

ABSTRACT

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BEST-SELLING AFRICAN AMERICAN
NARRATIVE

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This dissertation critically examines popular romantic fiction by African American writers and argues for its inclusion in the canons and curricula of African American literary studies. While novels that privilege themes of love and romance and that appeal primarily to a mass-market audience have tended to be cast as antithetical to matters of racial uplift and social protest, my work reverses this bias, establishing such texts as central to these concerns. I argue that popular romantic fiction and its authors have a particular story to tell in the history of African American literature, one that reveals a desire to address racial concerns but also, as importantly, to reach a wide audience.

Using the work of critical race theorists and feminist studies of the romance and sentimental genres, I identify the “racial project” undertaken in the popular romantic fiction of three best-selling African American writers in the latter-half of the twentieth century-- Frank Yerby, Toni Morrison, and Terry McMillan. I begin my

study with a discussion of the “contingencies of value” and the need for an ongoing process of canon revision in African American literary studies. In Chapter One, I argue that in his first published novel, The Foxes of Harrow (1946), Yerby uses the platform of historical romance to illuminate the instability and unreliability of racial identity. In Chapter Two, I argue that in Tar Baby (1981), Morrison integrates the narratives of romance and race to critique the popular romance genre’s lack of racial diversity and perpetuation of white female beauty. In Chapter Three, I argue McMillan uses her first three novels, Mama (1987), Disappearing Acts (1989) and Waiting to Exhale (1992) to advance new paradigms of contemporary domesticity that for the young, urban, upwardly mobile black females portrayed in her novels both disrupt idealized notions of love and marriage and redefine gender roles within heterosexual unions.

This study illuminates the critical biases that have shaped African American literary history, calls for a reassessment of those practices, and most importantly, in arguing for the serious study of popular romantic fiction, provides a critical framework for taking on the study of fiction – popular romantic or not – that has been similarly neglected by literary critics.

ROMANCE, RACE AND RESISTANCE IN BEST-SELLING AFRICAN
AMERICAN NARRATIVE

By

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Introduction: Romancing Canons

“Above all I am interested in how agendas in criticism have disguised themselves and, in so doing, impoverished the literature it studies.”

—Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark (1992)

“Scholars of early 21st century literature and reading practices must bring to their research a recognition of and respect for what has always been true: there are many ways to know a book.”

—Elizabeth McHenry, Forgotten Readers (2002)

When Terry McMillan’s third novel Waiting to Exhale was published in 1992, publishing industry observers, journalists and even literary critics were surprised by the novel’s commercial success. The book sold over 650,000 hard copies the first year and stayed on the New York Times best-seller list for 43 weeks.¹ Articles in a number of mainstream magazines and newspapers reported on the book’s widespread appeal by quoting experts who likened McMillan to a “literary phenomenon,” and critics who claimed she was the “*first* bestselling African American popular fiction writer” (Richards 21). Few, if any, mentioned African American novelist Frank Yerby, who, although he died a year before Waiting to Exhale’s debut, published best-selling novels for over four decades.

Yerby’s presence undermines the claim that McMillan was the “first” or the “only” African American writer to achieve unprecedented commercial success.

Yerby’s first published novel, The Foxes of Harrow (1946), a historical romance novel centered on a Louisiana slaveowner’s rise to wealth and notoriety, was an immediate commercial success, selling more than 2 million copies and making a

¹ See Paulette Richards for a full discussion of the sales figures for McMillan’s novels.

number of best-sellers list. A Hollywood studio purchased the movie rights for the book for \$150,000, and popular actors Rex Harrison and Maureen O’Hara starred in the 1947 feature film.² Yerby went on to publish over 30 more novels, most of which were best sellers and two of which were also made into films.

It is not surprising that most literary scholars do not immediately connect Yerby and McMillan. With the exception of the initial critical attention Yerby received in the late 1940s and early 1950s and a few critical essays on his published work over the past few decades, he has been virtually excluded from literary scholarship and criticism. When Yerby died in 1991, he had published 33 novels, five short stories, and several poems; yet, he is not mentioned in the pages of most contemporary anthologies of African American or American fiction. Until very recently, the few anthologies that include Yerby reprint one of his few short stories that contain overt racial content, but nothing of his popular romance novels—his more representative work.³

The story behind Yerby’s critical obscurity lays bare the ways in which, as Toni Morrison argues, “agendas in criticism have disguised themselves and, in so doing, impoverished the literature it studies,” and, I will add, literary studies (Morrison, Playing in the Dark, 8-9). For decades, literary critics have assumed that Yerby’s popular novels, which typically privilege themes of love and romance, mostly feature white protagonists, and primarily avoid overt or politicized discussions of racism and racial discrimination, are insignificant to African American literary

² See Louis Hill Pratt for a discussion of sales figures related to the movie adaptation of The Foxes of Harrow.

³ Gene Jarrett includes an excerpt from The Foxes of Harrow in his recently published “alternative” anthology, African American Literature Beyond Race. See Chapter One of this study for a full discussion of Yerby’s inclusion in Jarrett’s volume.

studies. Hence, as modern scholars have taken on the project of creating and maintaining an African American literary tradition that has at its foundation an explicit emphasis on social protest and racial uplift, they have not included Yerby in the various canons that represent this tradition. At the same time, scholars' inattention to Yerby calls attention to the implicit critical agendas at work in African American canon formation and tradition-building, specifically biases against themes of love and romance, against mass-market or genre fiction, and texts that as Claudia Tate and, more recently, Gene Jarrett, argue resist the "racial protocols" or "racial realism" of a black modernist canon.⁴

The failure of most scholars to connect Yerby and McMillan and thus perpetuate historical inaccuracies—McMillan is the first best-selling African American popular fiction writer—is just one indication of a current "impoverished" state of literary studies. This dissertation identifies and historicizes the critical agendas that devalue works like Yerby's and McMillan's and the canons that exclude them. Like most of Yerby's canon, McMillan's novels privilege themes of love and romance, appeal to a mass-market or popular audience, and avoid politicized discussions of race and racism—thereby appearing devoid of racial protest. Secondly, this study reveals how critical biases against popular and romantic fiction have resulted in the misrepresentation of works by even one of the most canonical authors. Consider Toni Morrison's contemporary love story Tar Baby. Critics have characterized the novel as "problematic" and unrepresentative of her canon, and, thus, it remains her most understudied and misunderstood work. Finally, this study demonstrates that as these same authors write popular romantic novels that undertake

⁴ See Claudia Tate, Psychoanalysis and Black Novels and Gene Jarrett, Deans and Truants.

a particular “racial project,” their works are indeed central to the concerns and interests of contemporary African American literary studies.⁵

Hidden Agendas and the Canons that Represent Them

As pedagogical tools, literary canons are both useful and necessary, helping scholars make universal decisions on which texts to include on syllabi, anthologize, and introduce to new readers. And by definition, literary canons are conservative, employed to preserve established traditions. Yet, literary canons do more than simply assist in the teaching of literature; they also determine criteria of literary value, shaping cultural understandings of both what is and *is not* considered “literature” that transcend the academic setting. Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls attention to the broader implications of academics’ canon-making on our understanding of “literature”:

Since they will usually exclude not only what they take to be inferior literature but also what they take to be nonliterary, subliterary, or paraliterary, their selections not only imply certain ‘criteria’ of literary value, which may in fact be made explicit, but more significantly, they produce and maintain certain definitions of ‘literature’ and, thereby, certain assumptions about the desired and expected functions of the

⁵ This idea of a “racial project,” belongs to Michael Omi and Howard Winant and is defined in their book Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s. They define a racial project as “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (56). I use it here in reference to how these popular authors use their works to represent a particular racial experience. And, at the same time, by deliberately appealing to a commercial or popular readership, these authors seek not only to explain or interpret the racial dynamics at work in their particular racial representations, but also to influence their contemporary audiences’ understanding and acceptance of such dynamics and their actions based thereon.

texts so classified and about the interests of their appropriate audiences, all of which are usually not explicit and for that reason, less likely to be questioned, challenged or even noticed. (26)

Thus, in accepting a particular literary canon, or canons, as representative of a field, we also accept broader notions of literary value, comprised of a particular definition of literature and understanding of its role, its function, and its audience. As scholars continue to put canonical texts on their syllabi, include them in anthologies, and annotate new scholarly editions, they endorse these texts' literary value, ensuring that these texts will be introduced to a new generation of scholars as "classics" or as the representative texts. As scholars have noted, it is the influence of "intellectual gatekeepers," and not the taste of popular readers, that over time regulate the literary marketplace, determining which books are likely to be reprinted and remain in the reading public's reach.⁶

Since by accepting canons we also accept what is *not* considered literature, it follows that the primary way in which scholars have sought to revise definitions of literature (and thus criteria of literary value) is by challenging an existing tradition and the canons that define it by way of arguing for the inclusion of noteworthy authors and texts. As Kofi Owusu explains, the canonical text "defines itself in opposition to an other, noncanonical text" (61). Canonical structures rely on an inherent hierarchy that is simultaneously sustained and challenged by the presence of those works that are *not* included. Essentially, canons and the process of canon formation are managed not only by what critics explicitly state as criteria of literary

⁶ See, for instance, Richard Ohmann, "The Shaping of a Canon."

value, or what determines a text's inclusion, but also by what is implied in their exclusions.

The practice of revising canons by exposing the literary value of that canon's exclusions has become common in the field of modern literary studies as a way to expand, enrich and emend the field. It is the primary method by which literary scholars established now prolific areas of study such as women's literature, African American literature and black women's literature. Canon revisionist scholars in the 1960s and 1970s argued vehemently for the inclusion of works by black and female writers into what was at the time a white male-dominated, Western-influenced American literary canon. Their efforts resulted in a field of literary studies that tried to more accurately reflect the nation's diverse cultures.

Beyond simply establishing new fields of study, however, these canon revisionists also revealed the capriciousness of literary canons and the "contingencies of value" that establish the status of literary works.⁷ It is now clear that, as Ann duCille argues, canons and traditions are "made and not born, constructed and not spawned" (*Coupling* 147). And, as Paul Lauter maintains, literary canons do not "spring from the brow of the master critic; rather [they are] a social construct" ("Race and Gender" 452). Lauter, for instance, identifies three primary extrinsic, or *extra-literary*, factors that influenced the making of an American literary canon in the 1920s. These factors include "the professionalization of the teaching of literature, the development of an aesthetic theory that privileged certain texts, and the historiographic organization of a body of literature into conventional 'period' and 'themes'" ("Race and Gender" 440). In establishing American literature courses for

⁷ See Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, "Contingencies of Value."

the first time at the turn of the twentieth century, scholars were required to make a clear distinction between the books that should inform and educate and those that were merely popular or solely for reading pleasure.⁸ At the turn of the century, women writers, women readers and women-centered themes, such as domesticity, family, marriage and romance dominated the literary marketplace. Yet, the task of deciding what texts should be taught in an academic setting and what texts best represented “America” belonged to literary scholars who were almost without exception white and male. These scholars established a nationalist aesthetic that privileged texts with more male-centered themes, such as politics and religion as opposed to the sentimental values of the popular fiction of the time.

Moreover, the practice of historic periodization worked to maintain the aesthetics of this canon and its idea of American literature. As conventional definitions were assigned to periods of literature such as Romanticism, Realism, Frontierism, etc., critics dismissed from study any text written during that period that did not display these “universal” qualities. Works by black writers that represented the particular experiences and historical perspective of the nation’s racial history were excluded, even though they, along with white women authors, made up the majority of writers at the turn of the century.⁹ Black male writers such as Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, W.E.B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson, as well as black women authors like Frances Harper, Alice Dunbar Nelson and Pauline Hopkins all

⁸ Paul Lauter writes in his article “Race and Gender,” that “American literature had become a legitimate subject for academic study only after the first World War. Courses in American literature had seldom been taught in schools and colleges before the last decade of the nineteenth century; classroom anthologies and American literature texts began to appear only after the turn of the century” (440). Lauter also points to the founding of the American Literature Group of the MLA in 1921 as a marker for the rise of American literature courses.

⁹ See Elizabeth Ammons and Nina Baym for a discussion of these writers’ influence on the marketplace as well as their exclusion from an American literary canon.

published works during this time. Yet, under the nationalist aesthetic and periodization privileged by American literary scholars in their quest for legitimization in the academy, these authors' works did not easily meet such criteria, and thus were not likely to be essential to an American literary canon. Lauter, for example, chronicles the oscillating pattern of inclusion and exclusion of black male writers in an early twentieth century anthology published by Harcourt, Brace and Co. The first edition of the anthology, Louis Untermeyer's Modern American Poetry (1919), contained works by Dunbar; another edition (1925) included Johnson, Countee Cullen and Claude McKay. Later, Langston Hughes was added to the list. By 1942 (the sixth edition), Dunbar, Johnson, Cullen and Hughes remained, but by the seventh edition, Dunbar had been eliminated.

The literary choices made by these white male scholars in the 1920s excluded works of immense popularity and excessive sentimentality. Therefore, when feminist scholars moved to expand the field of literature in the 1970s, they focused much of their efforts on challenging the scholarly exclusion of popular fiction. The shift of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin from marginalization to canonization is one of the best examples of their success as well as one of the best examples of the mutability of literary value. Published in 1852, Uncle Tom's Cabin was an immediate success, selling 10,000 copies in the first week and an unprecedented 300,000 copies by the end of the year. The appeal abroad was even more widespread with approximately one million copies being sold in Great Britain during the same period.¹⁰ Though now Stowe's anti-slavery novel is at the center of an American literary tradition, it was dismissed by intellectuals and literary scholars from the time

¹⁰ See Thomas Gossett for discussion of the novel's background and history of critical reception.

of its publication well into the twentieth century, primarily on the basis of its extreme popular success, commercialization and excessive sentimentality. African American intellectuals in the 1940s rejected the novel for its stereotypical portrayal of black characters. It was not until the feminist scholars in the 1970s argued that a text's ability to effect social change was an important indication of its literary merit did Uncle Tom's Cabin, and other popular sentimental fiction from the nineteenth century, move from being "merely sensational and propagandistic" and "a very bad novel"¹¹ to being "the most important book of the century."¹²

Critics of African American literature and black feminist critics also provide a compelling example of the changing nature of literary value through their revival of Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel Their Eyes Were Watching God. Similar to Uncle Tom's Cabin, Their Eyes spent years being marginalized by literary critics and out of print to later being called "one of the most important novels produced during this century" (Awkward, "Introduction" 4). Early in the movement to include black authors in an American literary canon, black feminist scholars challenged the exclusion of works by black women. Mary Helen Washington asked "Why is the fugitive slave, the fiery orator, the political activist, the abolitionist always portrayed as a black man?" (Invented Lives xvii). Washington and other black feminist scholars, therefore, focused their efforts on bringing attention to the works of black

¹¹ Baldwin issues his scathing critique of Uncle Tom's Cabin in his 1949 essay "Everybody's Protest Novel." As Baldwin discusses the failure of the protest genre, he points to Uncle Tom's Cabin as the flawed model imitated by later writers of protest fiction, including Richard Wright. Essentially, Baldwin attacks Stowe's portrayal of black characters, arguing that her characterization of black men, in particular, advances the racist ideology that links "white" to good and "black" to evil.

¹² See Jane Tompkins, Sensational Designs. Tompkins' work is significant for its revival of Uncle Tom's Cabin, but also for its attention to the category of "popular fiction." For a more detailed discussion of the history of the criticism of UTC and its revival by Tompkins and others, see Chapter II of my unpublished master's thesis: "'Value and Evaluation' in the African American Literary Canon."

female writers, by publishing key anthologies such as Washington's Black-Eyed Susans, Toni Cade Bambara's The Black Woman and All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave, which was edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith. To date, Hurston is among the most (if not *the* most) influential black female author "discovered" by these scholars.¹³ Their Eyes has become widely studied in American and African American literature courses and has been popularized in the general reading public as well, selling well over 200,000 copies in the first ten years after its 1978 reissue (Awkward, "Introduction," 4). Moreover, influences of Hurston's work can be seen in contemporary fiction by black women writers such as Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Bambara and McMillan.

Different Ways to Know a Book

While it may no longer be necessary to challenge existing literary canons along the distinct lines of race and gender, the process of canon revision, or of redefining criteria of literary value, remains necessary. This practice remains essential because even as we study new texts, the critical mechanisms used to determine literary value and what texts are included in canons often remain the same. In other words, it is necessary to assess not just the canon itself, but the ongoing process of canon formation, which requires both the recognition and scrutiny of the extra-literary or critical tools and academic practices used to create and maintain canons. Michael Berube speaks to the necessity of this "ongoing historical process of cultural 'revisionism,'" where literary scholars continue to "retrieve and reproduce

¹³ For a more detailed discussion of the revival of Their Eyes by black feminist scholars as well as a history of the criticism of the text, see Chapter II of my unpublished masters' thesis: "'Value and Evaluation' in the African American Literary Canon."

the once-forgotten texts of our pasts” (Public Access 79). For Berube, the project of “canon revision” is as “deeply historical as it is deeply ethical,” necessary so that “future readers may have the fullest possible opportunity to inspect their own literary heritages” (Public Access 79). Yet, as Lauter’s analysis of the extrinsic factors or critical mechanisms at work in the shaping of the American literary canon in the 1920s makes clear, it is not enough just to attend to the “retrieval of past-forgotten texts,” or argue for the inclusion of new texts. Equally important is the need to continuously re-evaluate the critical practices used to create and maintain literary canons, or the measures used to determine why a text was forgotten in the first place.

Consider the way in which critics of African American literature first revised the American literary canon and then worked to shape an African American literary tradition and its canons. In establishing and maintaining an African American literary tradition, these scholars have employed practices much like those used by scholars in the 1920s. Like American literary scholars of the 1920s, critics of African American literature had to determine what texts they would teach in the classroom and what aesthetic theories and tools of analysis they would use to teach them. What has emerged is a critical paradigm that emphasizes protest against racism and evidence of racial uplift, as well as historic periodization based on social movements—Abolition, Reconstruction, Northern Migration, Civil Rights, Black Arts. Thus, those texts that show elements of social protest and racial uplift and/or that represent these social movements are seen as valuable to the academic study of African American literature. What also emerged is a set of literary tools specific to African American literature, such as intertextuality, signifying and call and response, all of which scholars use to

connect texts across centuries and define a comprehensive literary tradition and its representative canons.

These mechanisms combine to represent a particular critical agenda by determining not just what texts are included in African American literary studies but also what is (and is not) considered African American “literature.” And, as is the case in the broader field of literary studies, this agenda is represented in the texts that critics of African American literature choose to teach and reproduce, by including them on syllabi and in anthologies. Arguably, the best representation of this agenda is the Norton Anthology of African American Literature, which was first published in 1997. While the process of establishing an African American literary tradition began with the institutionalization of Black studies and African American literature in the late 1960s and 1970s, it culminated in the publication of the Norton. As Farah Griffin argues, the Norton’s editors “stood at the forefront of the paradigm shifts that accompanied the institutionalization of Black literary studies” (“Thirty Years” 167). The Norton is not the only anthology of African American literature published in the latter half of the twentieth century, but it is the only one to carry the name of W.W. Norton, which in the field of literary studies is *the* preeminent mark of canonization.

Yet, the Norton, as representative of the critical agenda of modern scholars of African American literature, has not gone without scrutiny. Such scrutiny is expected, considering the inherent canonical/noncanonical structure of canon formation. Early reviewers of the Norton critiqued the anthology’s limited definition of literature even as they applauded its usefulness. Kevin Meehan, for instance, argues that editors “traded those elements that have made anthologies of African American literature

unique—an *open view of what is literary* and a crosscutting of history and literature—for conservatism, canonicity, and legitimization in the eyes of the academy” (42).¹⁴ And even before the publication of the Norton, critics such as Ann duCille and Claudia Tate challenged what they saw as limiting the study of African American literature. Tate argued that “traditional African American literary scholarship ... reflects an antagonism toward marriage, which categorically prejudices its view of black women’s domestic novels. The domestic novels center marriage; traditional scholarship valorizes freedom” (Domestic Allegories 89). Similarly, Ann duCille argued that “until recently, love and marriage were all but dismissed as female, or, at least feminized themes little worthy of study when juxtaposed to the masculinized racial and freedom discourse assumed to characterize the African American novel” (Coupling 3).

Such critiques have continued throughout the last decade, with more scholars looking to expand the study of African American literature by illuminating hidden critical agendas and offering evidence of an “impoverished” literary studies. In Psychoanalysis and Black Novels (1998), Tate continues her critique of traditional African American literary scholarship by identifying the “racial protocols” of African American canon formation, and how this focus on racial oppression marginalizes other critical categories, specifically “desire.” Tate uses psychoanalytic theory to probe the presence of desire in African American fiction, particularly in the understudied works of canonical authors, such as Richard Wright’s Savage Holiday

¹⁴ See also Chester Fontenot for another early review of the Norton that critiqued its conservatism. More recent critiques of the Norton’s exclusions include a 2006 article by Gene Jarrett published in the Chronicle of Higher Education titled “Judging a Book by Its Writer’s Color.” Also, Mary Helen Washington issues a critique of the Norton’s exclusion of black writers of the Cold War era, in her forthcoming manuscript.

and Zora Neale Hurston's Seraph on the Suwanee. According to Tate, these noncanonical works harbor the authors' repressed personal desires and longings rather than public conflict. Yet, by unleashing this discourse of desire, scholars gain insight into understanding the political context or "racial meanings" in these same authors' more prominent texts. Just as Tate's earlier work expanded the definition of African American literature to include the domestic fiction of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this more recent study extends our notion of African American literature to include "anomalous black novels," or those works that "resist, to varying degrees, the race and gender paradigms that [scholars] impose on black textuality" (8).

Like Tate, Gene Jarrett calls into question the racial paradigms that define African American literature in his "alternative" anthology, African American Literature Beyond Race (2006). Jarrett also argues for the study of "anomalous" black texts, in this case, works that do not include typical portrayals and experiences of black protagonists, thus defying the "racial realism" that governs canonical African American literature. Again, Savage Holiday and Seraph on the Suwanee, both of which feature white protagonists, are among the works that Jarrett includes in his study. But Jarrett does not just bring attention to the lesser-known works of canonical authors like Hurston and Wright, he also recovers Frank Yerby, whose entire canon has been virtually ignored in contemporary African American literary studies. By expanding the definition of African American literature to include works that resist conventional representations of race, Jarrett is able to show how African American authors at particular moments in history have deliberately worked beyond existing

racial paradigms and how these “moments of literary defiance,” influence these authors’ contemporary literary landscapes as well as African American literary studies.

In addition to challenging the racial paradigms of African American literature, scholars have (albeit less so) called attention to the criteria of textual production that has accompanied African American canon formation and how this has shaped reading practices. Susanne Dietzel, for instance, identifies a bias against popular fiction in African American literary studies, which she maintains has “kept in place a rigid division between high and low, or elite and mass culture, an emphasis on invention over convention, and a distinction between literary and commercial forms of literature” (156). Dietzel points to Yerby’s critical obscurity as evidence of this division. Along these lines, Elizabeth McHenry challenges the emphasis in the study of African American literature on a single tradition, one that privileges “the slave narrative as ‘the’ mode of literary production” (6). This emphasis, McHenry argues, has obscured a long history of black literary societies as sites of non-traditional literary production and reading practices.

These scholars’ efforts represent the necessity of an ongoing process of canon revision. By ensuring that literary traditions and the canons that represent them (while necessary as pedagogical tools), are never sufficient as “essential,” “singular,” or “sole” definitions of literature, they enrich the field. As McHenry argues, “scholars of early twenty-first century literature and reading practices must bring to their research a recognition of and respect for what has always been true: there are many ways to know a book. Different readers come to different texts for different

reasons, and they bring different reading strategies to texts at different times” (313). It is our role, I argue, to acknowledge as many of these different readers, texts, reasons, reading strategies, and historical contexts as our intellectual resources will allow. Black feminist critics brought a different reading strategy to Their Eyes Were Watching God and influenced black women’s literature for decades. Many have argued that contemporary writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor all evoke the work of Hurston. Feminist scholars did the same with Uncle Tom’s Cabin, launching a field of women’s literary studies with analyses that range from the sentimental fiction of the eighteenth century to contemporary popular romance fiction.

My study continues this process of canon revision, by expanding the definition of literature at work in contemporary African American literary scholarship to include works like Yerby’s, McMillan’s, and Morrison’s that are both popular and romantic. As popular fiction, these works deliberately appeal to a commercial audience rather than an academic one, thereby defying the aesthetic standards and hierarchy of textual production privileged in the current condition of African American canon formation. As romantic fiction, these works posit the individual pursuit of love and romance as foremost, back-grounding the communal agenda of social protest and racial uplift privileged in canonical African American fiction. Works by African American authors that are intended for widespread commercial audiences (because they represent specialized genres such as crime, detective, science, romance) or those that are not easily categorized as genre fiction, but have played to the desires of a popular audience and thus garnered commercial success,

have not been discussed collectively, either as a category of “black popular fiction” or in the context of one another.¹⁵ And although scholars such as duCille and Tate argued for the inclusion of works that center on themes of “feminized” themes such as marriage and domesticity, there is, as yet, no in-depth analysis of “black romance novels.”

The combination—popular and romantic—has ensured that the works I include in this study—Yerby’s The Foxes of Harrow, McMillan’s first three novels (Mama, Disappearing Acts and Waiting to Exhale) and Toni Morrison’s Tar Baby—have not been eligible for canon inclusion by standards and protocols of contemporary African American literary scholars. Although popular in the commercial literary marketplace, these works have primarily been absent from the contemporary field of literary studies. Yerby published 33 novels, five short stories and several poems, but until very recently, he was not mentioned in the pages of most contemporary anthologies or in contemporary discussions of African American *or* American literature. Morrison is one of the most widely studied authors of all time, but Tar Baby, her first contemporary love story, remains her most understudied work. And although Terry McMillan made history in 1992, when she, Morrison, and Alice Walker simultaneously appeared on the New York Times best-seller list, scholarship

¹⁵ By “black popular fiction,” I am referring specifically to works, primarily novels, by African American authors that are read by widespread, commercial audiences. In defining “popular,” I am using factors such as sales figures, appearance on best-seller lists and representations of the novel in other mediums (mainstream magazines, cinema, television, etc.) as indicators of a books’ appeal to a commercial audience.

Also, I am aware of the problems with labeling this category “black popular fiction.” For what makes a text “black”? Is it defined by the characters, theme, issues addressed or by the ethnicity of the author. This is an important question being posed in the field today. And unfortunately, I do not have an answer. Yet, for the purposes of this study, my focus is on authors who would be considered African American in the context of U.S. culture. And even then, that focus is complicated by the very authors I focus on. Yerby, in particular, at times adamantly resisted this very categorization.

on McMillan remains limited to a few journal articles and discussions of her life and commercial success. In contrast, scholarship on Morrison and Walker ranges from journal articles, to full-length book projects, to pedagogical studies, and more.

Where Is the Love?

Romance as a literary genre and as theme explored by writers is almost as enduring as literature itself. In her 2003 study, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, Pamela Regis traces the development of the modern romance novel as far back as the mid-1700s. And scholars have explored the themes of love and romance in American literature for decades, ranging from Leslie Fiedler's often-cited 1960 study Love and Death in the American Novel to today's burgeoning field of popular romance critics. The abundance of criticism on the popular romance genre, in particular, is evidence that these topics have become "accepted" areas of critique in American literary studies.

At the same time, critics have been less likely to explore romance *and* race. Among the many book-length studies on the romance novel, including Regis' recent one and a number of others written throughout the 1980s and 1990s by feminist critics seeking to initiate discussions of the popular romance genre in the academic arena, none except Rita Dandridge's recent study Black Women's Activism (2004), explores the relationship between romance and race. In fact, Dandridge's work is the first published book-length study of African American historical romance novels. While significant, Dandridge's work focuses on novels published since 1989, and thus is limited to only the most recent representations of romance and race and only

those portrayed in the historical romance genre. And, as previously argued, duCille and Tate are among the few critics to explore “feminized” themes of love and romance in African American fiction.

