance is a literary form that is historically perceived to glorify a kind of natural hierarchy, which implies an immutability of individual identity. For example, it is commonly assumed that because the romantic genre venerates sexual differences due to the inevitable marriage, the literary form glorifies gender roles. However, I have suggested that interracialism in women’s Civil War popular sentimental romances produces examples of transgressions of both racial and gendered identities, which brings to light the potential of transformation in what is more accurately a differing and fluctuating physical/metaphysical identity. This is an effect that has been rarely interrogated because the happy ending is most often accepted as the most important “affective ideologeme” operative in the sentimental romance (Ngai 7).\(^1\)

In this final chapter, I examine the problematic sentimental device of sympathetic identification in an interracial romance by Julia Collins, titled The Curse of Caste, or, The Slave Bride. Historically, the ideology of sentimentalism is understood to produce a dominant narrative that objectifies the Other via sympathetic identification. In this view, sympathetic identification results in the victimization of the specular object, and because sentimentality produces victimization, fictions that present arguments for equality within a sentimental framework victimize the object of their sympathy through their pity, stripping the Other of

\(^1\) See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005), for her definition of “affective ideologemes” as “concepts that become the site and stake of various kinds of symbolic struggle” (7).
agency and power. This is the paradox of sentimentalism. For example, during the Civil War many authors of sentimental anti-slavery fiction attempt to create sympathetic identification between their presumably white audience and black protagonists by portraying the protagonists as morally static beings who deserve the audience’s sympathy because the suffering inflicted upon them is due to their immovable and enduring morality. These heroines are also often portrayed as visibly white, exemplified through the popularized use of the mulatto figure in nineteenth-century sentimental literature. In this view, again, critical dismissal of the mulatto figure is supposedly justified because the figure is limited to a tragic end, panders to the audience’s racial prejudices, and reinscribes the racist logic from which it attempts to break.2

Accordingly, critics often conclude that the most successful authors of mid-nineteenth-century anti-slavery literature tried to offset the negative fallout of sympathetic identification, and therefore, the sentimental form, by mixing the popular style with other generic forms, such as the slave narrative or autobiography. For example, Katharine Ings examines the ways in which four white women writers of the Civil War decade stage interracial relationships in their sentimental literature,3 but supposedly, the authors find it necessary to temper their progressive literary works with more conservative conventions, in order to more safely test identities which were in flux or unstable during these years.4 Theoretically, this mixing of the ostensibly objectifying ideology of the sentimental form with more generically determined, radical ideologies, like the slave narrative, produces a more palatable subject position in sentimental anti-slavery fiction; but, nevertheless, Ings repeatedly concludes that these authors’ creations of

---

3 The four authors are Southworth, Alcott, Davis, and Child.
4 See Lemire, Sizer, and Daileader.
hybrid identities often still reproduce the racial and gendered paradigms they were ostensibly meant to challenge (4). Even scholars of the more radically-inclined subset of sentimental anti-slavery literature, the interracial romances, attribute the residual racial conservatism to the insurmountable effect of American racial ideology, to authors’ inability to escape popular market pressure for an acceptable, “whitewashed” heroine, and to the disempowering, objectifying tendencies of sympathy innate to the sentimental novel.

However, I propose that the sentimental form provides an opportunity from within the dominant narrative to release characters from the single dimension of victimization because of miscegenated narration’s reliance on a radical multi-positioning of object and subject. Narrative creates subject positions, and when a narrative takes up “the victim’s imagined point of view,” the “boundaries differentiating subject-positions” are muddled (Taylor 58). By drawing attention to the hegemonic operation of the symbolic order—what Jacques Lacan, in his “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” would call the “itinerary of the signifier” from which the subject receives a “decisive orientation” (29)—the literary device of miscegenated narration, through a fluid combination of subject positions, can be ascertained in its activity of subverting the supposedly normal concepts of the symbolic order. Carole Anne Taylor observes that “interrupted, disjointed, or overlapping narratives […] reflect changes in subject position;” I suggest that miscegenated narration is a valuable tool for Civil War interracial romances to evaluate such mixed subject positions through multiple narrative perspectives and subject/object positionings (74). Miscegenated narration mixes narrators and narrative voices that position subjects and objects, and through it, the dual inclination of both radical and conservative tendencies in sentimental anti-slavery literature can be explained. It is the playful and fluid performance of
subjectivity and objectivity, an exposure of the relationality of subject/object, in which
miscegenated narration participates.

Furthermore, the changes in identification, or self-differentiation, as enabled by the
continuously fluid subject/object positions via sympathetic identification, resist the consensual
forgetting necessary to cultural memory. The American nation is, after all, a cultural fusion that
is made possible by the selective processes of remembering and forgetting. The problem of
cultural memory as a shared experience is its inscription of national identity and erasure of
individual identity via cultural consent. The consent to this America—bourgeois, heterosexual,
white, masculine—preserves the national, master identity. Fortunately, the literary device of
miscegenated narration allows “changes in self-identification [that] make it possible to conceive
and narrate a story unthinkable to dominance” (Taylor 68). As Taylor explains, “The unthought
agency […] belongs to someone who might act responsibly by resisting the dreams of progress
[History] and who might understand a past as something in the act of being created [Public or
Cultural Memory]” (66).