Yet, even among these few critics, there are important similarities in their work. DuCille, Tate and Dandridge all read different texts from different eras, but they all identify a political tension in the relationship between romance and race, which casts these works as more than just simple love stories, but narratives with important political intent. In Domestic Allegories, Tate reads political desire and ambition in the eleven extant domestic novels written by black women in the post-Reconstruction era that she studies. The novels’ formulaic idealization of domestic settings and appropriation of bourgeois and what she refers to as “Victorian” values make them appear devoid of any racial or political agenda. Yet, by reconstructing the cultural, social and literary milieu in which these texts were created, Tate is able to uncover in the novels’ domestic happiness an “allegorical representation of fulfilled black ambition or political desire.” In the Coupling Convention, duCille traces the role of the marriage tradition in African American texts from the 1850s to the 1940s, exposing the way the marriage tradition, which she renames the “coupling convention,” is used as a trope in African American fiction to illuminate issues of racial identity, racism and sexuality. Similarly, Dandridge argues that recent African American historical romance novels re-create the black woman in the nineteenth century in order to more fully represent black women’s “invigorating calls to action and empowerment” (4).

In many ways, romance and race are inherently at odds. The schism is particularly stark for African American writers participating in a literary tradition where the strategies used historically to portray the complexity of black identity have centered on masking, passing, and “wearing the veil.” In their efforts to portray the particular experiences of black Americans negotiating racial prejudice and discrimination in the United States, black writers typically evoke black characters choosing to shelter their identity in order to negotiate the country’s racial landscape. Stories of romantic love, however, require exposure, unveiling, undressing, a sort of vulnerability that is seemingly incompatible with the strategies of racial representation at work in African American literature. Narratives of romance for African American writers have historically been much more than simple love stories, but ones that carry the burden of representing complex subjectivity, negotiating history, and balancing competing priorities. Importantly, they have also often been stories of regulation: laws during slavery prevented blacks from marrying, prohibited interracial unions, diminished the economic power of black men and the sexual autonomy of black women. Within such a paradigm, it is difficult to imagine or write of the type of idealized love common to the romance genre, complete with white knights, shining horses, and happy endings.

It is more likely, therefore, to see African American writers manipulating the romantic story, or more broadly, manipulating popular literary genres to integrate stories of romance and race. African American authors strategically revise these genres, essentially borrowing the most recognizable literary conventions of the time and recasting them to spread their message to a wide audience. Consider Harriet

Jacobs' popular 1861 slave narrative, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, which is distinguished from other slave narratives by its fictional qualities: Jacobs adopts a pseudonym (Linda Brent), incorporates dialect and uses a third-person narrator. But several scholars have also pointed out how Jacobs' text was influenced by the popular genre of sentimental fiction. For instance, the seduction plot, portrayed in the text by Dr. Flint's relentless pursuit of Linda, was widely used in sentimental fiction. Incorporating such conventions of the sentimental novel allowed Jacobs to appeal to her Northern white women readers' sense of identity. At the same time, as Valerie Smith argues, gaps in the text illustrate the inability of this genre to fully represent Jacobs' story.¹⁶ Jacobs' use of the genre, therefore, required significant changes. The most obvious of such changes is Jacobs' revised ending: "Reader," Jacobs concludes, "my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage" (513). For readers of the sentimental genre, an ending in marriage ensured stability and security for the heroine. Yet, for Jacobs, after years of living as a fugitive slave, having to flee at a moment's notice, it is freedom that is the mark of stability and security.

African American female novelists Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins also incorporate elements of a popular literary genre in order to advance a racial agenda in their post-Reconstruction domestic novels Iola Leroy (1892) and Contending Forces (1900). Both Harper and Hopkins, along with other black women novelists of the era, incorporate melodrama and domestic idealism, both elements of sentimental fiction, in their texts as a way of satisfying a popular readership and gaining public or

¹⁶ See Valerie Smith, "Loopholes of Retreat: Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." Reading Black, Reading Feminist (212-26). Also see, Claudia Tate, Domestic Allegories of Political Desire.

widespread attention.¹⁷ The novel's attention to love, marriage, courtship, family, womanly duties and female social status was expected and required in the sentimental genre. Yet, these authors also explore issues outside the domestic sphere, specifically the legal restrictions and restraints imposed on black people in the late nineteenth century. In so doing, they engage in a type of social activism and racial uplift uncommon to the sentimental genre.¹⁸ Hopkins admits her literary strategy—to use romance to advance a racial agenda—in the preface to Contending Forces: “In giving this little romance expression in print, I am not actuated by a desire for notoriety or for profit, but to do all I can in an humble way to raise the stigma of degradation of my race.” Still, like Harriet Jacobs, Hopkins and Harper face a dilemma, by choosing to use as their form/framework a popular genre that cannot fully represent their stories. As Mary Helen Washington recognizes, “in no other body of American writing are form and content so fiercely at war” (Invented Lives, 75-76). The conflict manifests in their texts as they are forced to revise the genre, primarily by challenging the era's ideals of “true” womanhood, which called for women to be modest, virtuous and chaste, and revising stereotypes of black females, which portrayed black women as amoral and sexually promiscuous.

Just as Jacobs, Hopkins and Harper use their novels to both engage and influence their contemporary audiences' notions of race and racial identity, so do Yerby, Morrison and McMillan in the novels I include in this study. Specifically, I argue that Yerby, Morrison and McMillan manipulate the romance genre in order to

¹⁷ In the introduction to the Schomburg Edition of the novel, Frances Smith Foster writes that Iola Leroy “was probably the best-selling novel by an Afro-American writer prior to the twentieth century.” (xxvii)

¹⁸ See Claudia Tate, Domestic Allegories. In addition to works by Hopkins and Harper, Tate focuses her study on works by Amelia Johnson, Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins and Katherine D. Tillman.

advance their particular racial agendas. In the novels I discuss, these authors center relationships of romantic love, incorporating elements of the historical romance and popular romance genres and exploring popular themes of love, courtship and marriage. Yet, in order to incorporate a racial and or political element into their novels, they revise the genre, often critiquing it in the process. At the same time, these authors undertake a not-so-popular “racial project,” using their novels to represent a particular racial experience that (prior to their texts) has not been widely explored in the literary marketplace and that counters existing literary representations. In so doing, they revise the romance genre, often critiquing it in the process, and work to influence their contemporary audiences’ understanding and acceptance of the particular racial experiences and perspectives they represent in their texts.

In Chapter One, for instance, I argue that in his first published novel, The Foxes of Harrow, Yerby recreates the economic, political and social realities of nineteenth century Louisiana slave society in order to challenge racialized notions of identity, both “black” and “white.” His portrayal of Stephen Fox, a poor “Dublin-gutter snipe” who becomes the wealthiest planter in Louisiana, calls into question “whiteness” as a stable category. And his portrayal of the slave Inch, the novel’s most transformative character, defies racial stereotypes of blackness. Using the conventions of the historical romance genre as a platform, Yerby illuminates the instability and unreliability of racial identity, thereby undermining those social and legal institutions that depended on racial surety. Such institutions include slavery, which he directly confronts in the novel, but also the racial segregation at work in the

everyday lives of his 1940s readership. Hence, although Yerby sets his novel in a historical setting, he seeks to influence a contemporary audience.

In Chapter Two, I argue that Morrison uses her fourth novel, Tar Baby (1981), to expand representations of race and gender, particularly that of black females, in popular discourse and the contemporary literary marketplace. At the time of Tar Baby's publication, the popular romance genre was transforming the publishing industry. Unlike Morrison's novels and Tar Baby, in particular, popular romance novels catered primarily to white women readers and disavowed the social constructions of race that permeated its readers' actual lives. Morrison, in contrast, integrates the narratives of romance and race in her novel, employing the genre's most recognizable elements—the fair maiden, the dark hero, the social barrier to their love—in order to critique the genre's lack of racial diversity and perpetuation of white female beauty. Yet, by exposing the romance genre's assumed “raceless” conventions, Morrison also critiques the marketplace that promoted the genre and the contemporary readership that accepted it. Finally, by introducing the black commercialized heroine into the literary marketplace, Morrison influences popular African American literature decades beyond the publication of her own contemporary love story.

In Chapter Three, I challenge critics' characterization of Terry McMillan's fiction as significant solely because of its commercial success. I argue that McMillan uses her first three novels (Mama, Disappearing Acts and Waiting to Exhale) to portray the particular experiences of young, urban, upwardly mobile, or middle-class black females, a group that previously had not been widely portrayed in the literary

marketplace, even among the “renaissance” of black women’s literature launched in the late 1970s and 1980s. These characters search for what I call “domestic success,” which is defined by not just having a husband or significant other (the goal of the romance genre) but also a thriving and promising career (a by-product of the civil rights and feminist movements, which created new professional opportunities for black females). As McMillan’s characters negotiate this quest for domestic success, they create a sort of “cult of single black womanhood,” marked by new paradigms of contemporary domesticity that both disrupt idealized notions of love and marriage and redefine gender roles within heterosexual unions. For those contemporary readers who share the particular perspective found in McMillan’s works these novels validate their own experiences and concerns.

My study represents a significant departure from existing scholarship on all three of these authors. In the case of Yerby, critics have assumed that his canon of primarily historical romantic fiction did not address issues of race and racism because of its focus on romance, its portrayal of white protagonists, and its popular appeal. Within the last few years, critics have started to initiate new criticism on Yerby’s works, emphasizing his importance to African American literary studies. My study participates in this new conversation, illuminating how Yerby’s use of romance provided a platform for him to challenge race, not to avoid it as many assumed. In the case of Morrison, my study is the first to read her fiction within the context of a popular literary genre. Although Morrison is one of the most popular authors of the late twentieth century, critics have been unwilling to associate her fiction with mass-market or formula fiction, which are typically considered of little artistic merit. Yet,

by limiting our critical lens to “literary” or “scholarly” fiction alone, we miss a chance to see how Morrison’s most misunderstood and most understudied text has influenced African American literature’s position in the marketplace. Finally, my study refocuses the attention on Terry McMillan away from her *commercial* value to her *literary* value, specifically the significance of her fiction in the African American literary tradition and on contemporary readers. While I have highlighted the important ways that my work contributes to African American literary studies, my study is not confined to this realm. The emphasis on popular fiction contributes to the larger field of study on popular culture, which tends to address other popular forms such as music, film and television, rather than fiction. Similarly, my study contributes to the field of criticism on the romance genre, which has generally omitted discussions of race.

Overall, my study argues for the cultural importance of the popular, particularly among modern critics of African American literature who tend to consider works that are both popular and romantic as “mainstream” and, thus, inconsequential to the study of African American literature. Moreover, while this study helps us read the novels of Yerby, Morrison and McMillan, in particular, it also provides a framework for a much broader analysis of romantic themes in popular African American novels. For instance, in the current literary marketplace, popular romantic fiction dominates what is being read and produced by African Americans. It is the basis for most novels that are made into film and for novels that are most likely to be reproduced and translated in international settings. As literary, social and cultural phenomena, these texts inevitably will influence representations of race and

constructions of racial identity in popular discourse and beyond. An analysis of romance, race and resistance in best-selling twentieth century African American narrative extends the necessary and ongoing process of enriching and expanding African American literary studies.

Chapter 1: Reclaiming Race in Frank Yerby: The ‘Prince of Pulpsters’

“Be a writer first ... colored second ... If you have something folks want to read, publishers do not care what color you are ... Almost nobody knows Frank Yerby is colored.”

—Langston Hughes, “Writers: Black and White” (1959) (Hughes)

African American best-selling novelist Frank Yerby published over 30 novels, as well as a number of short stories and poems, but in literary studies, he is primarily recognized, if at all, as a writer of pulp fiction, or mass-market paperback novels. As such, critics have relegated Yerby’s significance to the commercial literary marketplace alone, missing an opportunity to discuss the importance of his works outside these boundaries. In this chapter, I will challenge this narrow characterization of Yerby’s works, by examining the intersections between romance and race in his first published novel, The Foxes of Harrow (1946). In this novel, Yerby recreates the economic, political and social realities of nineteenth century Louisiana slave society to challenge racialized notions of identity, both “black” and “white.” Using the conventions of the historical romance genre as a platform, Yerby illuminates the instability and unreliability of racial identity, thereby undermining those social and legal institutions, such as slavery, that depended on racial surety. Critical race theory provides a lens to read Yerby’s racial agenda. As these critics argue, the social construction of race in the United States has worked in tandem with the institutionalization of the law, with the law working to reinforce the inferior positioning of the racial subject. In The Foxes of Harrow, Yerby recognizes this

paradigm and seeks to dismantle it by focusing on “whiteness” as an unstable racial category.

In addition to my reading of The Foxes of Harrow, I also examine the issue of race throughout Yerby’s literary career, from his early protest writing to his popular romantic fiction, by chronicling his successes alongside the responses and reactions of an African American critical establishment. This analysis reveals a strained relationship with a black literary and intellectual community and helps explain why the most prolific black U.S. author to date remains on the margins of African American literary discourse. The resistance to racial categorization that Yerby develops in The Foxes of Harrow is indicative of the racial agenda he pursues throughout his life, where at every turn he opposes attempts to be identified primarily or only by race. Critics of African American literature, however, have misinterpreted Yerby’s focus on whiteness and his desire to resist racial categorization as an *inattention* to race and racial tension. Thus as contemporary scholars of African American literature have worked to solidify a tradition built on themes of social protest and racial uplift, they have assumed that Yerby’s popular novels were antithetical to these concerns.

In the Protest Tradition

When he died in 1991, Frank Yerby had published 33 novels, the majority of which were best-selling novels that incorporated elements of the historical romance genre and featured white characters. As a result, the expatriate author was among the most popular American writers and, as Hughes indicates in the quote that begins this

chapter, few knew he was black. Yerby's first published writings, however, place him centrally within the group of black writers in the late 1930s and early 1940s exploring themes of racial protest and experimenting with social realism, the movement/technique popularized by the success of Richard Wright's Native Son in 1940 and William Attaway's Blood on the Forge in 1941. In 1935, when Yerby was just 18 years old, he published several poems in Challenge, a literary journal edited by author Dorothy West. West, who began her writing career during the Harlem Renaissance, endorsed Yerby in her editorial column, speaking to his promise as a young, yet confident writer: "Frank G. Yerby is so very young that he is still unaware of his youth, and his encouraging letters to us are almost grand fatherly." Yerby's maturity as well as his awareness of the realities of racism is reflected in the hymn he wrote in 1936 for his undergraduate institution, Paine College, a historically black university in Georgia:

O College of our heart's desire, resplendent in our gaze,
A wake in us thy sacred fire and let us to thy truth
Aspire throughout the coming days.

And may the things that thou hast sought, our nation's
Woeful lack, True union of the heart be brought
And differences be set at naught between the white and black.

Paine College, guardian of the way that each young
Foot must tread, Thy gates are open to this day

And our firm martial strides display hearts clean and unafraid.¹⁹

Yerby indicates that the biggest challenge facing the graduates of Paine College would not be their intellectual endeavors or career pursuits but the ongoing fight against racism. According to the hymn, college-educated blacks would need to be ready for a battle of truth, unity and justice, armed with “firm martial strides” and hearts “clean and unafraid.”²⁰

Yerby continued to address issues of racial tension in the short stories he published in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In 1938, Yerby left his native South, enrolled in the University of Chicago to pursue more graduate education and joined the budding community of black writers in the city. Here, he worked with the Federal Writers Project of the WPA, along with well-known authors such as Wright, Margaret Walker and Arna Bontemps. He also continued to seek a national forum for his writings, publishing short stories in venues such as the leftist publications New Anvil and Common Ground, and in Phylon, which was published by Atlanta University. Yerby’s short story, “Health Card,” however, was the first to receive both national and critical attention. Published in Harper’s Magazine in 1944, Health Card was awarded the prestigious O. Henry Memorial Award Prize for the best first short story. The story portrays a black soldier who is demoralized in the process of trying to defend his wife’s honor. When the soldier’s wife comes to visit him, military officers assume the soldier’s wife is a prostitute and therefore require that she have in her possession a “health card.” Unable to defend himself and his wife against the officers

¹⁹ “Paine Hymn” (1936). The poem is included in the Frank Yerby Archives at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University.

²⁰ While working on his master’s degree in Tennessee at Fisk University, another HBCU (historically black college and university), Yerby published several short stories in the university’s publication, the Fisk Herald.

for fear of retribution, the soldier proclaims in humiliation: “I ain’t no man!” His wife follows with a feeble attempt at reclamation: “Hush, sugar,” she said. “You’s a man awright. You’s my man!” (553). The central theme of “Health Card”—the power of racism to strip a black man of his manhood—is one that Yerby explores in his other published short stories (and in a number of unpublished short stories available in his archives). For instance, the protagonist in “The Homecoming,” a black soldier returning to the South after the war, refuses to return to his role as docile servant: “I done fought and been most killed and now I’m a man. Can’t be a boy no more” (qtd. in Clarke 156). The ex-soldier’s refusal to conform to racist Southern conventions, however, offends the town’s white residents, who retaliate by forming a lynch mob.

While “Health Card,” “Homecoming” and other short stories dealt with the themes of manhood and racism, Yerby also sought to diversify the subjects represented in protest literature. In other short stories, Yerby focused his attention on the plight of the black intellectual. His efforts are reminiscent of the focus of his undergraduate hymn. For instance, in “White Magnolias,” which was published in Phylon in 1944, the main character Hannah is the daughter of a prominent black doctor in a small southern town. Hannah represents the black elite, with a degree from Fisk University and involvement as a community activist with the International League. Yet, even with Hannah’s educational achievements and economic status, the parents of Hannah’s white girlfriend Beth assume that Hannah is a maid. Within the story, Beth’s father speaks directly to the limitations that racism placed on black intellectuals: “all the money and all the education in the world won’t make a white

man out of a nigger! All it does is make the critter miserable. Wanting things he never can have. Forgetting he's black and trying to act white" (324). Yerby brings attention to the difficulty that college-educated blacks faced trying to find jobs that would allow them to utilize their academic skills.

In addressing the plight of the black intellectual in his writings, Yerby mimics his own reality. The racial prejudices of publishers and the American reading public made it difficult for black authors like Yerby to make a living as a writer. Zora Neale Hurston's landmark essay, "What White Publishers Won't Print" (1950), speaks to the biases of publishing houses that only wanted to print the type of fiction that perpetuated stereotypes of minorities. In the article, Hurston advocates for literature that represented the diversity of black Americans, stories, for instance, that "take romance of upper-class Negro life as the central theme," and stories that "revealed Negroes of wealth of culture," much like Yerby's "White Magnolias" (rpt. in Hurston, I Love Myself, 173). Like Hurston and other black writers in the 1940s and 1950s, Yerby recognized the limitations of protest writing both in its artistic creativity but also in terms of market practicality. Wright's Native Son was commercially successful, mostly due to its selection for the Book of the Month Club in 1940. But Native Son's course was more the exception than the norm for protest literature.²¹ Thus, Yerby, like others, struggled to make a living as a writer. In the early 1940s, he quit his "\$138-a-month job" at Southern University and moved to Detroit to work at a Ford Motor Company plant. Later he moved to New York and worked at an aircraft company in the city's Jamaica neighborhood (Fuller 190).

²¹ Native Son sold 215,000 copies within three weeks after being selected by the Book of the Month Club in 1940. See, Janice A. Radway, A Feeling for Books, p.287

In an interview several decades later, Yerby recalled the financial quandary he faced: “I always, from the very first, wanted to write significant fiction, but there was a long time when, I economically and financially, could not afford to write significant fiction” (qtd. in Hill 210). Here, Yerby is referring to his struggle in the 1930s and 1940s to make a living as a writer of protest literature or the type of fiction he wrote throughout this period, which dealt directly with themes of racial protest and racial tension, what he refers to here as “significant fiction.”

After years of writing “significant fiction” in the social protest mode, Yerby, in the mid-1940s, shifted his focus in theme and genre and writes a historical romance novel, significantly redirecting the course of his literary career. In 1946, he published The Foxes of Harrow, which was an immediate commercial success, selling more than 2 million copies and making the best-sellers list. In 1947, the movie rights to the book were sold for \$150,000, making it the first novel by a black author to be purchased by a Hollywood studio.²² Set in Louisiana in the early nineteenth century, the novel centers on the protagonist Stephen Fox, an Irishman who comes to Louisiana with little money and no connections. But with his shrewd business sense, Fox soon builds the richest plantation in the state. After The Foxes of Harrow, Yerby published a stream of best-selling novels, one each year from 1946 to 1962, and although they varied in setting and time period, all of them were similar in theme and genre as The Foxes of Harrow.²³

²² See Louis Hill Pratt. The movie starred popular actors Rex Harrison and Maureen O’Hara. Two more of Yerby’s novels, The Golden Hawk (1948) and The Saracen Blade (1952) were also made into films.

²³ The Vixens (1947), The Golden Hawk (1948), Pride’s Castle (1949), Floodtide (1950), A Woman Called Fancy (1951)—in this book, Yerby introduces his first woman protagonist—The Saracen Blade (1952), The Devil’s Laughter (1953), Benton’s Row (1954), The Treasure of Pleasant Valley (1955),

Questioning Race and the African American Literary Tradition

In commenting on Yerby's shift to writing historical romance fiction and his subsequent commercial success, critics of African American literature gradually began to distance Yerby from the black community of writers that he was a part of in the 1930s and 1940s and from what many have interpreted as issues of race. Many of Yerby's contemporaries praised his success, but they did so on the basis of particular elements of his works, specifically his works' popularity and non-black characters. For instance, in an article in The Crisis in 1948, author and critic Hugh Gloster commends Yerby's use of non-black characters:

His chief contribution, however, has been to *shake himself free of the shackles of race* and to use the treasure-trove of American experience—rather than restrictively Negro experience—as his literary province. The Foxes of Harrow and The Vixens, along with Willard Motley's Knock on Any Door, signalize the emergence of Negro novelists from the circumscriptions of color and the power of these writers to treat competently not only various aspects of Negro experience but also the broader life of this country and the world. (13)

Gloster characterizes Yerby's novels, all of which in the 1940s and 1950s featured white protagonists, as evidence of Yerby's ability to "free himself from the shackles of race," that is to not be restricted to the stories about the plight of the black

Captain Rebel (1956), Fairoaks (1957), The Serpent and the Staff (1958), Jarrett's Jade (1959), Gillian (1960), The Garfield Honor (1961), Griffin's Way (1962).

intellectual and black manhood and racism that constituted Yerby's earlier short stories.

Among many in the postwar literary community of African American writers and intellectuals, Yerby's success signaled progression for black writers. Writer and scholar J. Saunders Redding urged black writers in 1945 to "make a common audience out of black and white ... write American books for American audiences" (1284). Critics such as Gloster and Redding argued that in order for the Negro writer to become a first-rate American novelist, he had to move "beyond race" and write for and about a "universal" audience. In their eyes, writing about themes of racial and social protest limited the Negro writer and hindered his ability to appeal to a mainstream or *American* audience. Thus, Yerby's novels came to represent the potential for black writers to tap into this new arena.

Yerby was not the only black writer in the 1940s and early 1950s to publish novels with white protagonists. Willard Motley, whom Gloster mentions, as well as Ann Petry and Zora Neale Hurston, among others, did so as well. But Yerby was the most prolific and the most commercially successful. And, his novels were the only, among these three at least, to be categorized as mass-market fiction and to follow a formula based on the romance genre. As such, critic Robert Bone dismisses Yerby altogether from his assessment of the field in 1958. In *The Negro Novel in America*, Bone separates Yerby from these other writers as well as from the history of Negro literature, foreshadowing Yerby's dismissal from contemporary literary discourse. In discussing the literature of the postwar years (1940-1952), Bone characterizes the period as representing a "revolt against protest" and recognizes a trend among black

writers to leave the race struggle behind (166). Within this trend, he identifies three types of postwar novels: escapist literature or pulp fiction, the assimilationist novel proper, and the novel of Negro life. Bone argues that the first group, i.e. the “pulpsters,” of which he deems Yerby the “prince,” can be “easily disposed of,” characterizing their novels as “serious about nothing whatever” and posing “no problem concerning race” (166). According to Bone, these writers had abandoned protest “in favor of pot-boilers and best-sellers.” More importantly, Bone claims that they have deviated from the tradition of black writers who had “been more interested in educating than in entertaining the white folks” (166).

Bone’s book is significant as one of the few critical assessments of the entire field of African American literature published before the surge of African American literary scholarship in the 1970s. Bone’s analysis is also significant as one of the first deliberate dismissals of Yerby’s fiction from the *tradition* of African American literature. In his book, Bone includes an analysis of Motley’s Knock on Any Door (1947) and Petry’s A County Place (1947), which were published just one year after The Foxes of Harrow and like Yerby’s novel, center on white characters. More significantly, Bone argues, like Gloster and Redding in the 1940s, that the decision by such authors to focus on white characters, or to move beyond race, was a natural progression for the black writer as political and social gains were made toward integration. But, in the case of Yerby, Bone characterizes his decision to shift his focus in genre and theme, not as progression for the black writers, but as a personal flaw, describing Yerby as a fortune-seeker, “marked by a willingness at all times to sacrifice literary value for sales” (166). As Bone looks back to determine the

significant literature of the postwar period, he sees these “pot-boilers” of popular culture as unacceptable for inclusion in an African American literary tradition that was defined on the basis of social protest.

According to Yerby, however, his decision to write The Foxes of Harrow and redirect the course of his literary career was not based on a desire to abandon the problem of race in his works, or to “entertain” white folks as Bone suggests.²⁴ In later interviews, Yerby attributes his decision to switch from protest writing to the frustration he felt after not being able to find a publisher and audience for his works of social protest, particularly a protest novel that he wrote in the 1940s.²⁵ According to Yerby, he decided to no longer write what he wanted, but what he had determined the reader wanted:

Having collected a houseful of rejection slips for works about ill-treated factory workers, or people who suffered because of their religions or the color of their skins, I arrived at the awesome conclusion that the reader cares not a snap about such questions; that, moreover, they are none of the novelist’s business. (“How and Why” 145)

These comments appear in a 1959 article Yerby wrote for Harper’s Magazine, where he outlines his formula for literary success and opines broader observations of the field. For Yerby, a writer was not a writer if he or she was not read. The measure of

²⁴ It also appears as if Yerby did not fully stop writing protest fiction. Among the more than two dozen unpublished short stories in the archives at Boston University, there are several short stories that deal directly with race in the United States and include many of the themes he addressed in his published short stories.

²⁵ For a discussion of the content of this unpublished novel, This Is My Own, as well as correspondence between Yerby and his agent regarding its publication, see Gene Jarrett, Deans and Truants.

a successful book and/or writer, then, was based on public reception. A “good” book was popular, that is, read by a wide audience when it was first published and remained popular over the years. Overall, literary success could be evaluated by sustained popularity, argued Yerby, who pointed to a few examples: “... the classics of today are very nearly always the best sellers of the past. Thackeray, Dickens, Defoe, Byron, Pope, Fielding—the list is endless—enjoyed fabulous popularity in their day” (146). But Yerby also argued that although he sought to please the reader, he did not completely abandon the issue of race, choosing instead to repurpose it for his new audience:

If your only theme is ‘Oh, God, I’m Black and look how badly they treat me,’ people get tired of that. You have to be more subtle than that. In every novel I have written about the American South, I have subtly infused a very strong defense of Black history and Black people. And Southerners who read my novels for the first time love them. Black writers are preaching to the converted; the people who need convincing in the States are the little old ladies in tennis shoes and their husbands. I have an audience of utter, nasty bigots. (qtd. in Graham 70)²⁶

²⁶ Yerby makes similar statements in a 1977 interview with James Hill, although here he names the black writers he is referring to, saying that he admires the works of James Baldwin, but does not agree with his literary strategy. “My feeling is that Jimmy and other black novelists of his group and of his school, because Jimmy formed the school, were preaching to the converted, that they had no possible way of reaching the people whom they needed to reach. Who you’ve got to convert is the bigot, not the semiliberal. And I was trying to get to the bigots; I was trying to get to the nigger-haters” (211).