Thus, in this chapter I argue that the sentimental, interracial form provides an
opportunity from within the dominant narrative to release characters from the single dimension
of victimization, and that the combination of images encourages self-identification by promoting
a multiplicity of identifications and resisting the appropriation of alternative or marginalized
narratives. *The Curse of Caste*’s fluid combination of female narrators and females’ narratives
allows for changes in subject positions, and the novel utilizes the device of miscegenated
narration to “reflect [these] changes in subject position” (Taylor 74). In light of these strategies,
I evaluate the problematic sentimental tropes of the mulatta figure, the strategy of sympathetic
identification as a particularly damaging positioning of subjects and objects, and the
appropriating activity of the master narrative that the sentimental novel models as a genre which seeks to make all readers “feel” “right.”

_The Curse of Caste_—like _The Ebony Idol_ and _Maum Guinea_—involves a dual marriage plot, which commences with the romance between Lina and Richard Tracy, a young man whose wealthy father owns a New Orleans slave plantation. Lina and Richard meet on a boat trip down the Mississippi, and after falling in love, Richard promises to make Lina his wife. However, Lina is a quadroon, thus visibly white, and unaware that she is a slave. When her white, slave-owning father is bankrupted, she is sold to Richard’s father Colonel Frank Tracy. With the help of his friend George Manville, Richard manages to buy Lina from his father, and they escape to the North to be married. Once they are settled into their home, Richard returns to New Orleans in hopes of reconciling with his father. Nevertheless, Colonel Tracy cannot be placated, and he is so enraged by his son’s anti-slavery and amalgamationist views that he shoots Richard. Grievously wounded, Richard sends word to Lina of his injury, but his now false friend, Manville, intercepts Richard’s communication. The traitor Manville travels to the North, and finds out that before she died, Lina gave birth to a child, Claire Neville, of whom Richard is unaware. Manville appoints a nurse, Juno Hays, to care for Claire, and neither Claire nor Richard ever knows of the other’s existence or identity.

As a young adult, Claire graduates from seminary and decides to take a position as governess for a family, which just so happens to be the Tracy family. Claire captivates a visiting French aristocrat, Count Sayvord, but in doing so, arouses the envy of Isabelle, the oldest daughter in the Tracy family. Claire’s stark resemblance to the estranged Richard draws people’s attention and incites a search for evidence surrounding Claire’s parentage. Richard, who is living in France with Count Sayvord’s uncle, gets wind of the possibility that he might
have a daughter and decides to return to the United States. In the final moments, all of the characters that have been scattered across the North and South are brought together in effort to verify the parentage of Claire Neville. Meanwhile, Count Sayvord stalls his confession of love for Claire on the recommendation of Dr. Singleton, the Tracy family’s physician, who possesses knowledge of Claire’s racial identity. Unfortunately, the story of *The Curse of Caste*, serialized in the *Christian Recorder*, ends “on the eve of the novel’s climax, when [Claire] would finally meet her father and learn her parents’—and in a crucial sense, her own—identity” and leaves the question of Count Sayvord’s bold public admission of love for the mulatta, Claire, unanswered because Collins fell ill and died in December 1865 before she finished the novel (Andrews and Kachun xv). Therefore, the narrative abruptly ends with the Tracys, Claire, and Count Sayvord awaiting the arrival of Richard Tracy.

The fact that *The Curse of Caste* is unfinished makes it a good case study for examining the issues of the sentimental genre independent of a happy ending, or, indeed, of any resolution at all. In analyzing *The Curse of Caste*, an unfinished Civil War sentimental, interracial novel, the affects of miscegenated narration can allow an interpretation of a novel that offers no resolution, happy or otherwise, because the conclusion is no longer the governing element of interpretation. No longer limited by the inevitable happy ending of the sentimental genre, my focus on *The Curse of Caste* seeks to illuminate the ways in which the intersection of sentimentalism and interracialism still produces both radical and conservative impulses, simultaneously; both resists and conforms “to various aspects of national identity, while […] test[ing] racial barriers to self-making and actualiz[ing] differing degrees of selfhood;” but mixes bodies, voices, and psyches, in addition to genres, in order to circumvent the prescriptive conventions of sentimentalism (Richards, “Imitation Nation” 204).
Bodily Narratives

During the nineteenth century, there was a frenzy of activity surrounding the mapping of family history; consider the language that came into use simply to identify racialized family history, like “octoroon,” “quadroon,” and “mulatto.” While the children of miscegenation were identified in language, without a linguistic marker of difference it could be difficult to identify visibly white people as “black” in families and in society. Thus, many authors of anti-slavery sentimental, interracial fiction utilize the mulatto figure to illustrate the artifice of racial categories, which, in addition to the gendered body, are also defined by “difference in nature, difference in moral sensibilities, and difference in culture and/or values” (Rothenberg 43). The use of “some readily observable difference, such as skull size, brain weight, or family structure” to support an essentialist claim of metaphysical difference is challenged by the mulatto figure, who shares the same visage/image and family structure/history of the white parent, but is paradoxically categorized as non-family, due in part to the biracial children’s “difference” in the moral sensibilities and the values of the white family members (Rothenberg 44). *The Curse of Caste* seems to be particularly concerned with deconstructing the racialized categorization of black or partially-black women as immoral, evil, sexually unrestrained, and as possessing other negative sensibilities. Karen Sánchez-Eppler suggests that nineteenth-century American feminist and abolitionist discourses rely upon a reading of the body as an indicator of “the institutional and racial status of the whole person” (“Bodily Bonds” 29). In contrast, I identify the converging discourses of the sentimental and interracial in *The Curse of Caste* to produce miscegenated narration, which is resistant to body fiction and interrogates the supposition of a homogeneous racial and moral national identity. *The Curse of Caste*’s mixing of subject

---

5 See hooks.
positions, also a by-product of miscegenated narration, challenges the viability of the body as a
sign of monolithic identity.