In other words, Yerby sought the best of both worlds, to write about race and to be read at the same time. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Yerby continues to publish his costume novels, with white protagonists and romantic conventions.

Despite Yerby's explanations, Bone's characterization of Yerby as a profit-seeking writer whose works included "no problem concerning race" followed Yerby throughout the 1960s and 1970s, further distancing him from a community of black writers and the issue of race. By this time, the political climate in which Yerby began his publishing career had significantly changed. The Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and the Black Power movement of the 1970s drastically altered the racial climate in the United States politically and socially, but also in terms of black cultural production. While in previous decades moving beyond race was considered a progression for black writers, during this era, race was solidly linked to social advancement. Therefore, black artists were called to use their literary talent to advance the cause of civil rights. In the 1970s, proponents of the Black Arts movement, in particular, urged writers to use their talents to further advance the fight against racism and discrimination. But Yerby, who in the mid-1950s had become an expatriate, settling in Spain in 1955, continued to write his costume novels with white protagonists and romantic conventions. And unlike other expatriates such as Richard Wright, Chester Himes and James Baldwin, he did not remain politically connected and publicly concerned about the plight of U.S. blacks through his writings.

As a result of Yerby's disconnection, the African American literary and scholarly community criticized his refusal to lend his voice to the civil rights struggle and questioned his racial loyalty. Writer and critic Hoyt Fuller, for instance,

chastised Yerby for not publicly acknowledging the role that race and racism played in his success. Aware of Yerby's early protest-style writings and his personal struggles with discrimination, Fuller argued, in a 1966 interview with Yerby in Ebony magazine, that "Yerby's steadfast refusal to allow his personal feelings about race in general or the American dilemma in particular to intrude into his work is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that his own 'pursuit of happiness' has in large measure been stage-managed by race and color" (188).²⁷ As editor of Negro Digest in the early 1960s and a leading figure of the Black Arts movement, Fuller, in contrast, had dedicated his work as editor and critic to directly confronting the race problem. Fuller's critique is representative of the sentiment among black intellectuals toward Yerby that persists throughout the rest of the twentieth century. As a result, even when Yerby tried to repair his image with black readers and critics, his efforts were not enough to change their perceptions. Yerby abandoned his policy of not giving interviews and agreed to the one with Fuller discussed above saying, "it was about time I repaired that image—the aloof, slightly reactionary writer who refuses to touch racial subject."²⁸ Yet, the response to the article from Ebony readers indicates

²⁷ Fuller recounts several instances where Yerby complained of being the victim of racial discrimination. In one instance, Yerby's neighbors in the all-white community where he lived stopped speaking to his family and refused to let their children play with Yerby's children after learning that Yerby was black. The neighbors had assumed Yerby was white, but learned differently after the publication of The Foxes of Harrow.

²⁸ Although Yerby agreed to the interview with Fuller, he set a number of restrictions, such as excluding pictures of his wife, his home, his cars, clothes, shoes and "other such external evidences of material wealth," which he saw as insulting. More significantly, however, Yerby also outlines for Fuller what he does want to discuss: "What it's like to be a writer ...; the joys and sorrows of voluntary exile; the future of the novel as an art form as opposed to using it as a sociological tract to further any cause whatsoever, no matter how worthy, which reduces ... writing, to mere propaganda." He also reiterates his stance on race, asking Fuller, "What on earth are the boys going to write about when the biological accident of a man's color has been reduced to the total unimportance it out to have in the scheme of things?" Letter to Hoyt Fuller, February 1, 1966, Hoyt W. Fuller Collection, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, Ga.

that he was not successful. As one Ebony reader wrote in a later edition of the magazine in response to Fuller's interview:

Yerby ran out on us when our backs were to the wall. When his book, Foxes of Harrow, was a best-seller and Mr. Yerby was riding the crest of popularity, he wanted no part of us and hied himself off to Europe to a white world, which was his business ... But as for being interested in his plight now, will someone in the audience please stand and tell Brother Yerby that *we don't need him now*. (emphasis added)

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Yerby's gradual dissociation from a community of black writers and racial concerns had reached such a point that even when he did include a black protagonist and commented directly on the problem of race in America in the novels Speak Now (1969) and The Dahomean (1971)—exactly what black critics had denounced him for not doing—it was not enough to “repair” his image. While some critics were complimentary of The Dahomean, their praise was cursory. Also cursory was Yerby's decision to feature a black protagonist and make direct commentary on race in the United States: Speak Now, The Dahomean and its sequel, A Darkness at Ingraham's Crest (1979), are the exception in Yerby's canon where white protagonists and historical settings are the norm. As a result, Yerby's efforts were not enough to reposition him as significant to the field or study of African American literature.

Yerby's prolific canon (he wrote 30 books by the late 1970s) gave critics substantial material to probe in order to determine his views on race, but his own commentary, printed in the few interviews he agreed to and in his correspondence,

undoubtedly prompted even more scrutiny. As Yerby became more successful and well-known, he opposed attempts to be identified primarily or only by race at every turn. “My mother was Scotch-Irish, a grandparent was Indian; I’ve far more Irish blood than Negro. I simply insist on remaining a member of the human race,” he argued in an interview. And when confronted about his refusal to lend his voice publicly to the race struggle, he responded: “I don’t think a writer’s output should be dictated by *a biological accident*. It happens there are many things I know far better than the race problem” (qtd. in The Gale Group). Similarly, when Fuller accused Yerby of trying to “flee his Negro identity,” Yerby responded: “I did tell my publishers at one time not to identify me as a Negro ... but not because I wanted to deny it, I just wanted to be consistent. If I raped a woman in Grant Park, there would be violent objection to identifying me as a Negro. I don’t see why I should be identified by race when I become very successful” (qtd. in Fuller 190). Yerby maintained this resistance to racial categorization throughout his career, commenting in an interview with James Hill in 1977, “I am a member of the human race, and I have many ancestors. I’m proud of them all; I love them all; I have denied none of them” (233).

Yet, while Yerby appeared steadfast in his defense of racial ambivalence in his public commentary, his personal correspondence indicates the complexity of his positions. In letters he wrote to his agent and publishers throughout the 1960s, it is clear that Yerby’s resistance to racial categorization was not due to any lack of awareness of racism in the United States, but more so to his to struggle to integrate his public identity and his personal desires. By the mid-1960s, Yerby had been away

from the United States for almost two decades, and even though his fiction was popular in the United States, he had only returned for short visits. In 1964, at the urging of his literary agent, Yerby considered making an extended visit, although he admitted: “If I could avoid it, I would never come over there.”²⁹ Yerby’s distaste for the United States was due to the prevalence of racial discrimination in the country, and, as importantly, his inability to avoid it. Whereas overseas Yerby was considered American, in the United States he was clearly *black* American.³⁰ And being black in America was not simply about identifying one’s race, but subjecting oneself to a life that Yerby’s financial success had afforded him an opportunity to avoid. For Yerby, the choice was clear: “My considered opinion is that any person of *noticeably* Negro ancestry, who can afford not to, and who voluntarily lives in the Union of South Africa or the United States of American is in serious need of psychiatric care.”³¹

Yerby’s public visibility in the United States as a *black* writer conflicted with his personal desire to avoid racial discrimination:

I refuse to let my life be circumscribed by such total irrevelancies as the color of my skin. I have neither time nor the energy to waste in the daily attempt to solve such idiotic problems (sic) as whether I dare go to a certain hotel, restaurant, night club, etc. I insist upon the elementary right to choose the neighborhood, rather than have the neighborhood choose (or reject) me. ... I regard it as rather sad that in Franco’s Spain, I can and do belong to the Country Club, while in

²⁹ Frank Yerby, letter to Helen Strauss, in Frank Yerby Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, Mass. (April 16, 1964).

³⁰ See, Robin V. Smiles, “Uncovering Frank Yerby,” *Black Issues in Higher Education*. 21:19 (November 4, 2004)

³¹ Frank Yerby, letter to Helen Strauss, (April 16, 1964).

Johnson's U.S.A. Ralph Bunch's [sic] son can't play tennis on a Long Island Court.³²

Furthermore, while Yerby was aware of racial prejudice in the United States and had his share of personal experiences with racism, his personal views were not in line with the current strategy of the Civil Rights movement, fueling another conflict between his public identity and personal desires: "Publicly ... I'm all for a Civil Rights Law with a triple row of teeth. ... Privately, I think racial prejudice is instinctive and incurable. I have never met a person of the so-called white race, and especially those of Anglo Saxon background, who is free of it, even the ones who think they are. I believe less than one tenth of one percent of Negroes are free of it either."³³ Thus, while publicly he supports the Civil Rights controversy, privately, he does not see it as an end to racial prejudice, and even more radically, he implicates black Americans. Yerby's positions were far from the conventional thinking among black activists in the 1960s.

Questioning Artistic Merit and the Scholarly/Popular Divide

Yerby's banishment from the critical realm in contrast to his notoriety in the marketplace is indicative of a long-held division in literary studies between the "scholarly" and the "popular," where books that are targeted for a mass-market audience and that receive widespread commercial success are more often than not assumed to have little *literary* value. As a result, Yerby's nontraditional racial agenda (i.e. his resistance to racial categorization in his life and his works) is not the

³² *ibid*

³³ *Ibid*

only reason that he is currently marginalized from African American literary discourse. Yerby was an extremely successful commercial writer, and in many ways his success made him an anomaly among African American writers at every stage of his career. In 1966, his 19 novels had sold more than 20 million copies and earned him a “gross sum far in excess of \$10 million.” Hence, Fuller described Yerby as “the richest expatriate American author now alive” (188). It is not until the 1990s, with the commercial success of best-selling author Terry McMillan, that black writers begin to achieve this same type of national and international notoriety and financial wealth.

The scholarly/popular divide is reflected in Yerby’s critical reception throughout his career, with critics of black literature not just questioning his racial loyalty but the artistic merit of his novels, particularly his use of the romance genre. Gloster, for instance, who praised Yerby in 1948 for being able to “free himself from the shackles of race,” in the same review denounced the aesthetic value of Yerby’s works, calling them “ideologically and esthetically unimportant.” Two years later, another author and critic Charles Nichols categorized Yerby’s novels as being “in the tradition of nineteenth century romantic fiction, overwritten, turgid” and reinforcing “aristocratic biases which should have died a century ago” (377+). As Yerby became more successful writing romantic fiction, critics questioned his ability to write the type of “significant fiction” that defined his early literary career. In the late 1960s, when Yerby expressed a desire to abandon his style of “costume novel” formula fiction and write his “most ambitious novel,” Fuller, in particular, responded with skepticism, writing “it is quite a challenge for a writer whose career has been built on

the facile rendering of fantasy and romance, and it may be a greater challenge than the author suspects” (193).

The few literary scholars who have taken a sustained critical interest in Yerby’s work, Darwin Turner and Hill, put the question of his artistic merit or aesthetic value at the center by focusing their analysis on the ways in which Yerby deviates from the conventions of the romance genre.³⁴ Turner, for instance, argues that Yerby’s novels are better characterized as anti-romantic: “Contrary to the pattern of conventional romance, disaster does not merely threaten, it happens—and to the best people” (“Debunker” 571). And Hill, who studied under Turner as a graduate student, argues that Yerby’s novels do not fit the historical romance genre, particularly his portrayal of the traditional hero figure: “Unlike the traditional romance hero who acts honorably in war and love, the protagonists of Yerby’s costume romances are not all brave men who achieve honor, fame and happiness. They are men and women whose visions are constantly in conflict with society ... Sometimes ruthless, amoral and non-religious, they are anti-heroes who represent no social force or movement of a society but are concerned mainly with their own personal quest for identity in it” (“Anti-Heroic” 145). As Turner and Hill seek to distance Yerby from the romance genre, they perpetuate the scholarly/popular divide and the assumption that popular fiction, particularly romantic fiction, lacks literary value. For instance, as Turner identifies strengths in Yerby’s novels, specifically his debunking of historical myths, he also cites “weak plots” and “contrived endings” as defining, yet flawed characteristics of Yerby’s works, an indication that Turner

³⁴ Both Turner and James Hill have published more than one article on Yerby, indicating a sustained interest in his works. Hill conducted one of the most detailed interviews with Yerby in 1977. However, it was not published until 1995, after Yerby’s death.

remains critical of any elements of Yerby's works that could not be declared as deviations from the romance genre.

Yerby acknowledged the influence that the scholarly/popular divide had on his career, often referring to the publication of his second novel, The Vixens (1947), as a turning point—the moment when he decided to pursue commercial or popular success in lieu of scholarly or literary value. According to Yerby, the first draft of The Vixens was a “true literary piece of art” (Hill, “Interview,” 237). But, his editor encouraged him to build on the success of The Foxes of Harrow, to “work this vein a little longer before we *go literary*” (emphasis added, Hill, “Interview,” 237). Thus, when faced with the decision to either “go literary” or pay the bills, Yerby chose the latter, reworking The Vixens into what he later characterized as one of the worst novels he ever wrote. And after years of writing best sellers like The Foxes of Harrow and The Vixens, Yerby believed the decision cost him in the value of his critical reputation. In letters to his editors at Dial Press in 1961, he expressed his frustrations with not being able to overcome the literary/popular divide:

I have become wonderfully skilled at the writing of tripe, and have seen tripe sell less and less year by year, while strong, real good books make money. In which regard, Dick and Jim, I think you both know that I have been one of the most sweetly reasonable writers in history, which is why, I sadly fear, that *my critical reputation is forty degrees below zero*—so low that neither *The Times* nor the *Herald Tribune*,

nor any other New York paper that I've heard of, even bothered to review *Gillian* (Yerby's 15th novel which was published in 1960).³⁵

By 1961, Yerby had published over 15 novels, all of which followed the framework of his first two novels, and he had become well-known for, as he says, "the writing of tripe." But even though his works were often reviewed in mainstream media outlets, he did not garner the type of serious criticism afforded more "literary" authors or writers of "significant fiction"; hence, his desire in the mid- to late-1960s to abandon the "costume novel" and write his "most ambitious" novel. Throughout letters between Yerby and his editors and literary agents, he expresses a profound concern over his reputation as a "pulpster," a strong desire to write "significant" fiction and to reach a "reasonably intelligent" audience. Still, for the past five decades, most critics of African American literature have narrowly categorized Frank Yerby, mischaracterizing the representation of race in his works, questioning his racial loyalty, and devaluing his artistic merit.

New Era of Yerby Criticism

Literary scholar Gene Jarrett is one of the first critics to make us think differently about Yerby, both about how Yerby deals with race in his novels and about his artistic merit. In his "alternative" anthology *African American Literature beyond Race*, Jarrett places the understudied Yerby in the company of a number of canonical authors in African American literature: Paul Laurence Dunbar, Nella Larsen, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni

³⁵ Frank Yerby, letter to Richard Baron and James Silberman, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston, Mass. (1961).

Morrison and others. Like Yerby, these authors pursued unconventional racial agendas in some of their lesser-known works. For example, Hurston's Seraph on the Suwanee explores the romantic relationship of a white couple, in contrast to her hallmark novel Their Eyes Were Watching God. Similarly, Richard Wright's Savage Holiday, which features white characters and has been described as "a little potboiler" (Tate, Psychoanalysis, 87) is far different from his defining novels Native Son and Black Boy. Jarrett identifies these works, along with others (including Yerby's The Foxes of Harrow) as "anomalous" texts, emphasizing their deviation from existing racial paradigms. Jarrett's anthology, and more specifically the inclusion of Yerby in it, is significant, having the potential to redirect the course of Yerby criticism. Instead of distancing Yerby from the issue of race and the African American literary tradition, Jarrett places Yerby directly within this tradition. And instead of questioning Yerby's racial loyalty, Jarrett questions the critical biases and practices that led not just to the marginalization of Yerby's novels, but to texts of other authors, who, like Yerby, in choosing to defy racial protocols, often sacrificed critical attention.

Yet, even within the margins of anomalous African American literature, Yerby is unique. Authors such as Wright and Hurston, for instance, had one or two "anomalous" texts in their canon, and even then, those works followed the writing style and form of their other canonical works. But the majority of Yerby's 33 novels can be placed in this category, and in terms of form and style, most of his novels remain true to his signature costume novel formula. As Jarrett points out, Yerby's "status as the most prolific and commercially successful African American novelist in

history forces us, perhaps more than any other writer does, to confront the aesthetic and racial-political principles of African American canon formation over the past half century” (Beyond Race 10). Consequently, as Jarrett calls for “more sophisticated readings of [Yerby’s] place in American literary history,” he also recognizes that such a task requires the scholar to, as a prerequisite, “dispens[e] with critical elitism” (Beyond Race 11). Jarrett does just this in his discussion of The Foxes of Harrow in his later monograph, where instead of distancing Yerby from his choice of genre (like Turner and Hill did decades before), Jarrett discusses the utility of historical romance fiction. In comparing The Foxes of Harrow to William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom, for instance, Jarrett recognizes that both novels pursue the theme of dynasty, yet Yerby’s genre poaching allows him to carry out this emphasis beyond Faulkner’s imagination: “Yerby’s marriage of the conventions of the historical novel and the romance novel in The Foxes of Harrow enables him to explore the kinds of racial reconciliation between individuals and communities that Faulkner, for example, depicted as tragic and improbable” (Beyond Race 200). In an unpublished dissertation on Yerby, Valerie Matthews Crawford also speaks to the potential of Yerby’s choice of genre, arguing that it provides a means for him to challenge Western institutions such as history and Christianity, which she further interprets as a challenge to the literary canon as well. And in dispensing with critical elitism, Crawford says Yerby’s works are “middle ground,” existing between the canonical authors such as Wright and Baldwin and more popular contemporary authors of genre fiction.

It is difficult to underestimate the need to “dispense with critical elitism” when assessing Yerby’s works, or to underestimate the importance of addressing the combination of factors that led to Yerby’s critical dismissal: the assumption of “racelessness” in his novels, use of the conventions of the romance genre, and the suspicion of Yerby’s appeal to a popular or mass-market audience. All of which are judgments that by themselves potentially place him on the margins of African American literary study. Fortunately, critics such as Jarrett have successfully highlighted the critical biases against some of these very factors. Jarrett, along with Claudia Tate and Ann duCille, reveal how the racial protocols of African American literary criticism obscure works that exist outside of these paradigms. Tate and duCille reveal the critical biases against feminized themes such as love and romance, arguing that books that privilege themes of courtship and marriage often do so in order to advance political issues and concerns. Susanne Dietzel also speaks to the biases in the study of black popular culture, where critics are more likely to discuss film and music than popular fiction. These critics provide a foundation for the recovery of Frank Yerby’s works and for an exploration of Yerby’s significance in the contemporary study of African American literature. They have set the stage for new considerations of Yerby’s works and, most importantly, for the creation of new critical models to address the “aesthetic and racial-political principles” that led to his obscurity.

I argue that the most useful critical model for assessing Yerby’s works is one that the author provides. Yerby called his best-selling novels “costume” novels, (“a certain genre of light, pleasant fiction, which in the interest of accuracy, I call the

costume novel”) and, in so doing, gives us a strategy for reading his works, particularly his first published novel The Foxes of Harrow (“How and Why”). The idea of “costuming” emerges as a narrative strategy, deployed to challenge notions of race and racialized identity. By “masking” or “dressing up” the appearance of his characters, Yerby shows that the physical markers of race, such as the color of one’s skin or the accent of one’s speech, are unreliable, thereby illuminating the façade of racial identity or racial recognition. Yerby also uses “costuming” as a generic or categorical strategy, masking his own racial agenda within the popular historical romance genre. Although The Foxes of Harrow is set in nineteenth century Louisiana slave society, Yerby anticipates the racial anxieties of the 1940s, a decade of mounting racial, political and social tension in the United States. Moreover, in The Foxes of Harrow, Yerby’s illumination of the instability of racial identity works to undermine social and legal institutions that depended on racial surety. In nineteenth century Louisiana the primary institution was slavery; in the latter half of the twentieth century, it is segregation. In other words, Yerby uses the historical setting and traditional love plot of the historical romance genre as a platform to challenge contemporary racial concerns. And costuming as a narrative and generic strategy allowed Yerby to reach an audience much more widespread and diverse than other Black authors writing at the same time. As shown throughout his career, Yerby’s relationship with race is a complex one. His early inclusion of racial protest in his short stories, his private views of race expressed in his personal correspondence, and his assertions of racial ambivalence in his public interviews paint a complicated picture, made even more so by the ways in which his literary works have been

misinterpreted by critics. His works are not, as Bone suggests, those that have “no problem concerning race.”

“Costuming” and Racial Recognition in The Foxes of Harrow

By choosing to chronicle five decades of slavery in the U.S. South in The Foxes of Harrow, Yerby could certainly not ignore the issue of race in his first novel. But the story of protagonist Stephen Fox, a handsome gambler and his quest for wealth and acceptance among the elite in southern aristocratic Louisiana society before the Civil War, unfolds under an umbrella of melodrama. The pale, white beauty; the handsome, yet devilish suitor; the unrequited love—all essential to the romance genre—appear, in some fashion, in the novel. Stephen is handsome, strong, hot-tempered, fearless and heroic. Odalie Arceneaux, his first love, is wealthy, reserved, and “unmistakably beautiful,” exuding a “pearly whiteness” that “seemed to float in a soft haze.” But it is not until Stephen, an Irish immigrant and poor “Dublin-gutter snipe,” becomes the wealthiest planter in all Louisiana and the master of Harrow—a plantation that rivals all others—that Odalie returns his affection. And after years of resisting his advances, Odalie marries Stephen, completing his fantasy: a bride for Harrow.

Stephen’s dream, however, is quickly doused by Odalie’s coldness and distaste for sexual intimacy, which prompts Stephen to establish a “connection” with the even more beautiful quadroon Desiree. Desiree’s mother brokers an agreement for Stephen to take care of her daughter for the rest of her life. And for a time, Stephen obliges, building Desiree a house in town and visiting as often as possible.

The affair, however, turns tragic, when Odalie finds out and, in effort to win back her husband's affection, ultimately sacrifices her fragile body to bear Stephen a second child, (even though she nearly loses her life during the birth of their first child, Etienne).³⁶ Thus, by mid-novel, Odalie is deceased; Desiree has been cast aside (albeit with Stephen's child); and Stephen is free to marry his true love, the one who can give him the affection that Odalie denied him—Odalie's sister, Aurore. For years, Aurore, who fell in love with Stephen the first time she saw him, watches helplessly as her sister and her true love try unsuccessfully to build a union based on material gains and surface attractions. But after 329 pages, her patience is rewarded as Stephen realizes that Aurore is the more beautiful sister and is truly his first love. Stephen and Aurore wed and have a daughter, Julie.

Yerby's use of the romance genre to present the story of Stephen Fox's rise to riches makes for a compelling narrative and a familiar one for romance readers. Stephen and Aurore's union fulfills the traditional love plot, in which the attraction is made in the first few moments but is fulfilled only after the characters withstand an array of challenges. Also typical is the happy ending, which often, if not always, involves a wedding.³⁷ Romance readers will also recognize Yerby's use of the reformed-rake plot, one of the most widely used conventions of the genre.³⁸ The hero begins the novel as a rogue, displaying a number of less than desirable characteristics. But the heroine sees through this façade. And over time and with the influence of the heroine's affection, the hero is transformed into the perfect

³⁶ The baby is stillborn.

³⁷ For a discussion of the significance of the happy ending and the wedding in the romance genre, see Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*.

³⁸ See Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance*, for full discussion of the reformed-rake plot and other conventions of the romance genre.

gentleman. In The Foxes of Harrow, Stephen undergoes this exact change, from a gambler and murderer to devoted father, husband and civil servant. Yerby is careful to highlight this change for the reader by including a number of references in the latter half of the novel to Stephen's *former* cantankerous nature. Stephen's transformation is also illuminated by the contrast he presents to his hot-tempered and quarrelsome son, Etienne.

Just as Yerby relies on a number of the romance genre's conventions to tell a compelling story and appeal to a wide audience, he manipulates these same conventions to advance another agenda, that which allows the complexities of race and identity that permeate the totality of his life and works. It is important, for instance, that Yerby extends his novel beyond the traditional romance plot. After the marriage of Stephen and Aurore, which fulfills the novel's primary love plot, The Foxes of Harrow continues on for another 16 chapters. Stephen fights in the Mexican-American War, votes against the South's cessation from the Union, and finally, serves as a Confederate soldier in the Civil War. Yerby devotes these 16 chapters to retelling the story of the Civil War, with a focus on the tensions that led up to it and to the prevailing role of the slave question. The country's division is mirrored within the Fox family. Stephen's daughter Julie marries a Boston abolitionist who ends up fighting on the side of the Union, in essence against his father-in-law (Stephen) and brother-in-law (Etienne). And Harrow, which is destroyed during the war, serves as a relic of the pre-Civil War South. "Leave it as it is so that never in any generation will any man of our blood forget. ... let Harrow

stand as a reminder of what we suffered and what we will never – forget or forgive!” exclaims Etienne in the novel’s last pages (531).

Similarly, Yerby extends Stephen’s reformation beyond the traditional rogue-to-gentleman trajectory to a near conversion on the question of slavery. While there is no question that Stephen amasses his wealth at the expense of his slaves, as the novel progresses, he grows more incredulous of the argument that blacks are inhuman and destined to be enslaved. Stephen’s interaction with blacks who defied such stereotypes—primarily his slave Inch, who reads and writes better than Stephen’s own son—and his relationship with the quadroon Desiree, force him to question the stereotype of black inferiority. Thus, even before the Civil War, Stephen admits, “I don’t believe any longer in aristocracy—even self-made aristocracy such as the South has” (488). As the novel nears its close, Stephen’s change of heart is clear. Unlike the other New Orleans gentry, he advocates gradual emancipation and wills his slaves to freedom after his death. While Jarrett argues that Stephen’s transformation “from racist to would-be abolitionist” is “not consistent” and “should jar the reader,” this change is not jarring for the *romance* reader, but, as an extension of the familiar reformed-rake plot, this transformation is expected.

While Yerby’s probing of the slave question and Stephen’s ideological transformation are important, they are not the novel’s most effective contribution to the discussion of race. Stephen predictably denounces slavery and racial prejudice at the end of the novel, but the novel actually concludes with the more polemical claim that racism in the United States will persist. This realization is made by the novel’s *most* transformative figure, Inch, a former slave who is elevated to a position of

political power. In the novel's final scene, Inch explains to Etienne (who returns to Louisiana after the defeat of the Confederacy to find that his former slave Inch now ironically has the power to imprison or free him) that the blacks' freedom and rise to political power is tenuous, foreshadowing the Reconstruction Period's actual brevity: "This came too soon. We weren't ready. White men will rule the South again ... perhaps for always"(529). Inch's declaration, as opposed to Stephen's change of heart, is much more in line with Yerby's broader concern about the prevalence of race and racial identity in determining one's social and legal status. As previously argued, throughout Yerby's writings and interviews we see an attempt to challenge accepted notions of race and racial categorization and to refuse the positions or status that accompanied racial recognition during the period of segregation in the United States.

In his portrayal of Inch, Yerby successfully challenges popular stereotypes of African Americans, making an important statement on race and reaching millions of readers while doing so. But instead of just probing the dilemma of being black in America in the way that other authors had done (and that he had done in his early short stories), Yerby also turns his attention to being "white" in America. In refocusing his gaze on "whiteness," Yerby attempts to deconstruct its institutionalization in America, particularly its power and its privilege. As such, he tries to complicate the notions of "white" and "black" as reliable racial and social categories in hopes of redefining race, black or white, as nothing more than a "biological accident."

Louisiana's Creole culture and unique history of racial mixing provides a useful setting for Yerby's questioning of racial identity. Throughout the novel,

extrinsic markers of racial identity prove unreliable in this setting. La Belle Sauvage, the African slave, has features “almost as a Caucasian’s” (137); Stephen’s son Etienne has skin darker than most mulattoes. Few of the characters in The Foxes of Harrow fit their prescribed roles in regard to race. Still, even in antebellum Louisiana where the idea of racial impurity or “creolization” is a part of the culture, racial identity still determines the legal status of Yerby’s characters. And, most importantly, legal status determines his characters’ fate, governing their ability to achieve economic success.

Yerby’s exploration of whiteness and racial ambiguity is best represented in his characterization of the protagonist Stephen Fox. Recognized as “white” in antebellum Louisiana society, Stephen is granted all the privileges given to those with the status of “white male” under Louisiana law—the ability to own property, to establish credit, and to employ others, all of which make it possible for Stephen to go from a “Dublin gutter-snipe” to the richest plantation owner in “all the South.” Yet, Stephen’s background as an Irishman, an immigrant and a bastard, allows Yerby to create a space in the novel for speculation about Stephen’s racial identity.

For instance, even though Stephen is considered “white,” his Irish heritage is a racial marker in antebellum Louisiana. As cultural critic David Roediger argues, Irish-American workers and blacks were seen as more alike than different in the antebellum United States. Roediger points to evidence that in antebellum Philadelphia, for instance, being called an “Irishman,” was as great an insult as being called a “nigger” (133). The references to Stephen’s “black heart” in the novel then do not just refer to his shrewd gambling persona, but to his racial identity as well. A

dilemma that Stephen even alludes to: “a Dublin gutter-snipe don’t become one of the landed gentry — not even in this mad, new land ...” (5). In addition to making Stephen an Irish immigrant, Yerby fails to reveal Stephen’s paternal lineage. This elision further complicates Stephen’s racial identity and acceptance among Louisiana society as well as, I would argue, among Yerby’s 1940s readership.

I’m a bastard. My mother never told me who my father was ...”

Stephen explains to his friend, the French-Creole Andre LaBluec.

“That’s nothing,” Andre chuckled, leaning forward. “Old Arceneaux swears that my family and his and nearly every other of any account in Louisiana are descended from a band of female petty thieves and prostitutes who were brought from La Salpetriere, a house of correction in Paris! (66)

Although Andre dismisses Stephen’s admission as unimportant, that admission does allow for speculation among Louisiana society and more importantly among Yerby’s readers. How can his readers be sure that Stephen Fox is really “white”? I am not suggesting that Yerby is really saying that Stephen is “passing” for white; however, he does make room for an element of speculation that I argue would not escape his contemporary audience, black or white.

Yerby might have set his first novel (and subsequent ones) in historical settings, but he anticipates his contemporary audiences’ racial anxieties, which in the 1940s and 50s centered on legal battles against racial segregation. By questioning Stephen’s “whiteness” and the “royalty” of the French, Yerby manipulates the needs, fears and anxieties of his 1940s popular readership. The trope of “passing” is

prominent in the fiction of black writers prior to Yerby, particularly in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, which immediately precedes Yerby's era (James Weldon Johnson, Nella Larsen, Jean Toomer, etc.). At the center of "passing" as a theme is the fear of finding out one's true racial identity. Yet, it is a fear both black and white readers share. Blacks that choose to pass are constantly anxious about the exposure of their true racial identity. At the same time, in a society where the economy of whiteness prevails, that is, where being white affords one the opportunity for economic success, whites need to be assured that they are indeed "white," hence the historical presence of the "one-drop rule" and the categorization of blacks as mulattoes, quadroons, octoroons, etc. Much more devastating than the exposure of a black person passing for white, is a white person being exposed as black (particularly, someone like Stephen Fox, who had used his "natural" ability to overcome his economic handicap). If race is eliminated as a factor or determinant of one's success, so is the belief that blacks were intellectually inferior, a belief that remained prevalent during the pre-civil rights era, when Yerby published his first novel.

"Whiteness," as critical race theorist Cheryl Harris argues, is something to be coveted, to own, "property." For Stephen Fox, "whiteness" is synonymous with freedom, and "blackness" synonymous with labor:

That was it, Stephen thought. To live like this—graciously, with leisure to cultivate the tastes and to indulge every pleasure a man must be free of labor. Leave the work for the blacks. Breed a new generation of aristocrats ... He knew what he wanted now: freedom for himself and his sons; mastery over this earth; a dynasty of men

who could stride this American soil unafraid, never needing to cheat and lie and steal. (30)

Yet in what I consider his attempt to challenge accepted notions of race, Yerby complicates this governing binary. After enjoying a moment of elevated social status in New Orleans society, a bizarre gun fight leaves Stephen a murderer, and he is, once again, a societal outcast. His quest to earn an “honorable fortune” is then enhanced with a desire for revenge. Therefore, when faced with the success or failure of Harrow, he recognizes first that labor is not black or white, and that the true determinant of one’s success is not race, but economic opportunity, evidenced by his taking part in the “slave” labor that builds Harrow. Stephen, working alongside the slaves, becomes a spectacle, and prompts the New Orleans gentry to deem him mad:

What are they saying about me in New Orleans?” he asked.

Andre said slowly, “They no longer blame you for the duel; they have discovered you are mad.”... ‘Tis no joke Stephen. They say you live in a hovel, and work in the fields with the blacks. And that sometimes at night you work all night alone, after the blacks have finished for the day. (100)

In the novel, Yerby clearly complicates whiteness as a stable and reliable racial category, questioning both Stephen’s inclusion in it, i.e. calling his whiteness into question, and the social construction of whiteness as an intrinsic or biological racial category accompanied by extrinsic power, benefits and privileges. In turn, Stephen’s precarious identity as a white man, manifests in the novel through a hypersensitivity to his “white privilege,” and a recognition of the instability (and/or unreliability) of

his legal/racial status. Throughout the novel, Stephen is very aware of the social construction of the legal status of “free” and the necessity of, as well as dependence on, its opposite, that of “slave.”

Contemporary readers of The Foxes of Harrow, part those informed by critical race theory, will recognize that Yerby does indeed address the issue of race and racial tension, despite characterizations of his works as having “no problem concerning race.” The fields of critical race theory and whiteness studies, in particular, have forced literary critics to expand their analysis of race beyond simply representations of blackness and similar discussions. In this new critical environment, Yerby’s white protagonists take on a new role. While critics have limited any acknowledgement of race in Yerby’s works to his few novels with black protagonists, now his white protagonists, which occupy the majority of his works, become central to reading the issue of race in his works.

New considerations of race in Yerby’s works also call for rereading race in his few novels with black protagonists. In Speak Now (1969) and The Dahomean (1971), Yerby appears to answer those critics who complained that he abandoned the race problem in his novels. Speak Now features his first black protagonist, and it is the first time Yerby inserts direct commentary on the racial and political climate of the 1960s, including references to the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The Dahomean is set in Dahomey, Africa (now called the Republic of Benin), and details the social, political and spiritual elements of Dahomean culture, chronicling the story of a chieftain son’s who at the end of the novel is sold into slavery.

We might expect to see in these novels an exploration of race that would meet the expectations of the African American literary and critical establishment of that time; yet, instead we see a continuation of the racial agenda Yerby set forth in The Foxes of Harrow, a refusal to accept racial categorization and accepted notions of racial identity. In the late 1960s, this refusal can be read as a resistance to accept the social movements predicated on a certain racial acceptance and solidarity. Therefore, just as Yerby defied the social realist movement in the 1940s and 1950s with his historical romance novel, here he counters an emerging Black Arts movement and black aesthetic. For instance, the protagonist in Speak Now, Harry Forbes (a jazz musician from Georgia who lives in Paris), is particularly critical of the social movements under way in the United States, specifically those that require an allegiance to race. Harry's racial loyalty (like Yerby's) is consistently under scrutiny in the novel. Thus, when confronted about his beliefs, Harry is absolute:

Have you then no pride of race ...? Ouija put in suddenly.

"No," Harry said. "None. Aside from the fact that, logically speaking, *a biological accident* is hardly sufficient motive for self-congratulation, the only race I believe in is the human race, and its record, throughout history, has been abysmal. But if it is of les Noirs that you speak, even less. I should have preferred to have been born a Comanche, an Iroquois, or a Sioux, who died before accepting slavery... (emphasis added 87)

Harry's sentiments clearly echo Yerby's own stance on race and racial categorization.

Thus, the first black protagonist that Yerby creates is very much like himself, ambivalent when it comes to identifying himself within, or embracing, a particular race. But Harry also expresses a particular disappointment in “les Noirs,” a reference to those of African descent and their “willingness” to be enslaved. In so doing, Yerby’s first black protagonist continues Yerby’s defiance of what is accepted and expected from most African American authors. Among 1960s and 1970s black intellectuals and activists, Harry’s views would undoubtedly be unpopular. Blaming African slaves for their enslavement is in direct contrast to the Black Arts movement’s privileging of African values. As well, Speak Now’s primary theme is not “black power” or “black pride,” but interracial love. In the Dahomean, Yerby is even more direct in advocating his racial agenda. In a note to the Dahomean reader, he explicitly distances himself from the Black Power movement, explaining that he “has not attempted to make the Dahomeans either more or less than what they were,” and that “neither the racist, the liberal, nor the advocates of Black Power and/or Pride will find much support for their dearly held and perhaps, to them, emotionally and psychologically necessary myths herein.” Throughout his life, Yerby remains consistent both in his novels—whether they feature black or white protagonists—and in his correspondence—private and public—in his refusal to accept racial categorization and his resolve to challenge racialized notions of identity.

Chapter 2: Toni Morrison and the Business of Love: Tar Baby as Popular Romance

My notion of love—romantic love—probably is very closely related to blues ... It's quite contrary to Western civilization; it's quite contrary to the overwhelming notion of love that's the business of the majority culture.

—Toni Morrison (1980)

Toni Morrison is one of the most widely studied and well-known authors of the late twentieth century. Yet, while she is a popular author, critics almost never consider her works in the context of popular fiction, particularly that of the mass-market or genre variety. In this chapter, I examine Morrison's popular fiction, specifically her first contemporary love story and fourth novel, Tar Baby. When it was published in 1981, Tar Baby was considered by most critics to be an anomaly in Morrison's canon. The novel's white characters, island scenery and present-day setting set it apart from her previous three texts, which centered primarily on black characters, rural spaces and historical settings. But Tar Baby's primary themes of love, rescue and protection, as well as its preoccupation with materialism and commercial beauty, align the novel with the popular romance genre, which at the time of its publication was transforming the publishing industry. Unlike Tar Baby, however, popular romance novels catered primarily to white women readers and disavowed social constructions of race that permeated their readers' actual lives. Morrison, in contrast, integrates the narratives of romance and race in her novel, employing the most recognizable elements of the romance genre, while also advancing a particular racial agenda, which is to revise the portrayal of black females in popular discourse and the contemporary literary marketplace.

Morrison's more recent association with the popular television talk-show host Oprah Winfrey and "Oprah's Book Club" has made it much more difficult for critics to overlook the popular appeal of Morrison's fiction or to continue to distance her from discussions of marketability, commercialization and even commodification—those aspects of the publishing industry that traditionally have been considered "less than literary," or counter to more scholarly endeavors. From 1996 to 2002, Winfrey chose four of Morrison's novels as Oprah Book Club selections, and on each occasion, Morrison appeared on the television show alongside Winfrey to lead the book club discussion. Song of Solomon (1977) was the second book Winfrey chose for her book club. It was chosen in November 1996 and spent 16 weeks on the New York Times best-selling paperback list. Paradise was chosen in January 1998, the year it was published; it spent 18 weeks on the New York Times best-selling hardcover list and sold 804,862 hardcovers in 1998. The Bluest Eye (1970) was chosen in April 2000; it spent 11 weeks on the New York Times hardcover list, 9 weeks on the paperback list and sold 979,004 paperbacks in 2000. Finally, Sula was chosen in 2002; it spent 1 week on the New York Times paperback list and sold 720,000 paperbacks in 2002.³⁹

Since Morrison's appearances on Winfrey's show, a few critics have begun to point up potential academic or pedagogical benefits to the Morrison/Winfrey connection.⁴⁰ Some, like Daphne Brooks, admit their discomfort with sanctioning

³⁹ The sales figures and best-selling stints are listed in Appendix A of Cecilia Konchar Farr, Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005); Farr relies on the New York Times best-seller list and the Publishers Weekly year-end reports for her figures.

⁴⁰ Daphne Brooks, "The Other Side of Paradise: Feminist Pedagogy, Toni Morrison Iconography, and Oprah's Book Club Phenomenon," Step Into a World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature, ed. Kevin Powell (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000) 163-72; Rona Kaufman,

television as a site for critical reading but acquiesce to the overall positive influence Winfrey has had on reading and literacy. Others, such as John Young, probe the influence of Morrison's commercial appeal both on the literary marketplace and on the study of literature. Young argues that the coupling of Morrison's canonicity and Winfrey's commercialism grants Morrison a type of "social authority" that transcends traditional racial hierarchies of the literary marketplace. He rightly credits Morrison with exploding "the high-low divide that still holds for much of postmodern art" ("Toni Morrison" 182).

While it has taken the recent Morrison/Winfrey connection to prompt critics to identify Morrison's ability to navigate both the scholarly and popular arenas, Morrison's relationship with the popular extends back to what is arguably her most "commercial" novel Tar Baby. Traveling the media circuit in 1981 to promote Tar Baby, Morrison told a New Republic reporter: "As a reader, I'm fascinated by literary books, but the books I wanted to write could not be only, even merely, literary or I would defeat my purposes, defeat my audience" (qtd. in LeClair, rpt. in Taylor-Taylor-Guthrie 120-121). She described her audience as "the village," "the tribe" and her fiction as "peasant literature," admitting that she wanted her books to reach "all sorts of people." Tar Baby fulfilled this wish, earning Morrison the most widespread commercial attention of her novels at the time.⁴¹ "The promotion of Tar Baby was a

"That, My Dear, Is Called Reading": Oprah's Book Club and the Construction of Readership," Reading Sites: Social Difference and Reader Response, ed. Patrocinio Schweickart and Elizabeth Flynn (New York: MLA of America, 2004) 221-55; R. Mark Hall, "The 'Oprahfication' of Literacy: Reading 'Oprah's Book Club,'" College English 65:6 (July 2003): 646-67; Cecilia Konchar Farr, Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005); Timothy Aubry, "Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow: Searching for Paradise on The Oprah Winfrey Show," Modern Fiction Studies 52:2 (Summer 2006): 350-73.

⁴¹ Morrison's previous three novels did receive some attention, but not to the extent of Tar Baby. The Bluest Eye was published in 1970; Sula was published in 1974 and nominated for the National Book

stunning show,” writes Robert G. O’Meally in his review of the novel in Callaloo, referring to the many events planned to promote the book including, readings, television appearances and book parties (193). The novel was reviewed in the New York Times and stayed on the paper’s best seller list for four months.⁴² And Morrison was featured on the cover of Newsweek, under the headline “Black Magic.”⁴³ Newsweek devoted a generous six inside pages to the story on Morrison, including recent photos of the author in her “lovely” home, showing the author “clowning” with her two sons, as well as vintage photos of the author’s parents and grandparents and a photo of Morrison in the first grade.

Still, in spite of Morrison’s popularity and the commercial appeal of Tar Baby, critics have not considered reading Morrison’s fiction in the context of mass-market or formula fiction, a genre that most critics consider to be of little artistic merit and in a sharp contrast to Morrison’s canon, which critics have held up as the model of literary aestheticism. While modern critics have been unwilling to defy hierarchies of literary production and risk tainting Morrison’s “literariness” with an association with mass-market fiction, I argue that Tar Baby belongs to the popular romance genre. Morrison’s desire to be read by “all sorts of people,” as well as her personal and professional investment in the market forces that governed the publishing industry’s trends are reflected in some of the novel’s most basic themes of

Award; and Song of Solomon was published in 1977 and named both a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and winner of the National Book Critics Circle award.

⁴² The editors of the Norton Anthology of African American Literature described Tar Baby as “immensely popular,” indicating that it was reviewed both in this country and in Europe. “Soon after its publication, Morrison was elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.” (2097)

⁴³ Morrison appeared alone on the cover of the national publication, and according Taylor-Guthrie, became the first African American women to be featured on the cover of a national publication since Zora Neale Hurston was caricatured on the cover of the Saturday Review of Literature in 1943.

love, beauty, wealth and desire. More significantly, by reading Tar Baby in the context of the romance genre, we are able to see it as both an example of the genre as well as an important critique of the genre and the marketplace that promoted it. Even as a romance novel, Tar Baby reflects Morrison's larger purposes or racial agenda, to diversify the portrayal of black females in popular discourse and the contemporary literary marketplace. This larger goal, however, requires Morrison to revise the romance genre. In so doing, she exposes the romance genre's racist and/or assumed "raceless" conventions, particularly its investment in happy endings and constructions of white female beauty.

The Rise of Popular Romance

As a writer, editor and literary critic in the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s—when the paperback romance industry “came into full bloom”—Morrison encountered a literary marketplace enamored with romantic love, happy endings, orphaned heroines and reformed heroes.⁴⁴ Romance novels have been popular in the American literary marketplace throughout the twentieth century, but in the 1960s and early 1970s, the publishing industry expanded the romance genre, offering paperback romance novels for mass-market distribution.⁴⁵ The Canadian-based publisher Harlequin Books, who became successful in the late 1950s by reprinting romance novels published by British publisher Mills and Boon, launched the paperback

⁴⁴ After spending a decade teaching English and creative writing at several universities, Morrison accepted a position as an editor at Random House in 1964. In 1970s, she published her first novel, The Bluest Eye. Throughout the early 1970s, Morrison became a “much-sought after book reviewer. Between 1970 and 1974, she published more than 20 reviews in major media outlets, such as the New York Times, as well as essays about black history and the women's movement.” See the Norton Anthology of African American Literature, 2096.

⁴⁵ See Pamela Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel for discussion of the romance genre in the history of U.S. fiction.

romance trend in the United States. Harlequin initially only issued a new Mills and Boon reprint for U.S. readers every few months. But when Harlequin acquired Mills and Boon in 1971, it increased its output significantly. From 1973 to 1980, Harlequin published 144 romance novels per year, supplying romance readers with books through direct mail as well as bookstores, supermarkets and drugstore chains (Thurston 47). By the late 1970s, the company was releasing up to 12 new books each month, and by 1977, the company had secured 10 percent of the paperback market in North America.⁴⁶

Although Harlequin initiated the paperback romance trend in the United States, a number of other publishing companies quickly followed the example and launched their own paperback romance lines or romance-themed imprints. Between the years of 1972 and 1982, the popular romance genre “came to full bloom” in the United States, asserts critic Carol Thurston (3). Avon, one of the first U.S.-based publishers to become successful in the romance market, launched its “Avon Spectacular” line and published its first title, The Flame and the Flower, in 1972, which, according to Thurston, “opened the door to a new American publishing enterprise” (48). Other publishers followed suit: Dell, Fawcett, Jove, Playboy, Leisure, Ace, Signet Warner, Pinnacle, Popular Books, Silhouette, Richard Gallen/Pocket Books all published single-title paperback romance novels or launched paperback romance lines during the 1970s and early 1980s.⁴⁷ Even Morrison’s employer Random House sought to capitalize on the trend with its acquisition of

⁴⁶ For a complete discussion of the history of Harlequin Books and its Americanization, see Carol Thurston, Tania Modleski, and Pamela Regis.

⁴⁷ For a complete listing of the publishers who launched paperback romance lines or published single titles from 1957 to 1985, see Thurston (62-63).

mass-market publisher Ballantine Books in 1973. By 1983, the romance genre averaged more than 1,500 titles a year (Frenier 6), and by 1985, romance novels “accounted for about 40 percent of all mass-market paperbacks published in the United States, with 20 million readers and close to a half-billion dollars in annual sales” (Thurston 16). In the last two decades, the romance genre has continued to increase in production and commercial sales. According to recent statistics provided by Romance Writers of America, the genre became the largest fiction category in 2007 by generating over \$1.3 billion in sales and releasing more than 8,000 titles.⁴⁸ It has also expanded to include a number of subgenres such as fantasy romance, suspense romance, young adult romance and paranormal romance.⁴⁹

While many books explore themes of romantic love, there are essential elements that define the romance genre. In one of the earliest studies (1976) of popular literary genres, John Cawelti distinguished the romance from other the literary formulas of adventure and mystery by identifying its “crucial defining characteristic” and “organizing action” as the “development of a love relationship” (41). Cawelti also identified an ending where love conquers all as essential to the genre: “The moral fantasy of the romance is that of love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties” (42). As such, Cawelti explained, most romantic formulas “center on the overcoming of some combination of social or psychological barriers” (42).

⁴⁸ Statistics on the romance publishing industry and readers can be found on the Romance Writers of America website www.rwanational.org. The organization publishes an overview of the genre each year, which includes statistics compiled from a variety of sources including, Book of Consumer Book Publishing, Simba Information, R.R. Bowker’s Books In Print, the Association of American Publishers

⁴⁹ For a full discussion of changes in the romance genre, see a special issue of the journal *Paradoxa*, Vol. 3 (1997).

In one of the first feminist studies of the genre, Tania Modleski confirmed much of Cawelti's observations, particularly the genre's requirement of love that conquers all. She also provided more detailed analysis of the typical romance formula. In her 1982 study, Modleski summarized what she identified as Harlequin Romances' conservative, yet typical formula:

A young, inexperienced poor to moderately well-to-do woman encounters and becomes involved with a handsome, strong, experienced, wealthy man, older than herself by ten to fifteen years. The heroine is often confused by the hero's behavior since, though he is obviously interested in her, he is mocking, cynical, contemptuous, often hostile, and even somewhat brutal. By the end, however, all misunderstandings are cleared away, and the hero reveals his love for the heroine, who reciprocates. (Vengeance 36)

Within this basic formula, Modleski identified other common romance genre scenarios such as the "reformed-rake" plot, where the heroine humanizes the hero through her interactions (mostly her refusal to give in to his attacks), transforming him from a rake into the perfect husband. Or, the novel portrays the opposite outcome, where the heroine gives in to the rake's attacks, submitting her virtue before he is transformed, and then she suffers a harsh death. According to Modleski, other typical narrative strategies and plot devices included the heroine's "dismissal" of her suitor's wealth, which is what attracts the hero, or the characterization of the heroine as isolated or orphaned, which ensures that the heroine will have to rely on the hero, but also works as a strategy to gain sympathy from the reader. Without a strong

connection, or commitment to her own family, the heroine is more likely to be wooed and easily removed from her past, and the hero can provide her with the security and protection that a well-to-do family brings.

Since Modleski's analysis, a number of critics have added their own assessment of the genre's conventions, further validating the genre's most traditional and recognizable elements—beautiful “orphaned” heroines, reformed heroes, societal barriers and happy endings.⁵⁰ In one of the most recent studies, A Natural History of the Romance Novel (2004), Pamela Regis criticizes Modleski for basing her analysis on just one type of romance novel (the Harlequin), but she confirms that a number of the narrative elements that Modleski identified are indeed typical, including the characterization of orphaned heroines, the “barrier” that keeps the hero and heroine from uniting, and optional elements such as “bad characters converted to goodness” (30).⁵¹ The most important element of the genre, however, according to Regis is the happy ending: “A novel that ends with the hero and heroine not in love, not betrothed, is simply not a romance novel,” claims Regis (114).

These essential elements of the romance genre have persisted even as the genre has expanded its typical formula and, in some cases, adjusted to changes in society. Interestingly, Cawelti predicted that the “coming age of women's liberation”

⁵⁰ Four of the most cited studies of the romance genre include: Tania Modleski, Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women (Hampden, Conn: Archon Books) 1982; Janice Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (Chapel Hill, N.C.: UofNC Press) 1984. Kay Mussel, Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press) 1984; Carol Thurston, The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity (Urbana: U of Illinois Press) 1987.

⁵¹ Later studies chastised Modleski for only focusing on Harlequin romances. She also faced criticism for what others read as condescension toward romance readers in her analysis. In later essays, Modleski reveals that she is an avid romance reader herself. For Modleski's response to the criticism of her early studies see “My Life as a Romance Reader,” and “My Life as a Romance Writer.” Both are reprinted in Tania Modleski, Old Wives' Tales and Other Women's Stories.

would possibly lead to “total rejection of the moral fantasy of love triumphant,” which he saw as affirming the “ideals of monogamous marriage and feminine domesticity” (42). The genre’s most conservative elements, particularly its insistence on ending in betrothal or marriage, presented a dilemma for the feminist critic: At a time when women were advocating female autonomy and independence, the genre clearly endorsed patriarchal modes of success. But this dilemma did not lead to total rejection of the genre or its conventions. Instead, feminist critics and literary scholars called for serious study of the romance genre, including feminist readings of the novels and genuine analyses of the romance reader.⁵² Many viewed it as an opportunity to interpret the genre for others, but also to add to the existing scholarship on other popular women’s fiction.⁵³ And in effort to establish a romance literary tradition, many critics argued that typical elements of the popular romance genre did not originate with mass-market romance but could be traced to sentimental fiction and domestic novels, as well as to the works of canonical writers such as Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte.⁵⁴ Modleski, for instance, connected her study of the genre to the feminist studies of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century sentimental novels and domestic fiction. “I will show that even the contemporary mass-produced narratives for women contain elements of protest and resistance underneath highly ‘orthodox’ plots,” claimed Modleski (Vengeance 26).

⁵² Modleski describes a feminist reading not in the sense of how the novels advance feminism, or deny feminism, but women reading women without the guilt factor, or being concerned with what men think.

⁵³ See Radway, Mussel, and Thurston.

⁵⁴ Many of the studies of the genre include a discussion of 18th and 19th century women’s fiction. For a detailed genealogy see Pamela Regis.

Critics also turned their attention to actual romance readers. Modleski, for instance, determined that in reading these novels women were engaged in their own psychological processes of resistance—resisting the contradictions in their lives. Their desire for utopian alternatives, she argued, was their wish to “stop being seen in the old ways and to begin looking at their lives in ways that are perhaps yet to be envisioned.” While Modleski imagined the romance reader’s experience, Janice Radway focused her study on an actual group of romance readers. She also determined that the readers were reading the novels out of dissatisfaction with their own lives. And similar to Modleski, Radway concluded that the dissatisfaction did not extend to social change and may continue the situation or perpetuate the submission: “In the end, the romance-reading process gives the reader a strategy for making her present situation more comfortable without substantive reordering of its structure rather than a comprehensive program for reorganizing her life in such a way that all needs might be met” (Reading the Romance 215).

The gender politics of popular romance became a primary site of tension in the study of the field during the 1970s and 1980s. Feminist critics like Radway and Modleski tried to make sense of the genre’s contradictions without indicting its readers, writers or critics. Others, such as Ann Snitow, were less accommodating, equating mass-market romance with pornography. At the same time, the popular romance novel’s most progressive changes occurred in terms of gender. As mentioned earlier, as the U.S. market grew, romance readers and writers began to revise the British-influenced conservative plot formula. Thurston identifies a new subgenre of erotic romances that emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s to reflect the

emerging social and political changes of and toward women in the United States. A “new heroine” emerged, and “revised some of the most tenacious conventions of the traditional romance formula,” argues Thurston (7).⁵⁵ The heroines of the erotic romances were career women and were no longer concerned solely with domestic issues, but with a combination of career and home. This new heroine was also much less vulnerable than before, sexually liberated, no longer a virgin, and allowed to express her sexual desires. Thurston also claimed that these new novels were both literary and social change agents, arguing that they had revolutionized the romance industry and could be seen as products of the women’s and feminist movements. The new heroine was indicative of a reading public that had adopted the feminist manifesto, but still believed that independence—economic and sexual—can be achieved *within* a heterosexual relationship.⁵⁶

Disavowals of Race

While the romance genre could be considered progressive in its gender politics, responding to the women’s and feminist movements, its racial politics were regressive, failing to acknowledge the parallel gains of the Civil Rights movement.