In Collins’s novel, Claire Neville and Isabelle Tracy are born within a few months of
each other and both came into the world during the same family crisis: Richard’s near fatal
wounding by his father. Not only are they conceived at the same point in time and crisis, but
they also mirror each other’s physical characteristics. For example, the narrator reveals that “the
resemblance between Claire Neville and Isabelle Tracy” actually accentuates how “those two
[women], so very like in appearance, [are] yet so unlike in disposition” (Collins 53). In Chapter
XIV, “Claire and Isabelle,” Isabelle is described in pointedly similar ways to Claire; Isabelle’s
“fair face,” “brilliant, almond-shaped black eyes,” “curling black brows,” “rows of even, pearl
white teeth,” and “beautiful black hair” (51) parallel Claire’s “creamy complexion,” “eyes of
midnight black,” “slightly arching brows of jetty hew,” “rows of even, pearl white teeth,” and
“wealth of purple black hair” (11). Claire’s striking resemblance to Isabelle even “excite[s]” the
“astonishment” of the neighbors, who propose that Claire “must be a relative of the family” (66).
Furthermore, Isabelle and Claire are fit to fill the same role in the Tracy family; Isabelle explains
that if Claire had not come to the Tracy Plantation, Isabelle might have been “responsible for the
education of a dozen little sisters” (52). Thus, Claire has been hired to fill the position that
Isabelle declines and takes on the education of her biological aunts. If the mixture of images, or
physical appearances, of Claire and Isabelle is read according to a consistent
physical/metaphysical binary, Claire and Isabelle ought to mirror each other in moral
constitution because, in examining the viability of the body as a sign of monolithic ethical
character, identical female bodies ought to have similar interiors.
But the obstacle—the romantic competition between Isabelle and Claire for the affections of Count Sayvord—reveals the differing interiorities of the female doppelgängers. Describing Isabelle as having “searching black eyes” that give off a “cold, haughty glance” and “seemed to scintillate hatred” toward Claire, the narrator paints a picture of Isabelle as a jealous, envious Jezebel who “augur[s] evil” (11, 12). Her “great black eyes” and “piercing glance which seem[s] to read her [Claire’s] very soul” causes Claire to shudder in fear (12). These representations certainly differ from the pliant, pious, unassuming character of Claire, who remains innocently unaware of Count Sayvord’s affections up to the story’s abrupt ending. Everyone appreciates Claire’s sweet spirit and winsome qualities; “the only eyes that did not smile a welcome to Claire” are those of Isabelle (73). The disconnection between outward appearance and interiority, or moral quality, imaginatively deconstructs the physical/metaphysical binary upon which racial constructions are supported. These overlapping body fictions are strategic “narrative pairings and pregnant significations” (Foreman 706). In *The Curse of Caste*, the uncanny similarities of Claire and Isabelle result in a blending or mixing of identities. The illusions of the body and the power behind body fictions are targeted by the doubles of Claire and Isabelle.

As a strategy for resisting essentializing readings of the body, miscegenated narration draws attention to the intra-body narrative, narrative, and extra-body narrative of the body. At the intra-narrative level, Claire reads herself though the narrative of her self-identity as daughter/orphan. At the narrative level, the characters read Claire as a white female, possible sister or aunt, and the family’s governess. At the extra-narrative level, Claire’s body is presented to the reader as a mixed-race female and/or imposter. Claire’s multiple identities—student, governess, daughter, sister, aunt, and niece—resist the fiction of monolithic interiority.
Furthermore, Isabelle’s own monolithic identity as “white woman” is compromised by the confusion that Claire brings to the Tracys; after all, Claire too is (visibly) white and woman.

*The Curse of Caste* uses these mixed corporeal narratives and the external doubling of fictionalized bodies to critique the cult of domesticity and as a strategy for resisting essentialist corporeal semiotics. Physically pairing these female characters allows a reading of their fictional bodies as indicators of moral and intellectual capacity through the filter of gender, which, in my interpretation, is just as problematic as filters of race and class for consistent bodily readings. The narrative explores physiognomic readings of the body and as indicative of interiority, which makes it harder as well to see the body as a repository of history or meaning, but the mulatto body deconstructs the connection between outward appearance and moral quality.\(^6\) Therefore, Claire’s physical appearance as a visibly white, biracial heroine complicates a consistent and verifiable reading of the racialized body.

During the early to mid-nineteenth century, the popularity of physiognomy—evaluating an individual’s character or moral integrity by their physical appearance—was tied to essentialist determinations of biological and physical characteristics, as indicators of societal value and status. *The Curse of Caste* complicates a physical/metaphysical connection by creating characters that embody ostensibly white physical qualities yet may or may not be morally upstanding, may or may not play a valuable role in society, and thus complicate black/white, slave/master, male/female, and immoral/moral binaries. It ought to be noted that the narrative does rely on physiognomy in its reading of some characters’ moral qualities, but does so, while

\(^{6}\) Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkley: U of California P, 1993), writes: “The Fictional mulatto combines this problematic of corporeality and identity […] because miscegenation and the children it produces stand as a bodily challenge to the conventions of reading the body, thus simultaneously insisting that the body is a sign of identity and undermining the assurance with which that sign can be read” (33).
it also dismisses the connection between outward appearance and interiority or moral quality, a familiar fluctuating quality related to miscegenated narration. In *The Curse of Caste*, physiognomy is constructed and deconstructed; it is reterritorialized and deterritorialized. The validity of physiognomy does not have to be completely dismissed, because unexpected aftereffects of interracialism still spring up out of obscurity. The overlapping images of Claire and Isabelle’s bodies still defamiliarize racial/moral constitution, which results from the literary device of miscegenated narration and the conjoined modes of sentimentalism and interracialism within the novel.