⁵⁵ Thurston points to the “rape” as one of the traditional conventions that the new subgenre revised.

⁵⁶ In highlighting some of the most influential studies of the romance genre (Modleski, Radway, Thurston), I do not mean to suggest that these studies were not debated or that they are the only studies of the genre. Modleski’s and Radway’s analysis have been criticized significantly since their works were published. They have even revisited and in some cases revised their early analyses. Similarly, Thurston’s declaration that these novels could be read as feminist texts, however, did not end the debate surrounding the romance novel’s investment in heterosexual courtship plots. Miriam Darce Frenier also recognized the genre’s changing heroines and values, but argued that such plots were inherently built on the heroine’s ability to attract the hero and had as their goal for the female (even one with “feminist ways”) to have the hero addicted to her. Romances, she determined, therefore “continued to uphold that woman by rewarding her with the myth of a hero obsessed with his heroine” (101). The genre’s happy ending is still an issue for debate among romance genre critics. Regis addresses this in her 2004 study by including an argument that marriage at the end of the novel was not restricting, but a signal of the heroine’s freedom.

There was very little racial and ethnic diversity within the romance genre's pages or within its community of readers, writers and critics—this did not change until the mid-1990s with the emergence of black romance novels. As such, Morrison not only faced a marketplace of happy endings, orphaned heroines and reformed heroes, but one that disavowed race.

For decades, the genre catered primarily to a white female audience. According to a reader survey taken in 1982, 91 percent of romance readers were white, and as late as 2002, only 7 percent of romance readers were men.⁵⁷ The majority of the writers were white women as well, though there were a few African American authors. In 1984, Sandra Kitt became the first African American writer for Harlequin, although she was not identified as such, and all except one of the books she wrote for Harlequin in the 1980s featured white protagonists.⁵⁸ In a 2004 interview, Kitt admitted that for many years, the majority of her readers did not know she was black.⁵⁹ As late as 2002, there were only a handful of black authors out of the 1,200 Harlequin writers.⁶⁰

More noticeable than the genre's dearth of black readers and writers was the absence of diversity within the genre's pages, which continued even after more American-based publishers entered the market. The early Harlequin novels focused

⁵⁷ For the most recent sales figures and demographic information for romance readers, visit the Romance Writers of American Web site, www.rwanational.org.

⁵⁸ Sandra Kitt's romance writing career, from Harlequin to Arabesque to writing mainstream romances is detailed in Stephanie Burley's unpublished dissertation: "Hearts of Darkness: The Racial Politics of Popular Romance."

⁵⁹ Kitt was the first author signed to the Arabesque imprint, the first line of African American romances launched in 1994. "I was very happy to be Arabesque's launch author; it helped expand my audience," she says. "I found out that for many years, a lot of my readers didn't know I was black." (Patrick, *Black Issues Book Review*, July-August, 2004)

⁶⁰ As late as 2002, "Harlequin estimates that only 'five or six' of its 1,200 authors are black." (Osborne, *Black Issues Book Review*, Jan-Feb, 2002).

on the romantic lives of European heroines and heroes since they were reprints from the English-based Mills and Boon. As the romance market increased in the United States, writers sought to present heroines and heroes that were more modern and more representative of American society. Guidelines for those writing for Silhouette Desire, for instance, called for the heroine to be “a mature capable woman of 25-32. ...a vulnerable, sensitive woman looking for a partner to share to the fullest the joys and challenges of life.” Writers’ guidelines for the hero called for him to be “a realistic, believable modern man ... He should be strong, caring, sexy and warm. He will tend to be in his late thirties” (Thurston 225). Harlequin executives associated the industry’s move toward Americanness with a move beyond traditional constructions of “Western” beauty, telling its writers that the heroine “need not be beautiful in the traditional sense of Anglo Saxon beauty: tall, blond and willowy.” And for the hero: “He should be recognizable American male. He does not have to be tall, dark and handsome” (Thurston 223).

Still, the industry’s effort to present characters that were “recognizably” American did not translate into an exploration of racial or ethnic identity. The absence of African American characters, in particular, indicates that the industry remained committed to writing primarily about “white” America. Kitt’s 1985 novel Adam and Eva was the first Harlequin novel to feature black characters, but it did not by any means launch a trend. It would be almost a decade, before Kitt would publish another romance with leading black characters.⁶¹ Moreover, while feminist critics

⁶¹ Before Kitt, journalist Elsie B. Washington, “under the pseudonym of Rosalind Wells, published Entwined Destinies. Believed to be the first-known romance featuring African American characters written by an African American author, Entwined Destinies was published in 1980 under the Dell Candlelight imprint with editor Vivian Stephens. Stephens is one of the first African American editors

actively debated the gender politics of popular romance, the genre's racial politics were completely ignored. Neither Modleski's innovative psychoanalytic analysis of the romance reader or Radway's groundbreaking reader-response study explored their subjects' racial identity. And even Thurston, who criticized Modleski and Radway for lumping all the novels together and failing to distinguish between the nuances of the publishing companies' different romance lines, assumes the category "woman" is homogenous in relation to race: "The erotic historical romance novels of this period ... in reflecting specific contemporary women's concerns within the historical setting, they project a powerful sense of *shared experiences and unity among women*, one that transcends both time and place and is often explicitly articulated ..." (emphasis added 88).⁶²

The lack of black characters in the genre is more than a simple oversight, but represents the genre's commercial investment in conservative and traditional constructions of race. Publishing companies' strict writers' guidelines prove the importance of physical characteristics to a book's commercial reception. The assumption here is that publishers did not believe that novels with leading black characters would sell. Yet, the implications of the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the romance genre extended beyond sales figures. Stephanie Burley, for instance, discusses the irony in the genre's lack of racial diversity but dependence on the

of romance fiction. "Later, during her tenure with Harlequin, Stephens was credited with updating and "Americanizing" the romance genre. She put into place the framework for the Harlequin American Romance, Harlequin Intrigue and Harlequin American Premier editions." (Osborne, Black Issues Book Review, Jan-Feb. 2002)

⁶² The evasion of race is particularly evident in Thurston's argument that romance novels were also social change agents, responding to or influencing debates on civil rights, affirmative action and white male backlash – all issues that have race at their center.

discourse of race.⁶³ Burley reads within the genre's typical descriptions of "dark" heroes and "milky white" heroines an interplay of whiteness and darkness that reinscribes society's "typical associations of feminine whiteness with innocence and purity and of masculine darkness with danger and sexuality." Such racially coded language, tropes and ideology, Burley argues, reinforce a racial hierarchy with whiteness and white female fantasy at the top.

The Business of Love

Morrison, therefore, did not face a literary marketplace in the 1970s and early 1980s that was just enamored with love and romance, but one that thrived on a commercial investment in the popular romance genre, as well as a marketplace that did not merely overlook representations of black females, but one that reinforced racial hierarchies. It is no surprise then that Morrison would make it her primary concern as a writer, editor and literary critic to address this issue. In interviews, book reviews and commentary, Morrison argued that a complete picture of the black woman had yet to be portrayed in the marketplace, including in literature by black authors. For instance, in a 1971 New York Times review of a new anthology on black history, she comments directly on this dearth:

Somewhere there is, or will be, an in-depth portrait of the black woman. At the moment, it resides outside the pages of this book. She

⁶³ Burley's unpublished dissertation remains the most significant treatment of the racial politics of the romance genre. Academics have not fully addressed the politics of race in the genre. There are a few articles that have been written on the topic, but the overall discussion can be described as limited and isolated at best--a stark contrast to the dynamic and sustained conversation among critics addressing the genre's gender politics. Burley's analysis begs for an in-depth discussion of the implications of the genre's racialized notions of black and white, particularly on the literary marketplace. Burley published a version of one of the chapters of the dissertation in the journal Paradoxa in 1999. (See "Shadows and Silhouettes.")

is somewhere, though, some place, just as she always has been, up to her pelvis in myth, asking those sad, sad questions: When I was brave, was it only because I was masculine? When I was human, was it only because I was passive? When I survived, was it only because my man was dead? And when shiploads of slaves became a race of 30 million was that really only because I was fecund? (“To Be Black Woman” 8)⁶⁴

In the above reference to the myth of the emasculating black female, she points her critique at the work that emerged out of the Black Power and Black Arts movements, which created a viable black audience for its literary and cultural production, but was dominated by the voices of black men.⁶⁵ In a 1985 interview with fellow author Gloria Naylor, Morrison recalled her dissatisfaction with the images of black females and messages to black women that were represented and articulated in the Black Arts movement:

I felt the world was going by in some direction that I didn't understand and I was not in it. Whatever was going on was not about me and there were lots of noises being made about how wonderful I was – ‘black woman you are my queen.’ I didn't believe it. I thought it sounded like something I had heard when I was eleven, but the vocabulary was different. There was something in it I just didn't trust.

⁶⁴ The quote is from Morrison's review of *Portraits in Fact and Fiction* by Mel Watkins and Jay David (New York: William Morrow & Co.) (1971). See other published commentary by Morrison, “What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib,” “Writers Together,” “Rediscovering Black History,” and “The Black Experience.”

⁶⁵ For a discussion of the origins of audience created by the Black Arts movement, see James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

It was too loud. It was too grand. It was almost like a wish rather than a fact, that the men were trying to say something that they didn't believe either. (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 199)⁶⁶

Morrison also critiqued the portrayal of black women in other popular forms. In an opinion piece in the New York Times magazine, she argues, for instance, that popular television images — particularly Geraldine, that “campy character in Flip Wilson’s comic repertory,” and Sapphire, the wife of Kingfish in the “Amos and Andy” radio and TV series — were the creations of men (“What the Black Woman Thinks” 15). Black women, she argued, rarely had the opportunity to create their own archetype. Yet, Morrison did see some value in these popular images, arguing that as stereotypes the caricatures were based on reality and that analyzing them helped to understand the experiences of black women in the world.

Thus, Morrison and other black women writers in the 1970s and early 1980s, such as Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones and Gloria Naylor, worked to insert the black female into the era’s literary and cultural marketplace and to revise representations of black women that emerged out of the Black Arts movement.⁶⁷

As an editor at a large publishing house, Random House, Morrison played an important role in this movement, editing and publishing works by black women writers that would counter existing representations of black women and reveal the particular experiences of black women in the world, specifically the challenges they

⁶⁶ Morrison has stated in several interviews that she was disturbed by the messages about black women that came out of the Black Arts movement. In an interview with Anne Koenen in 1980s, she commented: “I was not impressed with much of the rhetoric of Black men about Black women in the sixties, I didn’t believe it. I don’t think they meant it. I was distraught by the gullible young Black women who got caught up in it.” (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 72).

⁶⁷ For a discussion of how black women writers (including Morrison) responded to the Black Arts movement and black nationalism through their literature, see Madhu Dubey.

faced with racism and sexism. She published three different works by Bambara and Jones throughout the 1970s, demonstrating a significant editorial commitment to their work.⁶⁸

Moreover, as these writers told stories of black women struggling with motherhood, black female identity and sexuality, they presented a “different” love story, best represented by the title of Alice Walker’s collection of short stories published in 1973, In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women. The happy endings and idealized love of the popular romance genre were not found in the works of black women authors during the 1970s and 1980s. Their love stories were more like that of the black women blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s than the more traditional marriage and/or love plots of the contemporary popular romance genre. As Angela Davis argues in her study of black women blues singers, the type of love and sexual relationships portrayed in the lyrics of black women defied the mainstream perceptions of “romance” at the time. The many songs that deal with domestic violence, extramarital affairs, abandonment and obsession do not allow for an idealized notion of romantic love or marriage that filled the pages of sentimental fiction, and other popular forms. As Davis argues, “romantic love is seldom romanticized in the blues. No authentic blues woman could, in good faith, sing with conviction about a dashing prince whisking her into the “happily-ever-after” (23).⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Bambara’s early works edited by Morrison include: Gorilla My Love (1972 collection of short stories), The Seabirds Are Still Alive (1977 collection of short stories), and The Salt Eaters (1979 novel). In 1999, four years after Bambara’s death, Morrison edited Bambara’s novel These Bones Are Not My Child. Jones’s works that Morrison edited include: Corregidora (1975 novel), Eva’s Man (1975 novel), and White Rat (1977 collection of short stories).

⁶⁹ For an earlier and more historical study of black women blues singers, see Daphne Duval Harrison, Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s (Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1988). For a discussion of the role of the blues in the creation of a black women’s literary tradition, see Ann duCille, Coupling

Black women writers followed in this tradition, with fiction that defied mainstream perceptions of love conquering all and focused instead on the heroine's individual growth, and in many cases, her triumph over a male counterpart.

Black women authors in the 1970s and early 1980s launched what some have called a writing and reading renaissance, but their works did not by any means produce the type of commercial success that the popular romance genre recorded during this time.⁷⁰ Morrison was particularly disappointed in the reception of Jones' works, admitting that some of the decisions she made in editing Jones' fiction were somewhat based on commercial concerns: "Although there was a lot of other Gayl Jones material from which to select, I chose to publish Corregidora (1975) and Eva's Man (1975) because I thought that they would receive an enormous amount of notice for her," said Morrison. (qtd. in Jessica Harris 90). She attributes Jones' commercial failure to her characterizations of black men: "The men come off badly in Corregidora. They are violent, insensitive, greedy, selfish and mean. Men don't like to be portrayed that way. There was no grandeur, no magic, none of the magnificence that men have. ..." (qtd. in Jessica Harris 90). Interestingly, the popular romance genre, which did receive an "enormous amount of notice," did display the "magnificence" of men. As mentioned earlier, the genre's most traditional plots and successful formulas include heroes who display the characteristics listed above—insensitive, greedy, selfish and mean—but do not remain so. By the end of the novel,

Convention, (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), especially chapter 4, "Blues Notes on Black Sexuality: Sex and the Texts of the Twenties and Thirties."

⁷⁰ Henry Louis Gates, for instance, argues that the publication of Morrison's The Bluest Eye in 1970, along with subsequent works by Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Toni Cade Bambara, helped bring black women writers to the "forefront of Afro-American literary creativity," which resulted in a proliferation of writing by black women authors and the development of an avid readership. See, Gates, ed., "Introduction." Reading Black, Reading Feminist. New York: Penguin 1990.

the heroine succeeds in dusting off the hero's insensitivities, revealing his "grandeur" and securing his love.

While Morrison does not address the popular romance genre directly in her critiques of the literary marketplace, she does make love, the genre's defining feature, a central element of her fiction, arguably in response to the marketplace's predilection for romantic love. In several interviews in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Morrison discussed the centrality of love in her fiction: "I think all the time that I write, I'm writing about love or its absence" (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie xii). Moreover, in her attempt to further define the use of love in her fiction, Morrison indicates that she was indeed aware of the publishing industry's commercial investment in love and romance, drawing a distinction between the romantic love in her fiction, which she says is "closely related to the blues," and the romantic love of the mainstream marketplace, which she describes as the "overwhelming notion of love that's the business of the majority culture":

My notion of love – romantic love – probably is very closely related to blues. There's always somebody leaving somebody, and there's never any vengeance, any bitterness. ... It's not romantic in that sense, and that's my educated view. It's quite contrary to Western civilization; it's quite contrary to the overwhelming *notion of love that's the business of the majority culture*. This one is different, not only that I grew up with both cultures, but the one that came to my aid in times of crisis was always one that was not the majority culture, when you are

thrust back into small spaces. (qtd in Taylor-Guthrie 71, emphasis added.)

These comments suggest that Morrison was indeed aware of and influenced by the publishing industry's commercial investment in love and romance. In the 1970s and early 1980s, it is clear that the *business* of love was being written, marketed, consumed and critiqued via the popular romance genre's writers, publishers, readers and critics. As an editor at one of the largest and most varied publishing houses—one that in 1973 entered into the mass-market industry with its acquisition of Ballantine Books—Morrison undoubtedly was aware of the politics of a publishing industry enticed by sales figures and a financial bottom line as well as the capriciousness of a literary marketplace dependent on the preferences of a reading public. As a result, Morrison's use of romantic heterosexual love in her fiction, I argue, should be read not just in opposition to the type of love that is the "*business* of the majority culture," as she suggests, but also as a response to it.

While romantic love dominated the literary marketplace, this "business of love" did not acknowledge race, or the particular experiences of black women—Morrison's primary concern. Morrison was faced with the dilemma of participating in a mainstream literary economy of love (which was best represented by the popular romance genre that disavowed race), while representing the particular social and political experiences of black women. Her response, I argue, is to integrate the fictions of romance and race, incorporating both the marketplace's romanticization of "overwhelming" or "idealized love" and the type of "blues love," typically found in black women's writing.

Morrison's novels, like the fiction of Bambara, Jones and others put race and gender at their center and explored gender conflict and "blues love" relationships between black men and black women. But, while Jones' men were violent, insensitive, greedy, and selfish, Morrison created male characters that were rogue, but "romantic" as well, resisting a one-sided characterization of black men and settling for one that is more glamorous and appealing in the marketplace. The protagonist in Song of Solomon, Milkman, for instance, is harsh and selfish, particularly with the women in his life, but he redeems himself by the end of the novel by showing a newfound respect for his family and community. Moreover, Morrison, like the popular romance writers, often suggests that underneath the rogue façade of her male characters is "magnificence." In the novel Sula, for example, while making love to Ajax, Sula imagines that underneath his very black skin there was a "glint of gold leaf" (133). Similarly, in Tar Baby, beneath Son's "Mau Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair" is a man so beautiful that the women abandon their fear and forget their plans to escape and turn him over to the police (113). Morrison also explores the popular romance genre's notion of an "idealized" love, by creating female characters overwhelmed with the idea of romantic love or bound by the marriage ideal. Characters such as the lovesick Hagar and subservient Ruth in Song of Solomon, whom Trudier Harris calls "pathetic stepsisters to some of their historical literary sisters," remained emotionally and financially dependent on men, in contrast to the growth and independence of the more typical black literary heroine (186). These "stepsisters" challenged the emerging typology of the independent black literary heroine.

Tar Baby is the best example of Morrison's desire to integrate the fictions of romance and race and to negotiate a mainstream economy of love with a racial agenda. While we see evidence of this strategy in her early novels, it is best illustrated in Tar Baby. Unlike in Song of Solomon and Sula, for instance, where relationships of romantic love serve only as a backdrop to larger social conflicts, in Tar Baby the love story is the "organizing action." The relationship between Jadine and Son is at the center--a traditional love story driving the novel's primary narrative. At the same time, in choosing a black heroine, in particular, Morrison satisfies her desire to revise the images of black females in popular discourse and the literary marketplace. Yet, importantly, Morrison does not just simply color her characters black, but incorporates their experiences with racism and sexism and explores the influence of these experiences on their romantic relationships. Morrison allows her hero and heroine to move freely through the *physical* terrain of the Caribbean and the United States, but as they navigate the *racial* terrain of these settings, they face institutional barriers to the fulfillment of the romance plot's "happily ever after." This is an important departure from the romance genre, which depends on a love triumphant and overcoming all. Thus, while Tar Baby emerges as an example of the genre, it is also an important critique of it and the marketplace that promoted it, exposing the genre's racist and/or assumed "raceless" conventions, particularly its investment in happy endings and traditional constructions of white female beauty.

Reviewers and literary scholars have continually struggled to identify Tar Baby's role in Morrison's canon and in the larger field of African American literature. Most have considered the novel an anomaly: the novel's white characters,

island scenery and present-day setting set the novel apart from her previous three texts, which centered primarily on black characters, rural spaces and historical settings. Tar Baby was described as “peculiar” and criticized for its variations from Morrison’s previous novels. For some critics, the “new” elements of Morrison’s fiction displaced those elements of her novels that endorsed her intimate knowledge of the black community. The review of the novel in the Nation emphasizes this contrast:

Here (in Tar Baby), the small black communities that nourish her mythology are peripheral, displaced by locations that represent the dominant culture: a Caribbean island retreat and New York City. Instead of folk-speech, she gives us speeches; rather than experiencing a heritage, her characters discuss it; rather than expressing communal possibility, they quarrel over the value of racial identity. Tar Baby is, in effect, a novel of ideas set in the white world. (Caplan 529)

Overall, critics concurred that Tar Baby failed to live up to Song of Solomon’s legacy. The use of mythology and magical realism that Morrison eloquently weaved into Song of Solomon appeared less persuasive in Tar Baby, described by one reviewer as “a clotted book with telling moments, but not the headlong drive of Song of Solomon.”⁷¹ In the more than two decades since the publication of Tar Baby, literary scholars have continued to disagree on the significance of the novel in Morrison’s canon or in the tradition of African American literature. As a result, Tar Baby remains one of Morrison’s least studied novels. As Arnold Rampersad and Ann Jurecic argue, “reviewers and scholars have registered their general uncertainty about

⁷¹ This quote is from a review in the Village Voice published on March 18, 1981. p. 37

the text not only through their widely divergent interpretations and judgments of its artistic merit but also through their relative silence” (147).

Much of the uncertainty among critics about Tar Baby, I argue, is based on an unwillingness to acknowledge the shift in Morrison’s fiction as one to popular fiction. While critics recognize the departure the novel represents from her earlier works, they do not then connect it to the romance genre, despite the presence of the genre’s most recognizable elements—a love story as the “organizing action,” an “orphaned heroine,” “a reformed hero” and a societal barrier to their love. Furthermore, as argued in the beginning of this chapter, critics have continually resisted discussing Morrison as an author seeking commercial success. While her recent association with Winfrey and other popular media outlets has brought this connection to the forefront, it can easily be traced to the early 1980s, where Morrison’s shift to popular romantic fiction with the publication of Tar Baby represents her desire to appeal to “all sorts of people,” and to garner the type of commercial success denied Jones and others. Morrison’s novels (not those of Jones, Bambara and others) are the ones that gained the most notoriety among black women writers in the 1970s. Out of her early works, Tar Baby, earned Morrison the most widespread commercial attention. The novel was on the New York Times best-sellers list for four months, and Morrison was featured alone on the cover of Newsweek on March 30, 1981. The article in Newsweek focused not on Morrison as a literary icon, but as a working mother, aspects of her life that would appeal to a widespread commercial audience. Also, mainstream reviews of Tar Baby endorsed the reading of the novel as popular fiction, publicizing the novel’s most commercial aspects. “Tar Baby keeps you turning pages to find out

who killed J.R.: a melodrama full of sex, violence, myth, wit, wry wisdom ... it wraps its urgent message in a highly potent love story,” (Newsweek). In other instances, Tar Baby was called a “truly public novel,” (Newsweek) an “American novel” (New Republic). It was likened to a Broadway play, “white light comedy,” (Atlantic Monthly) a “comedy of manners” (New Republic) and even an “old-fashioned lady-and-the-truck-driver romance” (Time).⁷²

In the rest of this chapter, I look specifically at how Morrison integrates elements of the popular romance genre in Tar Baby, as well as how she revises and critiques the genre. This analysis provides important insight into Tar Baby’s significance in Morrison’s canon: Like her other works, she seeks to expand literary representations of black females and to influence perceptions of black female identity and womanhood. But this analysis also reveals Tar Baby’s significance beyond Morrison’s canon to today’s literary marketplace, where stories of romantic love, black female heroines and commercialization dominate the literary marketplace and works by black female authors.

End of Happy Endings

In Tar Baby, Morrison narrates the romantic relationship between Jadine “Jade” Childs and William “Son” Green over the course of a year, and, in presenting what is the novel’s primary love story, she relies on the popular romance genre’s most defining features. Jadine, a model who lives and works in Paris, resembles the

⁷² Quotes are from the following reviews: R. Sheppard, “Black Diamond.” Time, March 16 (1981): 90-92; Maureen Howard, “A Novel of Exile and Home.” The New Republic March 21 (1981) 29+; Wilfred Sneed, “Improbable Assignment,” The Atlantic Monthly April (1981) Vol. 247 No. 4: 119+; Newsweek, March 30, 1981.

genre's typical heroine in the most significant ways: She is both beautiful and orphaned. And Son, a former crewman now a fugitive running from the law, has characteristics of the genre's typical hero: mysterious and menacing. Moreover, the novel follows the romance genre's most familiar plot: Jadine (the "fair" maiden) comes to the Caribbean to visit her aunt and uncle, only to be swept off her feet by Son (the "dark" hero). The couple meets early in the novel and is immediately attracted to each other, but Jadine initially refuses Son's advances. Facing rejection, Son responds with anger, exemplifying the typical romance hero's rogue behavior. Yet, despite Son's rogue behavior, Jadine eventually relents, and the two declare their love for each other, after which they face the genre's requisite societal barrier, which in this case is the typical disapproving family.

Jadine's aunt and uncle, Ondine (a cook) and Sydney (a butler), raised her as their own daughter and positioned her to benefit from the generosity of their white employers, Valerian and Margaret Street. The Streets welcome Jadine into their home, providing her with a guest room in the house's main living area (unlike Ondine and Sydney who sleep in the servant's quarters), and financed her European education. Even though Ondine and Sydney are servants, they are proud "Philadelphia Negroes," or working-class black Americans. They are also proud that their sacrifices have allowed their niece to enjoy a lifestyle more indicative of the upper-class, wealthy Streets than her working-class relatives. Ondine and Sydney, therefore, disapprove of Jadine's relationship with Son, whose roots are Southern and rural, lacking the prestige of Northern working-class black society. To escape this barrier to their love, Jadine and Son flee the island and run off to New York. Here,

the narrator tells us, they “rescue” each other. Like all romance heroes, Son is reformed. Jadine’s love prompts him to give up his fugitive life. He now has gained a purpose, a “reason for hauling ass in the morning” (219).⁷³ And like all romance heroines, Jadine is “unorphaned,” given a “brand-new childhood,” now that she has Son to protect her (229).

In the typical romance novel, the story would end here. Jadine and Son, having declared their love and overcome the barrier of a disapproving family, would go on to live happily ever after. Yet, unlike the writers of popular romance novels that disavowed race, Morrison seeks to integrate the fictions of romance and race, presenting a story not only of idealized love, or what she identified as the “overwhelming notion of love,” but one that attends to the ways in which the realities of race and class challenge that love. Jadine and Son are initially happy when they flee to New York, but the economic realities of sustaining their union as well as their differences in their backgrounds and racial experiences soon burden their relationship and divide them. Son is unable to make a living to support them, hindered by his years of being homeless and running from the law, which, the narrator tells us, relegates him to “the great underclass of undocumented men” (166). In a commercial and industrialized New York, an unemployable, uneducated, “undocumented” Son is unable to cope, confronted with “a whole new race of people he was once familiar with” (217). Jadine, in contrast, is at home in the big city: “If there ever was a black woman’s town, New York was it” (191). Yet, when they visit Son’s rural hometown, Jadine cannot cope, hindered by her privileged upbringing and European education.

⁷³ All citations are from the First Vintage International Edition, 2004.

Like Son in New York, Jadine in Eloe is confronted with a whole new race of people -- a rural, Southern, black community that she has never been familiar with.

Jadine and Son's love for each other would be enough to conquer the society's barriers of class and race in the traditional romance novel. Yet, Morrison places the world's history of racial supremacy, particularly that of white and Western dominance, as an insurmountable barrier to Jadine and Son's relationship. While Jadine and Son have their differences, it is her relationship with Valerian, "the white man," that creates the primary fissure in their relationship. Jadine feels indebted to Valerian for his generosity and for financing her education, but Son sees Valerian's patronage as nothing more than an obligation:

Why *not* educate you? [Son asks] You did what you were told didn't you? Ondine and Sydney were obedient, weren't they? White people love obedience – love it! Did he do anything hard for you? Did he give up anything important for you?