Thus in *The Curse of Caste*, a stereotypical mulatto heroine actually participates in the work of defamiliarizing the biological determinism of racism. Mixing the images of Claire and Isabelle produces a dialectic of body fiction such that the pathology of racism can be partially traced to a false ideology of racial/gendered/metaphysical binaries. Because sentimental sympathy is to be administered to morally upstanding characters, *The Curse of Caste* disorients any sort of naturalized sympathetic identification on the part of the reader by confusing the connection between moralities and racialized or gendered identification of fictional bodies. The respective powers of racism and sexism derive from a similar reliance on the physicality of the body and its stereotype; however, *The Curse of Caste*’s subject pairings antagonize a physiognomic definition of interiority and self-identification and the viability of any other stereotyped identity, including, as I will show later, the American identity—a sentimentalist construction—as one who is white, landed, and male.

The Family’s Narrative

During the nineteenth century, American race ideology allowed the slave-owner to have an extended biracial family that was paradoxically both acceptable, in that a white male could
forcibly procreate with a black woman, and unacceptable, as the offspring of such unions were not recognized as a part of the official, socially-acceptable Family. Furthermore, Southern society was feverishly invested in the verification of official History; the racial pedigree of the Family was to be defined, pruned, and properly recorded for posterity, much as the History of the nation is to be an official account of the proper nature and character of its people. Social obsession over the official Family and fear of the unofficial family produces the dysfunctional practices of familial surrogacy, historical amputation, and memory erasure that characterize *The Curse of Caste*. In other words, in *The Curse of Caste*, the emphasis on physically identifiable Family traits, specifically racial identifiers, enables a foray into the fictionalized effects of racism as a malfunction of the Family caused primarily by identity crises that are internalized by the individuals/characters and can be examined via the family’s stories in *The Curse of Caste*.

The Southern racial ideology contributes to the Tracy family’s dysfunction and penchant for surrogacy; within the Tracy family, surrogate mothers replace biological ones for four consecutive generations. Colonel Tracy and his sister, Laura, were motherless children. Their nameless mother, married to Old John Tracy, “died in giving birth to [Laura]” (Collins 16).

Second, Laura Tracy (Hays) grew up with two surrogate mothers: her aunt, the sister of old John Tracy referred to only as “Miss Tracy,” and later Juno, a “beloved nurse” (5) who had lived both “with Laura’s aunt” and “with Laura Hays [so] that she was well acquainted with the history of the Tracys” (29). The narrator’s description of Laura as having “never felt the loss of the mother her infant eyes had never beheld” is the antithesis of Claire, the third character also “never knew a mother’s care,” but who desires to know her mother’s identity so strongly that it constitutes the narrative thrust of most of the novel (8). Furthermore, when Colonel Tracy’s wife, Nellie (Thornton) Tracy, releases her maternal responsibilities to Claire, Claire takes over Nellie’s
motherly duties under the title of “governess” because Nellie has been rendered invalid—literally, she is a physical invalid, and figuratively, as a mother, she is no longer valid (7). In a fourth generational surrogacy, Claire becomes substitute mother for her aunts, young Laura and Nellie Tracy. The irony of Claire becoming mother to the two namesakes of the motherless mothers of a generation prior speaks to the continual grafting of surrogate mothers of the South—the slave women—into family trees through the offspring of interracial liaisons, and to the cyclical nature and incestuous tendencies of a dysfunctional aristocratic Southern Family tree that is constantly truncated as a result of the internalization of a social pathology of racism. As a final example of pathological, maternal surrogacy, the nurse Juno is ever-present throughout four generations of the Tracy family; she was a slave-girl in the household of Great Aunt Tracy, the Old Colonel’s sister, she lived with Laura Tracy (Hays), she came to live with Lina at Rose Cottage; and she was a nurse to Claire, Richard’s daughter. Juno represents the internalization of racism to the family tree and the abuses to which it subjects those whom it objectifies, particularly the reappearing black nurse/surrogate who is “the only link between […] past and present life” (5).

In *The Curse of Caste*, fictional mixed-race offspring exhibit symptoms of this racialized pathology due to revisional Family structures through the narration of the “blighted inner worlds of [these] individuals” (Tate 482). The pathology of internalized social oppression that produces familial dysfunction manifests itself as the inordinate desire to have an official Family and to be accepted as kin. For example, Claire expresses the distinct difference between her schoolmate, Ella, and herself, as Claire’s lack of a socially acceptable family unit, the absence of the domestic symbol of the home, and her need of a mother figure; notably, Claire does not mention the difference in class status between them. Again, expressing that desire symptomatic
of biracial children, Claire articulates her perceived difference from the Tracy family members in terms of a mother, a home, and friends who care, rather than drawing attention to the much more obvious inequality between them as employee and employer (Collins 55). For Claire, knowledge of her family would provide her with a history and presumably a meaningful identity. Although “Juno, an old colored nurse, had taken care of her as long as she could remember,” Claire’s feeling of loss and obsession over her unknown biological mother is her sole motivation for most of the narrative (8).

However, Claire cannot be accepted into the Tracy family unless Richard confirms her biological identification, as he must resolve the problem of her racial identification. The Tracy family, represented by the patriarch Col. Tracy, must make a choice between an erasure of Claire’s history, identity, and memories, or find a way to acceptably integrate her into the family, which the abbreviated end of *The Curse of Caste* does not answer. Claire’s identity is difficult to establish because almost all of the maternal accounts of history, the very memories that would provide evidence for the great question concerning Claire’s identity, are forbidden to be told in the Tracy Family.

The women’s memories, or the maternal histories, represent the unofficial perspectives/versions of the plot’s events. When Richard and his radical act of transgressing the taboo of miscegenation are erased from family history, he is no longer spoken of in the Tracy home; all that remains are the women’s memories of him. His mother preserves his memory by visiting his portrait in the old study, the only physical confirmation of the existence of an unofficial history of the Tracy family. Claire and Nellie go to verify those unofficial historical narratives, their womanly memories, in their visit to the portrait of Richard. The question of Claire’s connection to the Tracy family precipitates out of Nellie’s re-telling of Richard’s story.
to Claire and their forbidden visit to the portrait. Continuing a symbolic and literal association of
to a woman, unofficial, Other, and blackness or darkness, Nellie says that she “always go[es] about
midnight” to affirm the unspoken family history, pointedly suggesting that the pursuit of an
unofficial history, which is restrained in daylight, is allowed in the dark (56). When Colonel
Tracy bursts in on Mrs. Tracy and Claire looking at Richard’s portrait, they are visually and most
movingly confronted with the similarities between the person of Claire and the image of Richard.

Propelled by this confrontation, Colonel Tracy decides to officially (dis)prove Claire and
Nellie’s suspicions regarding the biological connection between Richard and Claire. Colonel
Tracy asks Claire for an account of her past, requesting “a clear, concise statement of facts” (65).
Interestingly, Colonel Tracy uses the same phrase when he asks Richard for “a clear, concise
statement of facts” about Lina (38). The symbolic figure of patriarchal rule, Colonel Tracy
requests a specific type of account, a factual account, and an account not marred by (feminine)
emotions. He solicits from her an official version of History; however, when Claire cannot offer
Colonel Tracy a satisfactory account, he realizes that the only person who would be able to
verify Claire’s parents and the truest history of the family is Juno. Juno—the surrogate nurse
and most prevalent maternal presence in the Tracy family—will supply the Colonel with the
proof he needs to verify Claire’s parents through her narrative. Colonel Tracy’s ironic musing,
“Juno must know all about your parents,” takes on multiple connotations when the reader
remembers that Colonel Tracy certainly knows Juno; after all, Juno was twelve years old when
Colonel Tracy married Nellie, and before that, she lived with Colonel Tracy’s mother (66). Not
only does Juno know all about Claire’s parents, but she also knows about Claire’s grandparents
and her great-grandparents.
Therefore, in *The Curse of Caste*, Richard’s transgression of the taboo of miscegenation defamiliarizes the family structure enough to discombobulate familial and racial subjectivities in relation to the regulating force of Southern racial ideology on the official Family History. But, Colonel Tracy’s desire to reinstitute paternal law leads to a frantic search to verify Claire’s parents. In order to suppress this threat to the official Family History that Claire represents, Colonel Tracy must call forth the Other history of the Tracy family. He must acknowledge the presence of those who have been relegated by patriarchy’s law to invisibility or erasure. He calls for Juno, the repository of most every thread of forgotten, forbidden or fantastic Tracy family history, and in a deft move by Collins, histories will foreground History, unofficial will disprove official, and maternal memory will refute paternal narrative.

Furthermore, the appropriating tendencies and malfunctions of the Family in pro-slave, patriarchal society are a symbol of the broader national consequences of the race concept and the role of racial ideology in the United States. Although the Southern sociopolitical sphere attempts to disguise the familial dysfunction, the burgeoning narratives of maternal memory and of Other family histories still sprout out of concealment to challenge the imaginings of Family History and, ultimately, the imaginings of the official American identity. Juno, Nellie, and Claire’s recitals of indispensable histories resist the consent necessary to familial forgetting and model a solution for resisting cultural forgetting. Collins’s narrative exhibits an understanding of the past as in flux, of cultural memory as a continual process of forgetting and remembering, and as such, lends to Juno’s narrative the potential of resisting the monolithic, hegemonic dream of an essentialist national identity.

---

7 See Gwen Bergner, *Taboo Subjects: Race, Sex, and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota, 2005), for a discussion of the way the nineteenth-century American social economy and racial categories regulate sex and organize kinship through the Miscegenation Taboo, which also organizes racial subjects’ relation to paternal law.
The National Narrative

In sum, *The Curse of Caste* antagonizes an essentialist definition of physiognomic identifications, including the American identity that extends its locus of physical acceptability to individuals who are white and male, through the overlapping bodily narratives but disjointed internal identifications of Claire and Isabelle. Second, through a figurative and literal insertion of Claire into the Tracy family, *The Curse of Caste* produces an analogy of the dysfunctional Southern family with the narrative of the American “family,” both of which supplant the forbidden and fantastic stories of the Other in favor of a totalizing, universalizing History of white patriarchy. And finally, here, I argue that the narrator’s readiness to share with the reader all knowledge regarding Claire’s racial heritage diffuses what would be a great deal of suspense over Richard’s arrival, suggesting that Claire’s identity will not be proven by Richard’s arrival because her self-identification is not dependent upon Richard’s verification of her ethnic heritage.

When Claire and Nellie are sharing their personal histories, Nellie muses: “I almost fancy he [Richard] is speaking to me through you [Claire]” (55). This moment marks a shift in the narrative strategy from a metaphoric comparison between Claire and Isabelle, to a metonymic substitution of Claire for Richard. In Nellie’s statement, the name of “Richard” is metonymically transferred “onto a whole sequence of subsequent events,” namely Claire’s personal history (Johnson 205). Nellie posits Richard as the “presence” behind Claire’s speech; thus, it is Richard who will supposedly give meaning to her articulated history, which she then shares with Nellie. Nellie’s comment belies the Tracy family’s belief in the physical/metaphysical tradition and in Richard, as transcendental signified and repository of meaning, who must come and bear witness to Claire and give her identity or meaning. Even
when arrestingly confronted with the shocking likeness between Claire and the portrait of
Richard, Col. Tracy’s response is: “It must be; it must be, […] but the proof, the proof” (Collins
60). And, while Juno is being procured for Col. Tracy, it seems that Richard’s long-awaited
arrival will provide the final proof of Claire’s identity.  