He wasn't required to. But maybe he would have since he was not *required* to educate me.

That was toilet paper, Jadine. He *should* have wiped his ass after he shit all over your uncle and aunt. He *was* required to; he still is. His debt is big, woman. He can't never pay it off! (263)

According to Son, Valerian's debt represents Western civilization's larger debt to the societies they exploited under colonization. Throughout Tar Baby, Morrison indicts such powers, referring to them as "the aliens, the people who in a mere three hundred years had killed a world millions of years old" (269). The overwhelming presence of

Valerian, a metonym for Western and white-male dominance, leads to the couple's disrespect and distrust of each other. Jadine criticizes Son for not being able to "educate" her, questioning his ability to provide for her, and in a larger sense, his manhood. Son criticizes Jadine's admiration for Valerian, questioning her loyalty to her family and a larger African American community. As Son and Jadine are overwhelmed by their differences or incompatibilities, their storybook love affair takes on the characteristics and the burdens of a "heavy, grown-up love": "so mingled was their sex with adventure and fantasy that to the end of her life she never heard a reference to Little Red Riding Hood without a tremor" (225). And at the end of the novel, instead of getting married and living happily-ever-after, Jadine and Son separate. Jadine, "feeling orphaned again," heads back to the Caribbean and then to France (260). Son follows Jadine to the Caribbean, but he is unable to find her. The novel ends with Son in pursuit of Jadine, with little indication that they will reunite.

By positioning the history of U.S. race relations and class disparities as insurmountable barriers to Jadine and Son's happily-ever-after, Morrison illustrates the popular romance genre's disavowal of race. Instead of a happy ending that as John Cawelti argued depended on a "moral fantasy" of "love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties" (41-42), in Morrison's revised story of romance *and* race, the outcome depends not at all on a "moral fantasy," but on the immoral reality of racism and how it disturbs relationships of romantic love, particularly for African Americans. Therefore, at the end of Tar Baby, there is no happy ending to Jadine and Son's love story, more precisely, there is no ending at all; their story is left undone.

Jadine and Son's love story is the primary narrative, but it is not the only love story in the novel. The scenario that Modleski identified as the romance genre's typical formula ("a young, inexperienced poor to moderately well-to-do woman encounters and becomes involved with a handsome, strong, experienced wealthy man, older than herself by ten to fifteen years") accurately describes Margaret and Valerian's relationship. Margaret was just "eight months out of high school" when she married Valerian, heir to a successful candy-making company and who at 39 had experienced a "nine-year childless marriage to a woman who disliked him," "a hateful, shoddy, interminable divorce," and years of going "into and out of the military service" (51). The two marry despite the age differences but also despite their economic disparities: "It was just her luck to fall in love with and marry a man who had a house bigger than her elementary school." (57) Also true to the romance genre's formula, Margaret lacks a strong connection to her family and is easily wooed by the security and protection that Valerian's wealth and status provide. Speaking of Margaret's relationship with her parents, the narrator tells us: "So when she got married eight months out of high school, she did not have to leave home, she was already gone; she did not have to leave them; they had already left her." (57)

As with the story of Jadine and Son, Morrison disrupts the happy ending for Margaret and Valerian, and unlike in the romance genre, love does not conquer all. In the traditional love story, Margaret and Valerian's story would end at marriage, but Morrison extends it beyond this, exposing the problems they encounter after marriage. We learn that Margaret is very unhappy living on the island, and Valerian spends most of his time in his greenhouse talking to his plants. But the couple's

biggest disappointment is their son, Michael, who rarely comes home to visit, a consequence of the abuse he endured from his mother while growing up. In the middle of the novel, we learn that Margaret inflicted cigarette burns on her son.

Morrison's critique of the genre's disavowal of race, however, is most evident in what might be considered a meta-romance told by Therese, an island native who works for the Streets. Even before Jadine and Son meet, Therese, who is the only one to know that Son is hiding out on the Street's estate, begins "making up [a] romance in [her] head" between Jadine and Son (111). In this romance-within-a-romance, Therese imagines that Son (the "chocolate-eating man") has come to the island to find his girlfriend Jadine (the "fast-ass"). Ondine ("machete-hair") and Sydney ("bow-tie"), however, do not approve of the relationship and have tried to keep them apart. "But it didn't work," Therese imagines. "He find her, swim the whole ocean big, til he find her, eh? Make machete-hair too mad" (108). Therese's meta-romance, like the novel's primary romance, depends on the familiar conventions of the traditional romance formula: a romanticized hero, a vulnerable heroine who initially rejects the hero's advances, a "traditional hostile family" that tries to keep the two lovers apart, and an ending where love conquers all (111). But, as with the novel's other love stories, the story does not end here. At the end of Therese's romance, in a complete reversal of the romance genre's happy ending, Son dies.

More importantly, however, this story clearly implicates race as an obstacle to the happy ending, a factor that the popular romance genre denied. Therese initially begins telling her story as one of "idealized love," with a cast of all-black characters (Jadine, Son, Ondine, and Sydney), but as she tells the story to Gideon, her nephew,

he points to the flaw in her story, the absence of the others in the Street house, Valerian and Margaret—the “white bosses”:

But you are forgetting one thing in your story. One important thing. ... While you making up your story about what this one thinks and this one feels, you have left out the white bosses. What do they feel about it? It's not important who this one loves and who this one hates and what bowtie do or what machete-hair don't do if you don't figure on the white ones and what they thinking about it all. (111)

A romance that does not “figure on” the white bosses is incomplete, Gideon argues, “a half-finished plot on [the] tongue.” (111) Therese is halted by Gideon’s critique and the realization that she has to consider the white people in order to continue her romance:

It was true, she thought. She had forgotten the white Americans. How would they fit into the story? She could not imagine them. In her story she knew who the others were: the chocolate-eating man was a lover, the fast-ass a coquette who had turned him down; the other two were the traditional hostile family. She understood that, but now she had to get a grasp of the tall thin American who played in the greenhouse whom she had never seen clearly and certainly never spoken to. And also the wife with the sunset hair and milk-white skin. What would they feel? She realized then that all her life she thought they felt nothing at all. (111-112)

With the burden of having to consider the white ones, Therese is unable to continue narrating her story. She resents “the problem and the necessity for solving it to get on with her story” (112). Therefore, she moves to what she is certain: “I don’t know what they would think about him, but I know for certain what they would do about him. Kill him. Kill the chocolate-eating black man. Kill him dead” (112). In Tar Baby, the “white ones,” or the “white bosses,” represent the institutional forces of capitalism, colonialism and racism. Just as “the white man” disrupts Jadine and Son’s happily-ever-after, they also disrupt Therese’s romance, which ends with the killing of Son, after which, Jadine is left to suffer:

He dies and fast-ass is brought low at last. Too late, bitch – too late you discover how wonderful he really was. ... And you machete-hair and you bow-tie you will think everything is all right now he’s dead, but no! you will suffer too, because the fast-ass is grief stricken and will blame you for his untimely death and hate you forever. So you can go back to the States the whole pack of you and choke to death on your big red apples. (112)

In the novel’s primary romance, Jadine and Son do go back to the States, and, in essence, choke on the realities of racism, classism and sexism in New York City, the “big apple.” Essentially, in both stories, this meta-romance and the primary narrative between Jadine and Son, the “white ones” are a defining factor in the outcome of a romantic relationship between African Americans.

This exchange between Gideon and Therese is important to understanding the role of race in Morrison’s revised romance as well as what the absence of racial and

ethnic diversity within the romance genre's pages suggests about the contemporary literary marketplace. As Gideon explains to Therese in the novel, "It's not important who this one loves and who this one hates if you don't figure on the white ones and what they thinking about it all." A romance that does not "figure on" them, or attend to race, is incomplete, Gideon tells us, "a half-finished plot on [the] tongue." His comments can be read as Morrison's manifesto against the popular romance genre's disavowal of race. As previously discussed, the genre did not represent the obvious racial realities of its readers, avoiding characters of racial and ethnic diversity. Likewise, Therese does not attend to the obvious racial realities in her romance. She excludes the Streets from her story, although they essentially own the small island and her story takes place in their house. In essence, for the plot of Therese's meta-romance and the popular romance genre to be fulfilled with the happy ending, it has to avoid racial concerns. But, as Gideon makes clear, doing so results in a half-finished plot. Once race is introduced, the happy ending is no more. Put simply, the happy ending depends on a love story without racial concerns (or the social and political realities that the issue of race incurs), a formula that does not have to consider the "white ones." Or, in the case of the popular romance genre in the 1970s and early 1980s, the happy ending depends on a formula that does not consider the black ones and what went on inside them as they encounter romance *and* race.

It is significant that it is Therese who narrates the meta-romance. She is also responsible for disrupting the primary romance's happy ending by thwarting Son's attempts to follow Jadine. Perhaps she does so to save Son because she is so certain of the ending of the meta-romance once race is introduced: Son's death and the

demise of Jadine and her family choking to death on “big red apples” in the States. Yet, more importantly, Therese is the novel’s most unassimilated character. Unlike the Streets, Jadine, Ondine and Sydney, she and Gideon are islanders. Yet, Therese is also unlike the acculturated Gideon, who has spent time living in the United States. The narrator explains that Therese’s “hatreds were complex and passionate as exemplified by her refusal to speak to the American Negroes, and never *even to acknowledge the presence of the white Americans in her world*” (emphasis added 110-111). While one might argue that Therese’s exclusion of the white ones is a mere oversight, it is clear that it is representative of her broader and long-held biases—as the narrator tells us, all her life she had failed to consider white people. Likewise, the popular romance genre’s disavowal of race is by no means a mere editorial oversight, but emblematic of a contemporary literary marketplace’s broader prejudices.

Principles of Beauty

In revealing the correlation between the romance genre’s investment in happy endings and its “racelessness,” Morrison does not just revise the genre, but critiques it, exposing the larger biases behind the genre’s “racelessness.” Moreover, as Morrison works to expand the representation of black females in the contemporary literary marketplace, she confronts what is arguably the popular romance genre’s most identifiable bias, its perpetuation of traditional beauty standards. Readers of the popular romance genre expected the hero and heroine to look a certain way in order to accept their positive fate or successful coupling at the end of the novel. In the case of the heroine, beauty was mostly described as being of the “unassuming” or

“unadorned” type. As Ann Snitow argues, “for women, being ordinary and being attractive are equated in these novels” (251). As the genre became more Americanized, writers were told that the heroine did not have to be “beautiful in the traditional sense of Anglo Saxon beauty.” Yet, as previously argued, the move beyond “traditional” characterizations of beauty did not translate into an inclusion of racial diversity among the heroines of the genre.

In Tar Baby, Morrison challenges the romance genre’s perpetuation of traditional beauty standards in several ways. Her portrayals of Jadine and the African woman whom she meets in the grocery store and whose beauty is “unmistakable,” represent alternative constructions of beauty that counter the romance genre’s ideal. But it is in her characterization of Margaret, who represents the traditional romance heroine, that Morrison most obviously deconstructs the genre’s investment in traditional beauty standards. While we expect Morrison to use the discourse of race to advance her racial agenda, she deliberately appropriates the romance genre’s particular racial coding. The beautiful, yet vulnerable Margaret, for instance, is marked by her “milk-white” skin, in contrast to the handsome, yet menacing Son, whose skin is “as dark as a river bed” (112, 113). Such language, as Stephanie Burley argues, was used to re-inscribe society’s “typical associations of feminine whiteness with innocence and purity and of masculine darkness with danger and sexuality.” Morrison’s racial coding, however, ultimately defies this correlation.

Jadine has characteristics of the traditional romance heroine, but Margaret embodies her. As representative of the traditional romance heroine, Margaret, also embodies the genre’s investment in the privileges of white female beauty.

Nicknamed the “Principal Beauty of Maine,” Margaret represents the dominant culture’s ideal of beauty. Her “red whiteness,” “milk-white skin” and “blue-if-it’s-a-boy-blue eyes” (23) signify the colors of the American flag, positing her not just as an ideal, but as a national symbol of beauty and femininity. This national beauty has practical value: It captures the attention of the wealthy capitalist “candy king” Valerian, who marries Margaret despite her trailer-park upbringing and the disapproval of his well-to-do family. Margaret’s rags-to-riches/Cinderella story only further typifies her as a national symbol.

But Morrison also exposes the “principles” behind Margaret’s extrinsic beauty, that which, as the narrator describes, made her “feel of consequence under the beauty” (83). As Morrison looks *under the beauty*, she reveals that the national/ordinary/white beauty that the popular romance genre valued, in fact, hinders Margaret’s ability to be successful as a wife and mother. Margaret’s beauty provides the capital necessary to attract the wealthy hero Valerian and elevate her class status, but it also deprives her of the character building her parents provided her other siblings:⁷⁴

Still it left its mark on her – being *that* pretty with *that* coloring. ...
Maybe her beauty scared them a little; maybe they just felt, well, at least she has that. She won’t have to worry. And they stepped back and let her be. They gave her care, but they withdrew attention. Their strength they gave to the others who were not beautiful; their knowledge, what information they had they did not give to this single

⁷⁴ See Marilyn Sanders Mobley *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings* for a discussion of Morrison’s characterization of Margaret as an orphan and a discussion Jadine as a “cultural orphan.”

beautiful one. They saved it, distributed it instead to those whose characters had to be built. (56-57)

In this passage, Morrison directly challenges the romance genre's correlation between beauty and character. Margaret's parents deprive her of strength and character because she is beautiful. The consequence of Margaret's lack of strength, knowledge and character is that she physically abuses her son throughout his childhood.

Margaret's "sunset hair" and "milk-white" skin might signal femininity and innocence in the popular romance genre, but in Morrison's revised romance her abusive behavior undercuts this representation. It represents a blemish in her beauty, a result of the lack of character building from her parents and their belief that her beauty would be enough to parent her. As the other characters are made aware of Margaret's abusive behavior, their perception of her beauty is altered, and they see her true character. Ondine looks at Margaret as though "for the first time" (241). And Valerian sees the "real" Margaret: "Now he could see the lines, the ones the make-up had shielded brilliantly. A thread here and there and the roots of her hair were markedly different from the rest. She looked real. Not like a piece of Valerian candy, but like a person on a bus, already formed, fleshed, thick with a life which is not yours and not accessible to you." No longer able to mask her character, Margaret's beauty depreciates. It loses its status as a valuable and marketable commodity, "a piece of candy" that Valerian, the "candy king," could recreate and sell. Instead it is something much less valuable, "already formed," and inaccessible (239). As for the popular romance genre, the revelation of its conventional heroine's

true character devalues its system of racial coding where intrinsic characteristics such as innocence and purity are assumed on the basis of physical beauty.

While Morrison uses Margaret to deconstruct the traditional romance heroine by separating the genre's connection between physical beauty and character, her portrayal of the African woman furthers the disconnection. The woman first appears in a European grocery store as Jadine is shopping for a party to celebrate her passing her exams and landing a magazine cover. The woman's features are as untraditional as Margaret's are traditional:

The vision itself was a woman much too tall. Under her long canary yellow dress Jadine knew there was too much hip, too much bust. The agency would laugh her out of the lobby, so why was she and everybody else in the store transfixed? The height? The skin like tar against the canary yellow dress. (45)

Morrison positions the African woman who haunts Jadine's dreams in direct contrast to Margaret's "feminine whiteness." Just as Margaret is a symbol of American/white beauty, the woman in yellow represents African/black beauty. Here, however, the racial coding does not correlate with character. And the African woman's "transcendent" beauty gives no indication of the principles under her beauty. In fact, as the woman approaches Jadine, she spits at Jadine. Later, as Jadine warns herself against letting Son's good looks hide his character, she is reminded of the way she let the African woman's beauty cloud her judgment: "Too many art history courses, she thought, had made her not perceptive but simpleminded. *She saw planes and angles*

and missed character. Like the vision in yellow – she should have known that bitch would be the kind to spit at somebody” (158).

Both Margaret and the African woman are essential to Morrison’s attempt to revise and critique the popular romance genre: Margaret is there to deconstruct the genre’s traditional white heroine, and the African woman to counter the genre’s beauty ideal. But Jadine, the orphaned, single, beautiful black heroine, is the best example of Morrison’s literary intervention in the popular romance genre and the cultural marketplace that promotes its proliferation. Jadine is a part of both the popular romance genre’s “idealized love” stories and the “blues love” stories of black women writers. For instance, Jadine shares several characteristics with Margaret, the romance genre’s traditional heroine. They both are described as having “natural beauty.” They are both orphaned and/or disconnected from their family. Yet, Jadine’s racial experiences separate her from Margaret and the traditional romance heroine. Jadine’s self confidence, independence, and self assuredness, align her with the black literary heroines of black women’s fiction.

But Jadine’s materialism, her refusal to identify with her black past, her childlessness and her devaluation of family, distance her from the traditional black female heroine of African American literature. Instead of motherhood, family, tradition, etc., Jadine is best represented by her singleness and her attachment to friends instead of family. As such, she becomes more representative of a new African American literary heroine, one more concerned with career, consumption, singleness and her girlfriends. She is anxious about her domestic success, but more concerned with what she will lose by marriage, not what she will gain. In 1981 when Tar Baby

was published, Jadine was an anomaly in the literary marketplace and in Morrison's canon; yet, by the late 1990s she had become a fixture.⁷⁵ Single black females like Jadine appear at the center of works by popular authors such as Terry McMillan, Bebe Moore Campbell and Connie Briscoe, all of which have achieved the type of commercial success that writers like Jones and Bambara were denied. By introducing the black commercialized romance heroine into the literary marketplace, Morrison both precedes and produces writers like McMillan, who have helped to create a contemporary marketplace where black females are widely represented.

⁷⁵ She emerges in Morrison's later novels, specifically Billie Delia in Paradise and finally as Margaret Cosey in Love.

Chapter 3: Terry McMillan and the Quest for Domestic Success

Terry McMillan has published six best-selling novels, several short stories and a critical anthology. Her third novel, Waiting to Exhale (1992), set a number of new records for sales figures and paperback rights. It was also made into a Hollywood film, along with her fourth novel, How Stella Got Her Groove Back (1996). As a result, McMillan has achieved celebrity status as an author, and her novels have garnered enormous popularity. Many credit McMillan with igniting new interest among publishers in popular fiction by black writers, essentially forecasting these writers' commercial success as well. Yet, while McMillan's commercial success is important, it is not sufficient as a criterion by which to judge the significance of her fiction. Despite initial attention from literary critics when her first two novels were published, and several scholarly essays published after the publication of Waiting to Exhale, few scholars have addressed McMillan's novels in a serious and sustained manner. In fact, the more "popular" McMillan's fiction has become, the less likely critics have been to engage in a "scholarly" discussion about her works.

In this chapter, I challenge the limited characterization of McMillan's works as only popular or influential for their commercial success alone, by examining her portrayal of young, urban, upwardly mobile or middle-class black females and their quest for "domestic success" in her first three novels, Mama (1987), Disappearing Acts (1989) and Waiting to Exhale. I define "domestic success" as having a promising or thriving professional career and a happy or satisfying marriage or romantic relationship. While this quest for domestic success is not new in fiction by African American female writers, it is redefined in the post-civil rights, post-feminist,

late twentieth century setting where McMillan's novels take place. The civil rights and feminist movements both created new professional opportunities for black women as well as expanded society's perceptions of womanhood. McMillan's characters embody these advances as their quest for educational and professional opportunities move them away from their communities and homes and from traditional notions of domesticity. Their search for fulfilling heterosexual unions take them beyond idealized notions of love and marriage. At the same time, on this new journey—to new geographic spaces, new economic wealth and new relationship roles—McMillan's characters encounter new obstacles. They respond by creating new paradigms of contemporary domesticity and redefining gender roles within heterosexual unions.

In addition to my reading of McMillan's first three novels, I examine her fiction within a broader literary and cultural context, including the increase in popular fiction by black authors in the 1990s and the shifting literary marketplace and publishing industry that both propelled and accommodated this increase. I also discuss the influence of the rise in popular black fiction on an established field of African American literary studies and the re-emergence of reading groups among black female readers. This analysis, in particular, illuminates the ways in which McMillan's fiction, and other popular romantic fiction like hers, stand outside existing critical paradigms in modern African American literary studies in several ways: by deliberately seeking to satisfy the concerns of a contemporary audience, mostly black and female; by pushing the bounds of existing literary genres; and by positioning romance as the central conflict facing black female protagonists. I argue,

however, that by developing critical models that center the very ways in which McMillan's fiction works beyond existing critical paradigms, we can better assess the role and significance of her works in the study of African American literature as well as their appeal to a contemporary audience.

In the context of a romance paradigm, for instance, McMillan's fiction challenges the idealized notions of love and marriage at work in the popular romance genre, which by the 1990s included a burgeoning field of novels featuring black heroines and heroes and a widespread audience of black female readers. And, in the context of a paradigm of contemporary black women's fiction, McMillan's works diversify the portrayal of black women in the literary marketplace and influence perceptions of black female identity, much like the early novels of other black women writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, as argued in the previous chapter.

Reading McMillan's novels within such paradigms or critical contexts is essential to fully understanding the popular appeal of her fiction as well as the subgenre of fiction her works have come to represent. It is also essential to identifying her work's racial agenda, or "racial project," which is to "uplift" a particular group of readers by validating their social experiences and concerns in the contemporary literary marketplace.

Popular Fiction and the Critical Dilemma

In a 1994 interview in the New York Times, a usually reserved Toni Morrison expressed excitement over recent changes in the publishing industry, where books by black women authors were making the best-seller list and being

chosen as Book-of-the-Month Club selections. “There is now such a thing as popular black women’s literature. Popular!” said Morrison in the interview (qtd. in Dreifus 74).⁷⁶ As one of a small group of black women writers who struggled to find an audience and publisher for their fiction in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was difficult for Morrison at the time to imagine a literary marketplace with more than one “popular” black woman writer. For example, in a 1981 interview in Essence magazine, she declared that the market was capable of accepting only one or two black women writers. “Dealing with five Toni Morrisons would be problematic,” she said. “In terms of new kinds of writing, the marketplace receives only one or two Blacks in days when it’s not fashionable” (qtd. in Wilson 133). Yet, a little over a decade later, Morrison, Walker and newcomer McMillan appeared on the New York Times best-seller list simultaneously, marking a shift in the marketplace for fiction by black women authors. The three authors spent several weeks on the list together, but McMillan lasted the longest, a record 43 weeks, further expanding what literary critics have identified as a writing and reading renaissance led by black women writers and reinforcing the emergence of *popular* black women’s literature.

Despite Morrison’s early skepticism, popular fiction written by black authors, both male and female, increased significantly in the early 1990s, particularly with black authors publishing in a variety of popular literary genres. For example, Walter Moseley, Valerie Wilson Wesley and Octavia Butler helped popularize black detective and science fiction novels, and Kensington Publishing launched *Arabesque*,

⁷⁶ The actual question from the interviewer was “There’s a boom in black women’s literature. Terry McMillan makes best-seller lists. Bebe Moore Campbell’s ‘Brothers and Sisters’ is a Book-of-the-Month Club main selection. Is the book world changing?”

the first imprint devoted to black romance novels.⁷⁷ McMillan and a number of other black male and female writers, such as Connie Briscoe, Tina McElroy Ansa, Bebe Moore Campbell, E. Lynn Harris, Omar Tyree and Eric Jerome Dickey, published “mainstream” books that addressed the contemporary concerns of black females and targeted black female readers.⁷⁸

Much like the fiction of established black women writers such as Morrison, Walker and Gloria Naylor, these newcomers’ fiction centered on the portrayal of black women, but it also exhibited a number of other defining characteristics, including post-integration, urban settings; primarily middle-class, college-educated protagonists; and conflict that centered on the characters’ romantic relationships. Unable to categorize these novels in an existing genre, some argued that they represented a new subgenre of fiction, often referred to as “sistah fiction,” or “sista girl” and “brotherman” novels, colloquialisms that characterized the genre’s ostensible appeal to an “everyday” black reading audience and its central focus: portraying the intimate relationships and friendships between and among black males and females. McMillan’s six novels, published between 1987 and 2005, fit well within this new “subgenre” of fiction.⁷⁹ All of them are set in the contemporary moment, center on black female protagonists, and explore the ways in which her characters assert themselves in their personal relationships and professional lives.

McMillan’s characters are primarily college-educated, middle class, ranging in age

⁷⁷ Since then, Arabesque has changed hands several times. In 1998, Black Entertainment Television bought the line, and more recently Harlequin Books purchased it from BET.

⁷⁸ Representative novels from these authors include, among others, *Sisters and Lovers* (1994) by Connie Briscoe, *Brothers and Sisters* (1994) by Bebe Moore Campbell, *Baby of the Family* (1989) by Tina McElroy Ansa, *Invisible Life* (1991) by E. Lynn Harris, *Flyy Girl* (2001) by Omar Tyree and *Friends and Lovers* (1997) by Eric Jerome Dickey.

⁷⁹ *Mama* (1987), *Disappearing Acts* (1989), *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1999), *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001) and *The Interruption of Everything* (2005).

from their 20s to their 40s and concerned mostly with family, career, friendships and romantic relationships. Many are searching for husbands that equal their educational and professional success; careers that allow them to be creative, but also financially independent; and friendships with like-minded females that share and, thus, validate their own experiences. While McMillan's focus is narrow, it is one that has not been widely represented in African American fiction. Much of the novels of contemporary black female authors such as Morrison, Walker and Naylor favor post-slavery settings to support a historical emphasis, tales of northern migration to illuminate the effects of overt racism, abusive and loveless marriages with black men to emphasize black female independence, and tight-knit, monolithic black communities to emphasize a distinction from the white mainstream. In contrast, McMillan's novels are more likely to include contemporary post-integration settings; stories of women moving away from their communities to the suburbs or to the West Coast who are thus isolated and separated from family; unsatisfying and disappointing relationships with black men; an exploration of the possibilities and problems of being single; and elements of intra-racial strife perpetuated by economic and class distinctions.

McMillan also remains one of the most recognized and most commercially successful authors of this new "subgenre" of fiction. Her third novel, Waiting to Exhale (1992), stayed on the New York Times best-seller list for 43 weeks, selling over 650,000 hard copies the first year. Pocket Books paid a record \$2.64 million for reprint rights to the book (the second highest at that time), which brought in over \$1.75 million in hardcover and paperback sales.⁸⁰ Publisher's Weekly listed it as one

⁸⁰ See Richards for a full discussion of the sales figures and publishing ranks of McMillan's novels.

of the year's top 10 best sellers.⁸¹ McMillan's subsequent novels continued this trend, recording long stints on the best-seller lists and significant hardcover and paperback sales figures. Her fourth novel, How Stella Got Her Groove Back, reached the top of the Publisher's Weekly best-seller list in the first week of its release and stayed in the top five for over 20 weeks. Both Waiting to Exhale and How Stella Got Her Groove Back were made into feature films soon after their release, adding film rights and box office figures to McMillan's commercial success. Twentieth Century Fox paid \$1 million for the film rights to Waiting to Exhale and just several years later, \$2 million for How Stella Got Her Groove Back (Richards 16).

Critics and industry observers have commented widely on the impetus for McMillan's commercial success, and most attribute her popularity to the demands of an African American book-buying public as well as the nontraditional marketing strategies McMillan employed to publicize her novels. According to one account, "expenditures for books rose 26 percent in African American households between 1988 and 1991, while white households purchased 3 percent fewer books in the same period" (Richards 18).⁸² In an effort to target her first novel, Mama (1987), to these black readers, McMillan wrote over 1,000 letters to bookstores in cities with large black populations, black organizations, black colleges, and African American studies and women's studies programs on college campuses. Book editor Cheryl Woodruff argues that McMillan's success was "made in the black community" (qtd. in

⁸¹ Publisher's Weekly rankings found at <http://www3.isrl.uiuc.edu/~unsworth/courses/bestsellers/best90.cgi> In comparison, another all-time best seller for the year, John Grisham's Pelican Brief (which was also made into a film), sold 1.3 million hardcover copies in the first year.