In actuality, Claire’s self-identity is no more solidified by Richard’s arrival than it is
predicated on Col. Tracy’s acceptance of her or even on the continuance of Count Sayvord’s
romantic pursuit. The narrator’s early confessions of Claire’s racial heritage diffuse the
respective powers of Richard, Col. Tracy, and Count Sayvord to interpellate Claire’s personal,
familial, and romantic identifications. By stealing that power from them, the climax of the
narrative for the reader is really the moment when Claire chooses which of these possible
identities she will assume.

In the final scene, the entire Tracy family is in an uproar. Rose explains to Claire that
Mrs. Tracy has left in a rush, and “that young Count and a funny little old man are up in the
library with massa now. Mattie’s crying, in the east room, fit to break her heart. Jim looks awful
wise, and Dina’s as cross as fury” (111). Rose repeats, “I don’t see what the house is coming to”
as she then passes out (111). Meanwhile, Claire sits peacefully, and simply murmurs to herself,
“And I am happy” (111). While the Tracys are in chaos, awaiting the ostensible proof of
Claire’s identity, Claire happily contemplates the consequences of Richard’s proof, which are all
the identities she is free to assume.

In bringing together all the different narratives necessary to tell the full story of Claire’s
history, Collins motions to the multiplicity of identities with which Claire can identify, and gives
a more accurate picture of the complexity of her interiority. Collins resists the urge to

---

8 Ironically, even Richard needs Juno’s narrative to put together the proverbial puzzle pieces. See Collins, p. 101.
universalize Claire into the Tragic Mulatta, and she does so through metaphoric and metonymic strategies that signify to the reader the ever-changing constitutive facets of Claire’s present identity and her fluctuating history of influences. This strategy eventually correlates Claire with not only Isabelle, but also Richard. Collins offers to Claire the possibilities of identification with a white family, with a black nurse, with a deceased mother whom she never knew, and with a white lover, all without compromising her identity as a biracial woman or relying solely on that racial identity to determine her self-identity.

Early on, the narrator reveals the truth about Claire’s parentage and racial heritage to the reader because that knowledge changes readerly expectations for the narrative. In fact, the narrator’s early dissemination of information to the reader regarding Claire’s parentage and racial heritage is in place by the second chapter, where the narrator connects the histories of Claire and Richard for the reader, saying, “Claire remembered to have heard him [George Manville] frequently repeat the name of Richard. Who was Richard she wondered? And she instinctively felt that he was, in some way or other, connected with her past life” (9). Furthermore, the narrator wastes no time verifying Claire’s suspicion, on the very same page even, when Juno finds out about Claire’s new position as a governess and exclaims, “What would Master Richard say to your going to be governess in the Tracy family?” (9). By page thirty-five of the novel, the narrator has told the reader Lina and Richard’s history, and the reader knows that Lina’s baby is “Claire Neville Tracy.” Therefore, the next eighty pages of the novel are devoted to the characters’, not the reader’s, untangling of the complicated web of Tracy history.

Because the narrator offers the details of Claire’s parentage to the reader at the beginning of the novel, the reader’s job changes from divining the secret of a mystery to observing the
events of an unfolding history. This shift in the reader’s mode of participation portends a similar shift in the ideological force of the novel; if the reader approaches *The Curse of Caste* in expectation of a story of mysterious identity, all the reader is left to anticipate is at what moment each character will find out the truth of Claire’s identity, which the reader already knows. However, reading *The Curse of Caste* as an observant bystander intensifies the novel’s warning to the reader: “Caste has proved the bane of Richard Tracy’s life. It may prove the bane of yours” (105).

In doing so, *The Curse of Caste* both sustains and antagonizes the paradox of the democratic American concept as an imagined community that shares a communal narrative because the benevolent national imaginings of egalitarianism are confronted by the novel’s depictions of racism and its consequences for the individual family and the national Family, producing chaos and discord. *The Curse of Caste* employs a narrative strategy of sympathetic identification through overlapping metaphor and disjointed metonym such that the multiple presentations of subject positions and identities resist the fantasies of the dominant narrative “by signifying to the hegemonies that constrain the uncertainties of the people, and signifies to the past [personal, familial, and national] as something in the act of being created” (Taylor 66). Based on an understanding of the past as created and being created, Collins extends to her heroine, Claire, the opportunity to assume many different identities, rather than a singular, monolithic identity as “Richard’s biracial daughter.”

Veta Smith Tucker writes: “Had Collins lived and completed her novel, she might have successfully dramatized the radical politics of racial identity assigned not by social doctrine and legal classification but by the individual’s lived experience and self-perception” (751). However, I believe *The Curse of Caste* releases the characters from the single dimension of
victimization, and the combination of the images of Claire and Isabelle and Claire and Richard
are but facets of a multiplicity of identifications from which a fuller picture of one biracial
woman’s complex interiority is created. Tucker laments: “Deprived of Collins’s conclusion,
however, the American literary imagination remained faithful to the clichéd abolitionist
convention,” but I understand that the literary device of miscegenated narration, through a
continuously fluid mixture of subject positions, actively subverts normalized representations of
the symbolic order, and motions to the upshot of sympathetic identification’s mixed and
mingling intersubjectivities (750). The different possible identities enabled by the metaphoric
and metonymic substitutions of The Curse of Caste resist the consent necessary to
objectification, assimilation, and cultural forgetting by foregrounding the real in place of the
stereotype.

Critics have attributed the residual racial conservatism of sentimental, interracial
romances to the insurmountable effect of American racial ideology, to authors’ inability to
escape popular market pressure for an acceptable, to the “whitewashed” heroine, or even to the
disempowering, objectifying tendencies of sympathy innate to the act of sympathetic
identification. In contrast, I suggest that by inhabiting all of the perspectives offered through
miscegenated narration, the ostensible victims are made dynamic and multifarious through their
interactions with the readers’ perspectives. However, “because of its disguises and because of its
partial nature, the resistance of those with the least privilege or power may have, for dominant
Others, no visible or instrumental effects. Thus, in effect, dominance always skews definitions of
‘power’ itself, since the power of the ‘disempowered’ cannot be seen as such” (Taylor 68).
Miscegenated narration affects such a relative resistance, a resistance characterized by shape-
shifting subject/object positions and of various narrators’ perspectives engaged by the reader. As Tucker notes, but seems unimpressed by the implications,

It is the reader who thoroughly apprehends the racial paradox that Claire embodies. It is the reader whose complicity with racial hierarchy is challenged by the preservation of Claire’s white identity. It is the reader who has to manage his or her own socially shaped racial interpretations and expectations for narrative (and racial) closure. (751)
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Historically speaking, American romances are predominantly occupied with uncovering the truth of the national narrative, the constitution of national identity, and the official story of the American people. As Gregg Crane states, “Authors of nineteenth-century romances understood well that their productions represented an anomalous continuation of the epic or mythic impulse” (27). The authors of romances and the subset of sentimental novels, such as the ones that I have discussed here, offer their audiences literary productions of potential narratives for the nation—stories of the national “imagined community” as made possible by extensive use of “print-capital,” famously theorized by Benedict Anderson. More specifically, in sentimental, interracial novels, they offer imaginings of the viability of a future, harmonious, biracial America. However, even by the early nineteenth century, to be American and to enjoy the national promises of liberty, happiness, and equality was to be both white and male.

Fortunately, almost a quarter of a century ago, Jane Tompkins took a new perspective to nineteenth-century sentimental novels, and reinterpreted the subgenre of women’s popular sentimental fiction as “a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view; […] this body of work is remarkable for its intellectual complexity, ambition, and resourcefulness; and that, in certain cases, it offers a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics” (83). However, the undertaking that began with Tompkins, as the progenitor of a now well-established line of thinking about the work of popular sentimental women’s fiction, still has not reckoned adequately with the themes of interracialism present in these popular fictions and interracialism’s bearing on the sentimental. Situating my project within this scholarly milieu, I have considered a small, underanalyzed
sector of women’s popular sentimental fiction, published from 1860-1865, which stages forms of
interracialism, in order to remedy what I perceive to be a deficiency in our understanding of the
impact that sentimental literature has had on American culture.

Expanding on the aesthetic intersection of sentimentalism and interracialism during the
monumental paradigm shift of the Civil War, I have proposed that these women writers produced
an innovative “line of flight” in their sentimental, interracial romances, which at once
deteriorated hegemonic stable states and bolstered national myth—a fluid, virulent rhizome. In
other words, through the mixing of sentimentalism and interracialism, the power of the national
myth’s refrain, as constructed via literary ideology, was both challenged and stabilized. I have
suggested that a different strategy must be employed to understand the implications of these
movements within the generic narrative form, which is an understanding of the effects of
miscegenated narration.

My approach has involved an analysis of the techniques and consequences of
miscegenated narration, which refers to the way in which the sentimental, interracial quest for
sympathetic identification necessitates a new, different exploratory impulse to analyze a variety
of perspectives/narratives with differing ideological prerogatives. Miscegenated narration
defamiliarizes the hegemonic ideologies of the sentimental romance because the conventional
plot or master narrative, the compelling moralizing impulse of the sentimental novel, is
obfuscated by the heteroglossic cacophony of narrative voices. The mixing of opposing
ideologies within a narrative space is a product of miscegenated narration that characterizes the
conflicted impulses of nineteenth-century sentimental, interracial romances and the broader
project of the national narrative. The formulaic happy ending merely confines the narrative
pressure created by this conflict, and that ideological pressure is relieved via the contortion or
modification of other sentimental tropes, like the tragic mulatta. Miscegenated narration can also be extended to mixed images of bodies, which can be read narratively in the contextualization of sentimentalism and interracialism. A strategic mixing of body fiction helps illuminate the complications of official History, as based upon physical and paternal records, and exposes the similar methods of the national narrative’s racial and gendered hierarchies.

Such modification of sentimental conventions by way of interracial themes signifies to the malleability of a similarly constructed national narrative, an account of American identity that was created through sentimental rhetoric. The pressure of narrativized interracialism within the appropriating constraints of the sentimental romantic form exposes the nature of American mythology, American racial and gender ideology, and the appropriative activities of official national History. Thus, to adapt Fredric Jameson’s term, I argue that the “ideology of form” changes, as the form of sentimentalism itself must change when in context with interracialism (76). The effects of the interaction between sentiment and interracialism, which mutates both the generic conventions and the customs surrounding acceptable nineteenth-century stagings of interracialism, indicates the changes in both the form and the ideology of the form.