⁸² Also, according to Richards, between 1968 and 1994, the number of African American publishers jumped from 7 to 75, and the number of bookstores increased from 10 to 300. Richards cites Brenda Mitchell Powel, "The Trouble With Success." Publisher's Weekly, Dec. 12, 1994. 33+

McHenry 299).⁸³ Literary scholar Elizabeth McHenry maintains that what she calls the “McMillan Phenomenon” was “directly attributable to McMillan having taken control of her own marketing” (298). Moreover, in explaining McMillan’s overall influence on the publishing industry, many, including Woodruff, argued that McMillan’s success opened publishers’ eyes to a viable black book-buying public, “disput[ing] widespread assumptions that black authors’ books were read primarily by whites and a small group of black intellectuals” (qtd. in McHenry 299).

McMillan’s success, however, was not solely “made in the black community”; it was part of a larger shift in the literary and cultural landscape, marked by a supportive community of black readers on one hand, and also by industry consolidation and commercial pressures on the other. During the 1990s, the publishing industry experienced an overall shift in the economics of publishing—a move toward profits and entertainment. As publisher Andre Schiffrin details in The Business of Books, the buyout of small, independent publishing houses by large media conglomerates in the 1980s changed the infrastructure of the industry and its purpose. Schiffrin began his career working for the New American Library, a large American mass-market paperback publisher owned by the British company Penguin Books, but he spent the bulk of his career, 30 years, working at Pantheon Books, a small publishing house started by his father in the early 1940s with the mission of publishing books of “austere literary and cultural importance” (20). The story of Pantheon’s early existence as an independent publisher, its move to being a subsidiary of Random House in the 1960s, and then a subsidiary of the multibillion-

⁸³ McMillan’s targeted marketing efforts resulted in Mama selling out of its first printing before it was released. For a full discussion of McMillan’s marketing strategy, see Paulette Richards and Elizabeth McHenry.

dollar media conglomerate Newhouse in the early 1980s, and finally, its dismantling in the early 1990s illustrates the publishing industry's shifting financial priorities. As Schiffrin details, Newhouse's takeover of Random House moved the publisher into a "more commercial direction" (79). Previously, Schiffrin argues, they were able to publish "without worrying whether each new book would make an immediate profit or even show the promise of profit" (40). Yet, after the takeover, books were expected to make a sufficient contribution both to overhead and profit.

The story of Pantheon and Random House is indicative of the publishing industry's move toward consolidation. With new corporate owners—many of which (like Newhouse) owned a variety of entertainment venues—publishers faced greater pressure to meet the economic standards of the entertainment industry, where best sellers and celebrity authors were more the norm than the exception. Industry consolidation meant that media companies were looking for ways to maximize their products and their profits. For instance, Disney, as owner of Hyperion Books, or Viacom, as owner of Simon and Schuster, would be more likely to publish those books that could be more readily transferred into other entertainment mediums (movies, television, etc.) and bring in more profits for the company. McMillan's novels, two of which were made into feature films that became box-office successes, were particularly fit for the new book economy. Another novel, Disappearing Acts, was made into a cable television movie by Home Box Office.

The tendency among critics and reviewers to isolate McMillan's narrative (as a "phenomenon" or "made in the black community") masks the relationship between the popularity of her fiction and changes in the broader marketplace as previously

described, but also obscures the influence of both on the academic arena. The shift in the literary marketplace toward popularity, celebrity and entertainment brought more attention to the field of African American literature, increasing readership and the reach of black authors and their works. However, it also helped to continue the long-held literary divide between the “scholarly” and the “popular,” where books that appeal overwhelmingly to a popular audience and receive widespread commercial success are often assumed to have little literary value. Schiffrin, for instance, concludes that the result of industry consolidation was an “ever-narrower range of books based on lifestyle and celebrity with little intellectual or artistic merit” (6).

Schiffrin’s sweeping commentary on literary merit is indicative of the critical biases that perpetuate binary constructions such as the scholarly/popular divide. Within the field of African American literature in the 1990s, the increase in the publication of black popular fiction heightened this divide. On one hand, black authors were writing more genre fiction, expanding popular genres, moving black literature to the “popular” mainstream and reaching widespread audiences. On the other hand, scholars of African American literature were working to define an African American literary tradition and establish its canons. Consider the publication of the Norton Anthology of African American Literature in 1997. In discussing the Norton anthology before its publication, series editor Henry Louis Gates defined the task of the editors as “bring[ing] together the ‘essential’ texts of the canon, the ‘crucially central’ authors, those whom we feel to be indispensable to an understanding of the shape, and the shaping, of the tradition” (Gates 102). And although the Norton was not the first anthology of African American literature, it is

first to carry the mark of W.W. Norton, a name that has come to represent the apogee of canonization in the field of literary studies.⁸⁴

The publication of the Norton represented the culmination of a large project among scholars of black literature, one that began with efforts in the late 1960s and early 1970s to revise an American literary canon to include black authors and to establish the field of African American literary studies. By the late 1980s, scholars of black literature could document success in both of these endeavors considering the increase in African American literature courses on college campuses. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, then, the focus shifted from ensuring the inclusion of black authors to managing the politics of that inclusion. As Stuart Hall argues in another context, the shift is “best thought of in terms of change from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself” (Hall, New ethnicities, 442). Hence, Gates and the other Norton editors set out to determine which authors to include by identifying a set of criteria that best represented the African American literary tradition. At the center of the Norton editors’ tradition is Gates’ own theory of signifying, which posits that texts in the African American literary tradition call on each other, reproducing certain narrative elements and themes found in previously published works. The result is an intertextuality that links all the “essential” texts and “crucially central” authors to one another. In the current study of African American literature, these narrative elements that best represent the African American literary

⁸⁴ For a critique of the Norton’s emphasis on canonization, see Kevin Meehan, “Spiking Canons,” Nation 264.18 (May 1997): 42-6; Chester J. Fontenot, “Book Reviews,” CLA Journal 41.4 (June 1998): 477-93. For a recent discussion of the relationship between canonical exclusion and anthologies, particularly within the African American literary tradition, see Gene Andrew Jarrett, “Introduction: ‘Not Necessarily Race Matter,’” in African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reader, ed. Jarrett (New York: New York UP), 1-22; Jarrett, “Introduction: The Problem of African American Literature,” in Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 1-27.

tradition range from the use of the vernacular to a focus on themes such as racial uplift and social protest.

The rise in the 1990s of “popular” fiction like McMillan’s, along with the culmination of the “scholarly” endeavor to create an African American literary tradition and its representative canon, created a dilemma for critics of African American literature, who were faced with commenting on the emergence of new fiction by black authors that often defied what they had determined to be of “canonical” quality. McMillan’s fiction and the new subgenre of fiction it represented did not readily meet this criteria. The stories of confronting overt racism and sexism, uplifting the black community, and honoring familial ties and tradition, as well as traditional uses of the vernacular or the folk, and the blues were absent in these new novels. Literary scholars who reviewed this fiction emphasized these absences in their analyses. In discussing the emergence of these new “90s writers” (McMillan included), Thulani Davis, for instance, laments the absence of the “shared yearnings based on race, gender, generation, or family so common to black fiction” (26).⁸⁵ Similarly, in a review of McMillan’s first novel for the journal Callaloo, Michael Awkward writes, not necessarily negatively, that: “unlike the tradition’s most representative texts, Mama offers no journeys back to blackness, no empowering black female communities, no sustained condemnation of American materialism or male hegemony” (650).

At the same time, the lack of “canonical elements” forced these critics to identify the narrative elements that were in McMillan’s fiction and others like hers.

⁸⁵ In addition to McMillan’s Disappearing Acts, Davis reviews Marita Golden’s Long Distance Life, Melvin Dixon’s Trouble the Water and Tina McElroy Ansa’s Baby of the Family.

Davis finds in these works a narrow focus on the ambivalence, self-involvement and narcissism of the struggling individual. McMillan's second novel, Disappearing Acts, which Davis reviews in the article, fits this description, she argues, presenting characters who are "loners in every way," "isolated" and whose problems are "completely personal" (28). And Awkward identified Mama as a "moment of 'discontinuity'" in an emerging black women's literary tradition (649). "In its purposely stark, unlyrical delineation of an unredeemed and unrepentant female character ... Mama stands boldly outside the mainstream of contemporary black women's fiction," argued Awkward (649).

Essentially, critics manage the presence of a new "crop of fiction" that defies the racial protocols of an African American literary canon by, at every turn, asserting their preferences for existing critical paradigms and for those authors who best represent them. Both Davis and Awkward, for example, in their analysis of McMillan and other new writers, compare McMillan to "canonical" counterparts. Awkward references the "immensely influential" Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker; Davis mentions the "fabulous wild women of the 1970s and 1980s black lit boom. Morrison, Walker, and company..." (29). In both cases, the mention of these well-known, established "canonical" writers and the shared elements of their fiction work to help further define McMillan and the new writers out of the canon. Thus, these early discussions about popular black fiction of the 1990s like McMillan's were as much about critiquing this new fiction as they were about re-emphasizing the elements of "canonical" black fiction.

The presence of McMillan in the Norton perhaps best illustrates the dilemma of black scholars faced with managing two pivotal moments in African American literary production—the rise of “popular” fiction and the completion of the “scholarly” endeavors of tradition-building and canon-making. McMillan’s work appears in the Norton alongside Morrison, Walker and other “crucially central” authors, suggesting that her fiction is more like her “canonical” counterparts than critics such as Awkward and Davis recognized. But rather than a testament to the canonical quality of McMillan fiction, McMillan’s inclusion in the Norton is more indicative of the politics of canon-making, as the editors of the Norton attempt to link McMillan to an existing critical paradigm that they determine best represents the tradition. Though one of the most commercially successful and popular authors in the latter half of the twentieth century, with several best-selling novels by the time, McMillan is not represented in the Norton by any of her popular novels, but by an obscure short story, “Quilting on the Rebound.” McMillan’s contemporaries, who precede her in the section titled “Literature since 1970,” are represented by excerpts from their most well-known works and in genres that best represent their canons.⁸⁶ Morrison, for instance, whose six novels by 1997 are all well-known, is represented by her second novel, Sula, which is reprinted in its entirety.

The editors presumably chose “Quilting” to link McMillan to the literary tradition represented in the Norton. The story is about a 38-year-old single black woman who turns to quilting to heal her heartache after being stood up at the altar by her much younger 26-year-old boyfriend. An esteemed practice in African American

⁸⁶ These include Walker’s The Color Purple, Naylor’s Women of Brewster Place, Jamaica Kincaid’s Annie John and Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.

culture, quilting is often associated with acts of resistance and protest during slavery. By choosing the quilting narrative to represent McMillan, the Norton editors attempt to show McMillan's fiction representing a particular social and cultural act of resistance in African American history.

By choosing "Quilting" as the work to represent McMillan in the African American literary canon, the Norton editors misrepresent McMillan's canon, which does not typically rely on historical and traditional markers, such as quilting, as symbols of resistance. In fact, the presence of quilting in McMillan's canon is more the exception than the norm. As I argue in this chapter, signs of social protest and resistance appear in McMillan's fiction in more contemporary forms, such as her character's insistence on pursuing educational and professional opportunities outside their home communities, or their refusal to adhere to proscribed gender roles within heterosexual unions. Yet, instead of a discussion of the ways in which McMillan's fiction updates or extends literary representations of protest and resistance, the Norton editors limit their discussion of McMillan's literary significance to her commercial success. In the introduction to the "Literature since 1970" section, the section writer mentions McMillan only to say that she appeared on the New York Times best-seller list along with Morrison and Walker and that her novels "made black romance stories a central part of U.S. publishing success." Similarly, in the brief text that introduces McMillan's short story, the emphasis again is on her commercial success, with descriptions of McMillan moving "farther on her way to literary celebrityhood," being "truly a force to be reckoned with," and her novels as having "upped the ante for those writing after her" (Gates and McKay 2572).

Beyond Critical and Literary Paradigms

While McMillan's commercial success is noteworthy, it is not sufficient as a basis on which to evaluate her literary value or significance. By including McMillan in the Norton, the editors rightly suggest that her works are integral to African American literary studies; however, they provide little context for a serious critical analysis of her works. For instance, there is no in-depth discussion of how specifically her novels have "upped the ante" for other writers, of how her "celebrityhood" is influenced by a larger literary and cultural landscape, or of how her works adhere to and/or revise "black romance stories." By limiting their discussion of McMillan to her commercial success, and simultaneously forcing her into traditional critical paradigms, the Norton editors miss an opportunity to illuminate the ways in which McMillan's fiction updates and extends such paradigms. As Gene Jarrett argues, anthologies often resort to "problematic essentialist paradigms of canon and tradition that prioritize the authenticity of African American literature without recognizing the various and frequent ways in which African American writers themselves were working *beyond* this paradigm" (Jarrett, "Introduction" 6).

McMillan's fiction, as well as the popular black women's fiction that her novels have come to represent, work beyond existing critical paradigms in modern African American literary studies in a number of ways. First, as popular fiction, these works are successful precisely because they deliberately address the concerns of a commercial audience rather than satisfy the purposes of an academic one.

McMillan's books, for instance, are full of references to popular culture and consumer goods, such as movies, television shows, magazines and name-brand fashions. While a number of reviewers have condemned the emphasis on material goods and consumerism in her novels, I argue that such references work to identify a target audience (those who recognize these references and their significance), as well as work to attract this audience to her fiction. As Susanne Dietzel argues, "for popular fiction to work, to be successful and to attract and maintain a body of devoted readers, it has to embody elements of recognition and identification" (159). In the case of McMillan's fiction, this audience is comprised of the same demographic she portrays in her works: young, urban, upwardly mobile or middle-class black females. For this audience, as well as for her characters, possession of (or the desire for) these material goods serves as an outward or tangible marker of economic status and class.

While McMillan's novels are concerned with satisfying a commercial audience, they do not fit easily within established popular or best-selling genres, such as science, romance or detective fiction. Thus, early in McMillan's career, literary critics did not immediately relegate her fiction to that of pulp or mass-market fiction and, consequently, outside the bounds of traditional academic scholarship and literary criticism. After the publication of Waiting to Exhale, several critics attempted to assess the artistic merit and literary value of her works. A simple search in the MLA International Bibliography reveals three journal articles and one chapter in an edited book that include a literary analysis of McMillan's Waiting to Exhale.⁸⁷ All of these

⁸⁷ These four articles include: Jackson, Edward. "Images of Black Males in Terry McMillan's Waiting to Exhale," MAWA Review 8:1 (1993): 20-6; Ellerby, Janet Mason. "Deposing the Man of the House: Terry McMillan Rewrites the Family," MELUS 22:2 (Summer 1997): 105-17; Dandridge, Rita. "Debunking the Motherhood Myth in Terry McMillan's Mama," CLA Journal 41:4 (June 1998): 405-

articles were published between 1993 and 1998, signaling scholarly interest in McMillan. Yet, as McMillan's fiction moved beyond the literary arena into an entertainment industry, literary critics began to show less interest in her works' artistic merit. After the groundbreaking commercial success of Waiting to Exhale the book (1992) and the movie (1994), McMillan continued to gain notoriety and her works more popularity. Her fourth novel, How Stella Got Her Groove Back (1996), was a huge best seller and was also made into a blockbuster feature-length film. Also, in 2000, Home Box Office premiered an adaptation of Disappearing Acts on cable television. All of these films attracted an all-star cast, featuring some of the most well-known black actors and celebrities: Angela Bassett, Whitney Houston, Loretta Devine, Wesley Snipes, Taye Diggs and Sanaa Lathan. In addition, McMillan became a celebrity herself, marked in particular by widespread media coverage of her personal life. At the same time, published scholarship on McMillan's fiction has waned. Entries that appear in the MLA bibliography after 1998 are primarily of a bibliographic nature or center on other extraliterary concerns such as analyses of the films based on her fiction or her fiction's influence on reading practices. While important, these more recent entries signal a significant shift away from the traditional literary analysis prior to 1998.⁸⁸

By portraying relationships of romantic love as the most important issue facing African American characters, McMillan's fiction defies modern critics'

16; and Dandridge, Rita. "Debunking the Beauty Myth in Terry McMillan's Waiting to Exhale." Language, Rhythm, and Sound: Black Popular Cultures into the Twenty-First Century. Ed. Joseph K. Adjaye and Adrienne R. Andrews. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh Press, 1997. 121-33.

⁸⁸ A simple search in the MLA bibliography is by no means an exhaustive search. I use it here as an example only. Several of the works I cite in this chapter, for instance, that include references to McMillan's fiction do not appear in this simple search. Yet, the MLA remains an essential database for those in literary studies.

expectation that African American literature must privilege racial conflict. Romantic relationships between black women and black men are at the center of McMillan's most popular novels: Disappearing Acts is devoted entirely to the relationship between Zora and Franklin; Waiting to Exhale is propelled by the characters' experiences and escapades with black male lovers; and How Stella Got Her Groove Back revolves around the courtship between Stella and Winston and the problems they face because of their age difference. Yet, modern African American literary studies has created a critical paradigm that emphasizes protest against racism and evidence of racial uplift, as well as an historical focus based on social movements—Abolition, Reconstruction, Northern Migration, Civil Rights and Black Arts. Thus, those texts that represent elements of social protest and racial uplift are seen as valuable to the academic study of African American literature. As argued throughout this dissertation, romance is often seen as antithetical to this critical agenda.

In summary, as popular, romantic fiction that pushes the bounds of existing genres, McMillan's novels stand outside existing critical paradigms in modern African American literary studies. It does not follow, however, that in defying specific critical paradigms, her works also defy the broad goals and functions that critics have identified as characteristic of African American literature, particularly that of providing a means of racial uplift and a platform for social protest. I argue that racial uplift and social protest are filtered through a different lens in her works and require new critical models of analysis. Using the romance genre as a lens, for instance, illuminates the ways in which McMillan's popular novels challenge (or protest) the idealized notions of love and marriage at work in the equally popular

romance genre, which by the 1990s had begun to incorporate racial and ethnic diversity in its pages. Similarly, putting her novels in the context of contemporary black women's fiction reveals the ways in which McMillan's fiction extends an essential goal of this fiction: to diversify the portrayal of black women in the literary marketplace and influence perceptions of black female identity. Here, McMillan's novels "uplift" the experiences and concerns and challenges faced by young, urban, upwardly mobile or middle-class black females at the end of the twentieth century, a group that had not been widely portrayed in the literary marketplace, even among the renaissance of black women's literature launched in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the rest of this chapter, I continue this discussion of alternative representations of "protest" and "uplift" in McMillan's fiction. Specifically, I examine McMillan's portrayal of young, urban, upwardly mobile, or middle-class black females, specifically their quest for "domestic success" in her first three novels. While this quest for domestic success is not new in fiction by African American female writers, it is redefined in the post-civil rights, post-feminist late twentieth century setting where McMillan's novels take place. The civil rights and feminist movements both created new professional opportunities for black women as well as expanded society's perceptions of womanhood. McMillan's characters embody these advances as their quest for new educational and professional opportunities take them away from their communities, homes and traditional or historical notions of domesticity privileged in most contemporary black women's fiction. Similarly, they embody such advances as their search for fulfilling heterosexual unions take them beyond idealized notions of love and marriage perpetuated in the popular romance

genre. At the same time, on this new journey—to new geographic spaces, new economic wealth and new relationship roles—McMillan’s characters encounter new obstacles, to which, I argue, they respond by creating new paradigms of contemporary domesticity and redefining gender roles within heterosexual unions. As I argue at the end of the chapter, these new models are essential to her work’s popularity, serving as a means to validate a particular audience, by elevating their concerns and experiences in the contemporary literary marketplace.

New Models of Contemporary Domesticity

McMillan’s first three novels center on portrayals of black females and address many of the typical themes found in black women’s fiction, such as motherhood, sexuality and domesticity. McMillan’s first novel, Mama, chronicles the relationship between Mildred Peacock, a hard-working single mother, and her eldest daughter, Freda. As Mildred struggles to raise five children alone in an economically depressed Midwestern town, it is Freda who suffers the most from her mother’s missteps. Freda, however, is also shaped by her mother’s ambition and determination, which she relies on as she faces her own struggles and challenges with her career and romantic relationships. Disappearing Acts, McMillan’s second novel, is the story of Zora Banks, a teacher and aspiring singer, and Franklin Swift, a construction worker. The novel is told from both Zora’s and Franklin’s perspectives as they meet, fall in love and attempt to pursue a romantic relationship while facing economic hardship, negotiating class differences and competing career ambitions, as well as managing each other’s expectations of gender roles. Finally, Waiting to

Exhale is the story of four friends (Savannah, Gloria, Bernadine and Robin). The novel centers on their experiences as middle-class black females dealing with distant families, demanding jobs and disappointing romantic relationships.

Like most contemporary black women authors, McMillan uses her novels to challenge conventional notions of women as homebound, immobile and static. In most of these conventional works, the narrative centers on the female protagonist's return home, and the authors are most concerned with how the protagonist negotiates the community to which she returns. Often, the character's success or failure in her native environment is used as a measure of her respect for history or her commitment to the ideals of the past.⁸⁹ In contrast, McMillan's focus is on how her characters operate in their new settings: the friendships and new communities they create; the challenges they face with new careers; and how they maintain their closeness to family and friends despite the physical distance. While most authors use the return home to evaluate their characters' perceptions of history, family and/or community, it is on the "quest" for domestic success where McMillan's characters are forced to re-evaluate home and community, especially their relationships with the female relatives they have left behind, and thereby their perceptions of womanhood as well. As a result, these characters create new paradigms of contemporary domesticity that require the freedom to move around and call a number of places home; to have the

⁸⁹ Morrison, for example, centers both Sula and Tar Baby on the main characters' return home in order to emphasize how these characters navigate the communities they return to and how their journeys have changed them. In both of these novels, the return home is marked by a significant event. Sula's return is signaled by the plague of dead robins. And Jadine's return home sets the state for the temporary dismantling of racial hierarchies in the Street household. As readers, we do not witness firsthand the experiences of Sula or Jadine on their journeys. In Sula's case, we only hear about her journey and only her version of select events when she returns. Similarly, in Tar Baby, the experiences of Jadine in France are selective. Another example is Sugh in Alice Walker's The Color Purple.

“financial freedom” to own, build and manage their homes; and, finally, to be home alone, that is to exist outside the restrictions of traditional marital norms.

In each of these three novels, McMillan presents protagonists who journey away from their families and communities to unfamiliar areas. The characters leave small towns in Middle America (Toledo, Ohio; Point Haven, Michigan; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) for big coastal cities: New York, Boston, Los Angeles and Phoenix — places where, as a young Freda explains in Mama, “everybody don’t know all your business” (130).⁹⁰ In each case, the character’s journey frames a significant portion, if not all, of the text. In Mama, Freda’s move (and later her mother Mildred’s move) to California fills the last half of the book. And it is in California that Freda grows up, and Mildred gets the chance to experience life outside of Point Haven. In Disappearing Acts, the novel begins with Zora moving into a renovated brownstone in Brooklyn, having left a “safe little cozy” life in Toledo to live a “bold and daring life” in New York City (20).⁹¹ The brownstone becomes the site for the intense domestic conflict at the novel’s center. In Waiting to Exhale, the novel begins with Savannah packing her bags for Phoenix, “the fourth city she has lived in in fifteen years” (4).⁹² Savannah’s move to Arizona, via Denver, Boston and Pittsburgh, sets in motion the coming together of the four women whose interactions and stories make up the novel.

McMillan’s protagonists trade small-town boredom and familiarity for career and/or educational opportunities. Freda, who leaves Point Haven for Los Angeles

⁹⁰ All citations from Mama are from the New York: Pocket Books, 1987 edition.

⁹¹ All citations from Disappearing Acts are from the New York: Washington Square Press, 1989 edition.

⁹² All citations from Waiting to Exhale are from the New York: Signet, 2005 paperback edition.

right after high school, immediately lands a job as a secretary at an insurance company, making \$90 a week, a figure unheard of in the economically depressed Point Haven. Freda, “tired of being in the dark about everything,” also enrolls in a nearby community college: “Now she had an ocean of knowledge at her disposal, and it was all within walking distance” (139). Zora plans to launch her singing career in the entertainment haven of New York, a city that provides her with access to a voice coach who “already has a reputation” and who “has coached some of the best,” increasing her prospects of a successful singing and songwriting career (59). Although Savannah claims that she is leaving Denver because “the men are dead,” and because she is “tired of the altitude, all this damn snow, and this obsession with the Denver Broncos,” she moves to Phoenix to begin a new job at a TV station (2). Although it comes with a \$12,000 pay cut, the job comes with “plenty of opportunities to advance” and a chance for Savannah to diversify her publicity skills (3).

Freda’s, Zora’s and Savannah’s moves are emblematic of post-civil rights and post-integrationist migration habits of African Americans.⁹³ Their actions also can be linked to a rich literary and cultural history of African American migration. In several ways, McMillan’s novels can be read along with what Farah Jasmine Griffin has identified in her pioneering study “Who Set You Flowin’?” as “one of the twentieth century’s dominant forms of African American cultural production”: the migration narrative (3). Migration narratives “portray the movement of a major character or the text itself from a provincial (not necessarily rural) Southern or Midwestern site (home

⁹³ For a discussion of post-integration migration habits, see Andrew Wiese. Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2004.

of the ancestor) to a more cosmopolitan, metropolitan area” (3). This narrative is also characterized by distinct “pivotal moments,” one of which is the “event that propels the move northward.” This event is often violence or the threat of violence: lynchings, mobs, beatings, sexual abuse and rape. While the catalyst for the move might vary in migration narratives, in all cases the South is portrayed as “an immediate, identifiable, and oppressive power,” which is “unsophisticated in nature” (4-5).⁹⁴

In McMillan’s novels, her characters are “set flowin’” for much less dramatic reasons: to escape the dreary Point Haven, to launch a singing career, to hone their publicity skills. Yet, underneath each character’s expressed intention for leaving is the suggestion of something more pernicious. McMillan replaces the presence of Southern power in the African American migration narrative with that of a domestic power in her fiction. The “immediate, identifiable, and oppressive power” that serves as the catalyst for McMillan’s characters’ migration is not the threat of racial or sexual violence that their ancestors faced, but the threat of stifling domesticity and economic stagnation. In Mama, Freda struggles to name this threat when she returns to Point Haven for the first time after leaving for California:

What’s going on around here she wondered? It couldn’t just be dope.

It had to be something more debilitating, more contagious. It was this

⁹⁴ In her 1995 study “Who Set You Flowin’?” Griffin looks closely at four “pivotal moments” of the migration narrative: the event that propels the move northward; the migrants initial encounter with the North or the urban landscape; the migrant’s attempt to navigate the urban landscape, and finally, “a vision of the possibilities or limitations of the Northern, Western, or Midwestern city and the South.” I am particularly interested in Griffin’s discussion of the catalysts for the migrants’ move northward. Literary artists, Griffin argues, use violence or the threat of violence as the catalyst for their character’s migration. Writers during the early twentieth century present racial violence in the form of threatening mobs, lynching, rape, beatings, etc. And contemporary black women writers expand the violence to include sexual violence (abuse, rape) from within the black community and in some cases, from within the home.

town. This termite of a place, which would sooner or later eat away her mama and the girls too. It already had Money. The thought itself alarmed her. Her sisters stuck in front of a TV all day watching soap operas, on welfare, with a house full of babies. And what about Mildred? Freda knew she couldn't sit back and let this happen to them. (149-150)

Although we are told that Freda wants to leave Point Haven to escape the boredom and routine of her small hometown, upon Freda's return we see evidence that she was looking to flee something else, "something more debilitating, more contagious." Here, the threat is a manifestation of the economic woes plaguing Freda's native community. The lack of jobs and professional opportunities for the people of Point Haven creates an atmosphere of deprivation that imprisons Freda's family and friends. Her brother, Money, goes to jail. Her high school girlfriends are "living in the projects with one or two babies." And the guys from high school are spending "all of their waking hours in front of the pool hall, drinking wine or nodding over cigarettes." These scenarios suggest that if Freda chose to stay at home or return permanently to her native community, she would also fall to such circumstances.

For Zora, the threat lies in her weaknesses: "tall black men and food. But not necessarily in that order." In the first pages of Disappearing Acts, as way of introduction, Zora recounts her history of making poor decisions in the relationship arena: "I've got a history of jumping right into the fire, mistaking desire for love, lust for love, and, the records show, on occasion, a good lay for love." As a result, Zora has had a number of bad breakups, one of which prompted her move to New York,

another led her to change her phone number to an unlisted one and another “goodbye,” she says, was “so ugly that when I missed my period again, there was no way I could bring myself to tell him. So I did it again, but swore I would never hop up on one of those tables and count backward from a hundred unless whatever came out was going home with me and my husband.” While Zora’s bad luck with relationships might appear benign, her “addiction” to men, naiveté, indiscriminate choices and self-esteem issues because of her struggle with her weight make her vulnerable to abusive relationships. Although she does not express the presence of physical or verbal abuse, there is evidence of controlling partners: One of her boyfriends wanted her to quit her job, marry him and move to Louisiana to “run a farm and have babies” (21). There is also evidence of volatile partners—in particular, a cocaine addict who Zora assumed was “sniffing all the time” because of sinus problems (21). Therefore, when Zora moves into her new brownstone and vows to focus on the present, she is leaving behind more than a safe, cozy life in Toledo but a history of placing herself in potentially abusive relationships.

In Waiting to Exhale, it is the possibility of ending up like her mother or her sister Sheila that threatens Savannah:

Sheila and Mama have always thought that something was better than nothing, and look where it’s gotten them. Mama ... hasn’t had a whole man in her life for seventeen years, and if I knew where my daddy was, I’d probably kill him for making her such a bitter woman. He broke her heart, and she’s never recovered. And Sheila? She files for divorce on an annual basis and calls me collect from some cheap motel

where she and the kids are hiding out until she can serve papers on Paul. (1)

Savannah is critical of her mother's and sister's contentment. This idea of settling for something less or settling down distinguishes Savannah from her female relatives. Savannah's moves are not just the manifestation of her seeking career advancements, but also her need to avoid her mother's and sister's willingness to settle down and settle for less.

Freda fears being on welfare, watching TV all day and raising a house full of babies. Zora fears being trapped in a controlling or volatile relationship that would render her powerless. And Savannah fears the unhappiness that is a consequence of "settling" and "settling down." For these three protagonists, this domestic threat, much like the Southern power in the traditional migration narrative, is both "immediate and identifiable." They have witnessed in their communities and in their closest female relatives. The domestic threat, like the Southern power in the migration narrative, is also "unsophisticated" because it limits their knowledge, keeping them from pursuing educational opportunities and broadening their experiences. When Freda gets to California, she is faced with her ignorance but soon finds the "ocean of knowledge at her disposal." And Mildred confirms the presence of Freda's new sophistication: "She wanted the other kids to get the same introduction to the good life that Freda was getting. And Freda had sure changed. She was so much sharper and alert, even sounded wiser." And most importantly, this domestic threat is "oppressive" because it hinders their ability to move. Early on in Mama, Mildred says that her children have given her "a feeling of place, of

movement, a sense of having come from somewhere.” Yet, while her children might have initially offered the hope of mobility, the burden of children is stifling. Mildred admits that her domestic state kept her from being able to leave Point Haven: “Now don’t get me wrong. I don’t want none of y’all to end up like me with a house full of babies and then *can’t go nowhere*” (emphasis added 130).

In McMillan’s novels, the ability to go somewhere, or more specifically, to flee this domestic threat is essential. While some have read this movement as representative of her characters’ rejection or “disengagement” with the past, I argue McMillan’s characters do not reject their pasts, their families or their communities, but the conceptions of domesticity within those contexts.⁹⁵ McMillan illustrates how the tension between domesticity and mobility creates conflict for her protagonists within their own families. Savannah, in particular, is continually confronted by her mother and sister asking her why she doesn’t settle down. “This’ll make the fourth city you’ve lived in in fifteen years. I can’t keep track, Savannah. When are you going to be still enough to settle down?” And even though Mildred knows first-hand how domesticity can halt one’s desire to leave, she continues to warn Freda that she needs to settle down. What Sheila, Savannah’s mother, and Mildred want for their loved ones is for them to get married and have children. Without this, Sheila argues, Savannah’s life “has no meaning.” These women believe that even if Savannah divorces later on (as Sheila considers on an annual basis or like Mildred, who by the

⁹⁵ See Daphne Brooks’ “It’s Not Right” for a critique of *Waiting to Exhale*’s disengagement with the past. Brooks argues: “As a text about the present, it seems uninterested in linking that present to the complexities of the historical past or the future. Instead *Exhale* replaces historical depth with an affirming, fleeting engagement with the immediate” (36).

end of Mama has three ex-husbands), at least she will have experienced “settling down.”

Mobility is what gives McMillan’s characters the impetus to craft a future different from previous generations. The importance of mobility is characterized in the mission of the community service group that the characters in Waiting to Exhale belong to, “Black Women on the Move,” which is described as: “a support group that held workshops for women who wanted to do more with their lives than cook, clean, and take care of kids; for women who weren’t moving but wanted to move” (37). Being able to move allows McMillan’s characters to expand their knowledge and their experiences and to create a different future for themselves and their families. Therefore, it is on the journey (as opposed to their return home) that McMillan’s characters realize alternative “domestic” situations. And, as a result, her novels forge new perceptions of black women as no longer tethered to their old communities, but pioneering new ones. For instance, several of McMillan’s characters bring their families to them. Mildred follows Freda to California in Mama. In Waiting to Exhale, Bernadine’s mother joins her in Arizona when she retires. And Savannah urges her mother to move with her. Once free of their original communities, many of McMillan’s characters thrive. The financial success they experience as a result of their decisions to pursue educational and career opportunities allows for new “domestic” arrangements as well. They can provide their parents with financial support, move their sisters and brothers away from economically depressed environments, provide an alternative for their relatives and potentially alter the future of their families for generations to come.

Revising Traditional Gender Roles

Even as McMillan's characters flee familiar constructions of home and community, they desire the sense of stability that home and family typically (or presumably) provides. Thus, in addition to the characters' quest for professional careers and educational opportunities, these novels portray the desire for a satisfying romantic relationship, one that would provide the stability and security these characters have sacrificed on their journey to new places and experiences.

McMillan, for instance, begins both Waiting to Exhale and Disappearing Acts much like a popular romance novel, where the plot and central conflict all center around the hero and heroine finding each other, discovering their love for one another and living happily ever after. McMillan reveals Savannah's quest for romance within the novel's first two pages:

From the outside, everything looks good: I've got a decent job, money in the bank, live in a nice condo, and drive a respectable car. I've got everything I need except a man. And I'm not one of these women who think that a man is the answer to everything, but I'm tired of being by myself. Being single isn't half as much fun as it used to be. (2)

With the exception of Bernadine, whose marriage is ending at the beginning of the novel, the rest of the characters share Savannah's desire to abandon "being single." Gloria's last relationship was with her now teenage son's father, whom she occasionally reunites with on the rare occasions that he comes to visit his son. Although Robin has had a number of male lovers and suitors, none have led to

marriage. Similarly, McMillan does not wait to reveal Zora's romantic quest in Disappearing Acts. Early in the novel, Zora admits her quest for romance as well:

As corny as it may sound—considering this is the eighties and everything—there's nothing better than feeling loved and needed. And until God comes up with a better substitute, I'll just keep my fingers crossed that one day I'll meet someone with my name stamped on his back. (20)

When Zora meets Franklin soon after, she, therefore, has hopes that he will fulfill this wish.

As argued in the previous chapter, the romance genre had for years failed to include African American characters as leading protagonists. Yet, by the time McMillan's Waiting to Exhale debuted, black heroines and heroes were becoming more popular in the genre. Kensington Publishing launched an entire line of romance novels with African American characters in 1994.⁹⁶ The line, Arabesque, was bought by Black Entertainment Television in 1998. BET continued publishing the novels but also expanded their appeal with movie adaptations aired on the company's cable television station. And in 2006, Harlequin Enterprises, the largest romance book publisher, bought Arabesque and announced plans to publish two single-titles each month. Yet, even though the genre has diversified its racial representation, its core elements typically remain in place: heroines who are isolated from family and therefore more vulnerable to the hero's advances; heroes who are rogue and need the heroine's refining touch; and, most importantly, narratives that end in marriage or

⁹⁶ For a full discussion of the emergence of black romance novels, see Stephanie Burley, Hearts of Darkness.

engagement.⁹⁷ This final element is, as Pamela Regis argues in The Natural History of the Romance Novel, *the* “universal feature” of the romance novel. “A marriage—promised or actually dramatized—ends every romance novel,” she argues (10).

Similarly, John Cawelti explains in his pioneering study on popular genres that the “moral fantasy of the romance is that love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties” (Adventure 42). And even though Cawelti allows for the absence of an outcome of a “permanently happy marriage,” he does insist that the romance ends “always in such a way to suggest that the love relation has been of lasting and permanent impact” (42).

By framing her novels as popular romance novels, McMillan also sets up an expectation that the novel will adhere to the genre’s requirements of idealized love and marital fantasy. And at times, her characters do perpetuate the moral fantasy of a triumphant love and the marital ideal by associating home and stability with a husband. Savannah, for instance, says she will “be still and settle down” when she “finds what she’s looking for”: “peace of mind, a place I can call home; feeling important to somebody ... “ (4). Zora envies her friend Claudette’s stability, which she attributes primarily to her marriage: “She is so normal. She’s a lawyer, married, has a daughter, and she’s happy. She loves her husband. Her husband loves her. They are buying their house. They have lawn furniture. They ski in the winter and spend weeks in the Caribbean. He brushes her hair at night. She rubs his feet. And after seven years of marriage, they still unplug their phone” (17).

⁹⁷ Although these novels feature black characters, they still struggle with the genre’s racialized discourse. For a discussion of the ways in which black romance novels still disavow race, see Stephanie Burley, as well as Tania Modleski’s article “My Life as a Romance,” reprinted in Old Wives’ Tales.

At the same time, McMillan's characters acknowledge the ways in which such ideals create anxieties among women about not being married and negative perceptions about being single. Bernadine, for instance, recognizes the stereotypes of "desperate" women, women who will, as she says, "do damn near anything to snag" a man (13-14). Bernadine distances herself from such characterizations, vowing to never become like them. Similarly, Savannah discounts the validity of popular discourse that perpetuates this desperation, attributing the glut of magazine covers that anguish: 'Will I Ever Meet a Decent Guy?' and 'The Ideal Man: Is He Out There?' and advise: 'How to Find True Romance,' 'How to Find Mr. Right' and 'How to Spot Mr. Wrong,' as mere media hype. "It's not *that* rough," she says. "The media wants us to believe this shit" (212). Savannah also shifts focus away from troubled women to immature men, arguing that they are "scared to make the first move ... grow up and act like men" (212). As a result, McMillan's novels do not offer any clear proclamation for or against marriage or the marital ideal. And more often than not, contradictions are embodied in the same character, as we see in the following remarks by Savannah in Waiting to Exhale: "I'm also willing to spend the rest of my life alone if I have to, until I find someone that makes me feel like I was born with a tiara on my head. ... All I've got is *one* life, and this is one area that's too large for me to compromise" (13). Here, even as Savannah vows to not settle for an unsatisfying marriage or relationship, she perpetuates the notion of marriage as a fairytale, complete with "a tiara on her head."

Yet, even as McMillan's novels set up the framework of the romance genre and include passages that appear to perpetuate a marital ideal, they do not incorporate

the genre's most universal feature—a happy ending marked by marriage or engagement. This does not mean that the novels do not have “happy endings.” At the end of Waiting to Exhale, all of the characters face a more positive future: Bernadine is planning to open a bakery after winning a million-dollar divorce settlement; Gloria is looking forward to spending more time taking care of herself now that her son has graduated from high school; Robin is preparing to be a single mother who will have the support of close friends and family; and Savannah is promoted to her dream job, complete with a salary increase, which restores the pay cut she took to move to Phoenix. But there is uncertainty regarding McMillan's characters' romantic relationships. At the end of Disappearing Acts, for instance, Zora and Franklin, having broken up after their fights turned physical, meet again a year later. But whether or not they rekindle their relationship is not clear. And, although both Bernadine and Gloria have potential suitors in Waiting to Exhale, there is no guarantee that their relationships will lead to marriage, engagement or “love relation with a lasting impact.”

With a clear opposition between “mobility” and “settling down,” or marriage, in McMillan's novels, it is no surprise that her characters do not marry. In the absence of marriage, engagement or any such relationship for her female characters, McMillan's novels are more concerned with defining what social stability and status looks like for the contemporary *single* black woman. McMillan, therefore, turns to marriage and/or relationships not to fulfill the romance genre's requirement, but more as a platform for critiquing the social stability and traditional gender roles of African American women in the 1990s. In so doing, she continues a long history of black

women writers—from nineteenth century novelists such as Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins to Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston in the 1920s and 1930s—using the marriage tradition as a site of social critique. As Ann duCille argues, “coupling is consistently used as a metaphor in these texts, as the outward and visible sign of the inward and systemic ills that plague American society” (145).

The absence of marriage in McMillan’s novels works to challenge the popular romance genre, and, importantly, the idealized constructions of love and courtship, and traditional gender roles that accompany it in the literary marketplace. As discussed in the previous chapter, the love stories told by black women writers in the late 1970s and early 1980s were more like that of the women blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s than the idealized love plots of the traditional romance genre. In modern, black feminist texts, for instance, coupling, duCille argues, is “more often fictionalized as marital horrors than as hearthside harmony” (145). McMillan also presents this type of “blues love” in her novels. Mama’s opening scene offers a vivid example as it portrays Mildred’s murderous plans:

Mildred hid the ax beneath the mattress of the cot in the dining room. She poured lye in a brown paper bag and pushed it behind the pots and pans under the kitchen sink. Then she checked all three butcher knives to make sure they were razor sharp. She knew where she could get her hands on a gun in fifteen minutes, but ever since she’d seen her brother shot for stealing a beer from the pool hall, she’d been afraid of guns. Besides, Mildred didn’t want to kill Crook, she just wanted to hurt him. (1)

Crook is Mildred's childhood sweetheart, husband and the father of her five children. Yet, as we see in the above scene, their relationship is troubled, plagued by violence and distrust. Unable to keep a steady job in a town plagued by the demise of American manufacturing jobs, Crook spends most of his time down at the local bar. He takes his anger and frustration out on the 27-year-old Mildred by beating her and then forcing her to have sex with him. A few chapters into the book, Mildred ends her relationship with Crook, packing up his stuff and dumping it in front of his girlfriend's house. Yet, Mildred's divorce from Crook does not end her cycle of "blues love" relationships. She marries two more times in the novel, and in each case, the marriage is admittedly not for love. She marries Billy Callahan, who is young enough to be her daughter Freda's boyfriend, because he "warms her bed at night." The marriage does not last a year. She then marries Rufus, simply because she is tired of the electricity and gas being cut off. Again, the marriage does not last more than a year.

In Disappearing Acts, again, the romance that McMillan presents is far from any idealized notion of love. Franklin's wife—from whom he's separated—two children and inconsistent employment put emotional and financial strains on his relationship with Zora. At the same time, Zora's naiveté, low-self esteem and dishonesty place another set of challenges on their relationship, which is marked by power struggles, verbal and physical abuse and, in the end, a child. Similarly, in Waiting to Exhale, blues love persists. After sacrificing her own professional ambitions to help her husband build a successful company, Bernadine finds out that

her husband is leaving her for his younger white secretary. Robin's boyfriend Russell marries another woman, but *after* conceiving a child with Robin.

McMillan's novels, however, do not just resist notions of idealized love. They redefine gender roles within heterosexual unions, primarily by reversing these roles. For one, it is more likely that the *men* in McMillan's novels are "trapped" in unhappy marriages, and in several cases, the reader is encouraged to empathize with them. In Disappearing Acts, Franklin complains that his wife, Pam, stopped wanting to make love, or take care of herself, and that the only thing she was interested in was soap operas and food. Both Franklin and Zora characterize their fathers as victims in their respective marriages. Zora complains that her stepmother takes advantage of her father, demanding that he work overtime, taking his paycheck and denying him affection. Franklin blames his poor relationship with his father on his father's inability to stand up to his controlling and overbearing wife. In Waiting to Exhale, several of the male characters purport to be in unsatisfying marriages. Russell and Kenneth complain of wives who "don't understand them," and characterize their marriages as mistakes, having married, at least in Kenneth's case, because the women were pregnant. But it is James, whom Bernadine meets the night her divorce is final, who is most likely to garner the empathy from the reader usually given to women characters. Just as he and his wife are planning to divorce (because she did not want children and he did), James' wife is diagnosed with a rare form of breast cancer, and he is compelled to stay with her.

A similar role reversal appears in the context of financial stability. In traditional stories of love and romance, for instance, male marriageability is equated

with financial wealth. Male suitors are measured by their ability to provide financially for their wives and families.⁹⁸ Therefore, a man with substantial means is deemed a “good catch.” In several of McMillan’s novels, these economic roles are reversed. It is the female character who brings wealth and economic status to the union. This episode is even more likely for McMillan’s characters, who have deliberately pursued professional and educational opportunities. This question of “worth” is at the center of the conflict between Zora and Franklin in Disappearing Acts. On several occasions, Zora tries to convince herself of Franklin’s “worth” despite his inability to keep a steady job:

For some stupid reason, I started thinking about the yardstick friends like Portia and women’s magazines used to measure a man’s worth. They measure wrong. I mean, standing right here in front of me was a man, and a man who loves me, who just opened himself up and took a chance by telling me the truth ... How many of them have told me the truth? And when was the last time I met a man this smart, this sexy, this gentle, this strong? (96)

In absence of Franklin’s financial stability, Zora looks to such qualities as his intelligence, honesty, sense of humor and strength to determine his value. This is not uncommon in the romance genre; the heroine is expected to fall in love with the hero despite or in spite of his financial promise. It is unlikely, however, that the hero would truly lack any means of financial security to provide the heroine. Franklin is a

⁹⁸Ann duCille argues in The Coupling Convention that this tradition ranges from Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice to Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God. DuCille argues that Nanny in Their Eyes “plots in the fashion of Mrs. Bennet in Pride and Prejudice, to marry her granddaughter off with all deliberate speed to a single black man in possession of a comparatively great fortune” (117).

talented carpenter, but he is hindered by a number of personal vices and societal constraints, and there is no clear indication in the novel that he will overcome these obstacles and meet society's expectations of male worth.

Moreover, both Zora and Franklin express discomfort with the reality of their reversed economic roles. Zora comments it "just felt lopsided" (342). And Franklin, unable to be the "provider," struggles with defining his own worth. While he is proud of the success Zora is finding as a singer and songwriter, he is also ashamed of his inability to fulfill traditional characteristics of male identity: "I looked at her hard and pictured her onstage with people screaming and shit 'cause she had just tore the roof off the place. Then I started wondering. Where would that leave me? Her man, the construction worker who couldn't even be sure if he was gon' get paid every week or not" (101). In a further reversal of domestic roles, it is Franklin, who in recognizing that Zora is a "good catch," wants to "trap" Zora with a baby, a role usually reserved for females: "Ain't no sense in my lying – I didn't really plan on having no more kids, but I love Zora and I wanna keep her. I guess this was one way of guaranteeing it" (277).

McMillan's novels again reverse the roles of men and women in courtship and engagement. While traditional notions of bachelorhood have been reserved for men, McMillan bestows this "privilege" on her single, black, female protagonists. Her characters count the proposals they have turned down as marks of achievement, of evidence of their ability to move on. For instance, when Freda informs her mother that she is moving yet again, this time to New York for graduate school, Mildred typically diminishes her accomplishments and encourages her to settle down: "What

you need to be doing is looking for a damn husband. Writing for newspapers and thangs sound glamorous and everything, but when you gon' slow your ass down?"

(224). Freda responds:

You just don't seem to understand what it means to be black and female and be accepted to these schools, do you, Mama? They don't let just anybody in! I can have a baby any time ... I could've been married at least three times by now, if you want to know the truth.

(224)

Similarly, when we meet Zora in the first few pages of Disappearing Acts, she recounts the several proposals she has turned down. Savannah, as well, is happy that she did not marry the three men she lived with because "they were all mistakes." Qualities typically associated with the eligible bachelor—unattached, free to move, no responsibilities—now all fall on McMillan's protagonists. Single black womanhood is a privilege in these novels. Instead of settling for the possibility of an unhappy marriage, McMillan's characters choose to remain single. And their decisions to bypass marriage are endorsed by the scarcity of satisfying heterosexual unions and "happy" marriages portrayed in the novels.

Finally, McMillan's characters exercise the sexual autonomy and freedom usually reserved for male characters, and in so doing redefine notions of black female sexuality. Zora's friend Portia counsels her to adopt this stance at the beginning of her relationship with Franklin:

Some things we're supposed to keep to ourself. That's what's wrong with women anyway. Get fucked real good, think we're in love, then

we spill our fuckin' guts, give 'em our love resumes in chronological order, tell 'em all kinds of personal shit that shouldn't have no bearing or ain't got nothin' to do with them, and what kind of information do they give up? Where they were born, how old they are, and where they work and shit. We need to be more like them. (83)

Portia imagines that these actions will empower Zora in the relationship, suggesting that a woman's emotional investment in a relationship, often triggered by sexual intimacy, is a sign of weakness. In Waiting to Exhale, Bernadine follows Portia's counsel as she pursues a sexual relationship after her husband leaves her for his secretary:

Bernadine thought he'd made the mistake women were often guilty of: confusing orgasms with love. ... The only thing she wanted from him was between his legs. She assumed that Herbert must've thought he was giving her more than that. He was probably hoping she'd fall madly in love with him and go crazy. But she hadn't. ... Herbert didn't have a clue that on those dry nights when Bernadine needed to get her parts oiled, she simply knew who to call. She used him. But so what? That's what they'd been doing to women for years, she thought. Taking advantage of us. (293)

Like Portia, Bernadine rejects the stereotype of women associating sexual intimacy with love, and, in so doing, places herself in a position of power usually reserved for men.

By reversing the traditional gender roles in heterosexual unions and by validating a number of new paradigms of contemporary domesticity, McMillan's novels protest idealized notions of monogamy, marriage and sexuality, particularly for the young, urban, college-educated, middle-class characters that she portrays. It is important that even if her characters do desire such ideals, they come to accept their absence. Robin in Waiting to Exhale reflects this realization:

I have always fantasized about what life would be like when I got married and had kids. I imagined it would be beautiful. ... just like it was in the movies. We would fall hopelessly in love, and our wedding picture would get in *Jet* magazine. We would have a house full of kids ... I would be a model mother. We would have an occasional fight, but we would always make up. And instead of drying up, our love would grow. We would be one hundred percent faithful to each other. People would envy us, wish they had what we had, and they'd ask us forty years later how we managed to beat the odds and still be happy. *I was this stupid for a long time.*" (emphasis added 48)

McMillan's novels, therefore, are more so about the realities of romance—dealing with economic and social pressures facing women—rather than romantic fantasy. For her characters, these pressures include being disappointed with male companions for a number of reasons, such as men's inability to commit to one partner, take on the role of husband and father, or to perform satisfactorily sexually. Such realities are not just confined to relationships, but extend to other aspects of their lives, such as the reality of having to raise their children without a father in the home, to relocate by

themselves to unfamiliar areas in order to pursue professional and educational progress, and to recreate the stability of home and community with like-minded female friends.

Reading Differently

While McMillan's novels, particularly Waiting to Exhale and How Stella Got Her Groove Back, set new records for sales figures for African American authors, they did not do so in isolation. "Despite their differences," argues Scott McKraken, "all theorists of mass culture agree that popular culture cannot be understood in terms of *individual* texts. Instead those texts must be read and interpreted in relation to the totality of production, distribution, and consumption that organizes the conditions of their reception" (emphasis added 25). In the case of McMillan, these conditions were created by a number of factors: the black women's writing "renaissance" in the late 1970s and 1980s; the publishing industry's shift toward entertainment, which put pressure on publishers to seek out books that could move beyond the literary arena into other forms of entertainment; and the emergence of black popular romance novels, which proved an interest among readers in stories of romance and race.

As important to the reception of McMillan's fiction are factors outside the publishing industry, in particular, the emergence of book clubs and community reading groups in the African American community. While the phenomenon of African Americans coming together in intimate group settings to discuss literature dates back to the nineteenth century, such gatherings garnered newfound interest in the 1990s, marking a shift that has occurred over the past two decades from reading

as a private and personal endeavor to a public and collaborative act.⁹⁹ In the contemporary book club setting, reading takes on a role beyond formal analysis and interpretation. These contemporary book clubs “are about far more than the communal analysis of a good book,” argues Elizabeth McHenry, who examines the practices of reading groups composed of black female members in her study of African American literary societies (303). “Although reading literature provides the catalyst for their coming together, the impact of black women’s associations with a reading group is usually felt on both an intellectual and an emotional or spiritual level” (McHenry 303).¹⁰⁰ These reading groups fill a void in their member’s lives, providing them with a support network and an outlet to discuss everyday challenges, such as feeling isolated as the only African American in the workplace and balancing a demanding career and family responsibilities.

McMillan’s novels, with their emphasis on her characters’ everyday concerns, lend themselves to this type of “communal analysis,” as well as to its “racial uplift” function, particularly for those readers who identify with the experiences and perspective found in her works: young, urban, college-educated, middle-class, contemporary black females concerned with family, career, friends and romantic relationships. Cultural critic Lisa Jones identifies McMillan’s readers as part of a

⁹⁹ For a full discussion of the history of African American book clubs, see Elizabeth McHenry. For a discussion of the shift in reading from a private to a public act, see Cecilia Konchar Farr.

¹⁰⁰ McHenry bases much of her analysis on quotes and interviews with members of the Go On Girl! Book Club, which she describes as “one of the most widely publicized and far-reaching black women’s book clubs currently in existence” (303). The club was started in 1991 and formally incorporated itself in 1995 as national, nonprofit organization, and launched chapters not only in New York, where it started but across the country. According to the organization’s web site, <http://www.goongirl.org/>, it has more than 30 chapters in 12 states. Most books clubs, however, are informal, and therefore, McHenry admits that it is “impossible to accurately estimate the number of black book clubs and reading groups currently in existence” (303).

post-civil rights, post-feminist, hip-hop generation, who identify with the struggles portrayed in the novels of Morrison and Walker, but wanted to read about the “burdens of [their] own,” many of which echo those McHenry identifies as important to the book club participants she interviewed.¹⁰¹ “Glass ceilings at the office and in the art world, media and beauty industries that saw us as substandard, the color and hair wars that continued to sap our energy. We wanted to hear about these,” Jones says (133-34). Thus, in addition to the burdens of single motherhood, sexual oppression, domestic violence and substance abuse that appear in much of black women’s fiction, the less familiar, new burdens that Jones and her generation call for figure prominently in McMillan’s fiction, such as preoccupations with physical appearance and beauty, particularly in the workplace; material goods and commercialism; and individual professional success in climbing the corporate ladder.

The presence of this perspective in McMillan’s fiction, and, as importantly, in the popular marketplace helps to validate readers’ own social experiences, anxieties and concerns. While McMillan is not the first author or the only to portray this perspective, it is not until the 1990s that it becomes widely explored, with the creation of a sort of “cult of single black womanhood,” represented not just by McMillan’s

¹⁰