First, my project confronts a historical dismissal of the nineteenth-century popular plantation romance as a genre that inevitably glorifies racial hierarchy and patriarchy because of the conservative ideology of the genre’s prescriptive form. Using G. M. Flanders’s The Ebony Idol, the most overtly racist text of my three case texts, I have proposed that the pro-slavery narrative, in a reversal of its presumed ideological thrust, actually creates space for authentic slave stories because it rejects the monolithic Slave Narrative as universal slave experience. Even though this rejection of universalizing slave experiences is effected in order to discredit the stories of brutal slave treatment used to stir up Abolitionist sentiment, it creates space for an
authentic, and yet still sympathetic, slave narrative: Caesar’s narrative. Furthermore, the supposed pro-slavery position of *The Ebony Idol* is also undermined by the novel’s interracial experiment. The ideological consistency of the novel is troubled by the consequences of Caesar and Mary’s engagement in a proto-feminist, pro-slavery narrative. That inconsistency models the paradoxes of hegemonic racial and gendered hierarchies, and it models a very real dissonance in American society as well.

Second, I have sought to remove the negative lens through which women’s popular sentimental, interracial romances have been traditionally viewed, such that all these narratives eventually reinscribe patterns of racist and gendered hegemony via the inevitable happy ending. In my examination of Metta Victor’s *Maum Guinea*, a pseudo-plantation romance with a paradoxical pro-slavery/anti-slavery message, I underscore my intuition that the conflicting radical and conservative impulses are not unsatisfactory, as has been presumed. As *Maum Guinea* tests the viability of a future biracial American community through its fictional interracial relationships, the ostensibly didactic frame story’s romantic happy ending of racially-compatible lovers stands in contrast to the unresolved internal stories of interracial romances, which are much more speculative and fragmentary. Through the technique of miscegenated narration, *Maum Guinea* contrasts the urge of the master narrative to universalize and totalize all experiences with a more authentic presentation of the differences and nuances of racial and gendered identifications that constitute, what Barbara Johnson calls, “ever differing self-difference” (218). This self-difference is given space to be articulated and assumed by the characters of the respective romances of *Maum Guinea*, and can be seen as a quality of the larger narrative of America, which the author was presenting for the readers to consider as such a complex and intricate weaving of individuals’ narratives.
Finally, I have engaged the contemporary critical dismissal of the nineteenth-century sentimental strategy of sympathetic identification, which suggests that sympathy between reader and subject in nineteenth-century anti-slavery fiction is “tantamount to the erasure of all difference between spectator and spectacle,” by exploring more subversive uses of the mulatta figure in Julia C. Collins’s *The Curse of Caste* (Boudreau 83). Due to the novel’s unfinished ending, the text’s ideological thrust cannot be ascertained in the most traditional and oversimplified way through the novel’s resolution or happy ending. As I analyzed the novel’s use of miscegenated (bodily) narratives to dislocate the body as the central support of racial and gender hierarchy, and I have proposed that Collins’s text presents radically progressive gender and racial ideologies for the reader. Furthermore, the unfinished ending liberates the text from an interpretation based entirely upon the happy ending, and this novel reinforces my proposition that the happy ending is not the only important ideologeme of these sentimental, interracial novels. In addition, *The Curse of Caste* signifies to “both the appeal and the injustice of universalization,” as it exposes Claire’s great desire for family and the surrogacy and erasure necessary to maintain a Family History (Johnson 218). Much like we find in the unfinished American narrative, the Traceys’ narrative flounders between totalitarian History and a differing collective of many self-histories.

The riddle of the interaction between the conventions of the sentimental and romantic genres and interracial themes filtered through popular women’s fiction is the varied range of at times viable or otherwise unfeasible imaginings of a biracial national community. The sentimental convention of sympathetic identification can be interpreted as having successfully produced an alternative national narrative when enacted as transracial identification; however, the radical implications of interracialism and anti-slavery principles can also be perceived as
destructively tempered by sentimental conventions, like the romanticized mulatta heroine that assimilates the light-skinned heroine into a white American consciousness and “threaten[s] to displace the authentically black in the national imaginary, gaining in the process not only the rewards accorded other newcomers to the melting pot but the superadded benefit of salving the conscience of white Americans” (Nyong’o 3-4). In a very real way, sentimentality paradoxically acted as an antagonistic force, even while it reinforced hegemonic ideology. It has been my aim to engage the effects of ideological conflict between the generic conventions and the thematic matter by suggesting that the ideological inconsistency of sentimental anti-slavery romances that explore interracial stagings is actually a manifestation of multiple distortions of conventional figures and plot structures of both sentimentalism and interracialism; thus, as the genre and theme interact within a shared narrative space, they are modified in the context of each other.

In a broader scope, it has been my hope to foreground the conflicting radical and conservative impulses of these novels in order to emphasize the ways in which these ideological conflicts should be understood as part of the national literary project of theorizing the fluid, unstable, but presumably static American national identity that has spanned centuries past and present. Underscoring the role of conflict in the various articulations of American nationalism complicates an understanding of the national narrative as seamless, universal, and all encompassing because “conventional accounts of American literary nationalism generally focus on manifesto-like pronouncements that convey a shared national vision” (Levine 4). However, by conjuring up “literary-nationalist imaginings,” which “have generally been looked at in subordinate relation to or apart from the literary-historical arc of the U.S. literary nationalism,” it is my hope to engage these overlooked texts as products of the “provisional and contested notions of U.S. national identity” (Levine 5). And by working against the familiar critical binary
of ideologically suspect popular works on one hand and subversive repressed texts on the other, I have offered a detailed analysis of the overlooked strategies of these consensually forgotten popular novels, one which might produce a clearer image of the ways in which American literary nationalism has always been and continues to be in flux.
REFERENCES


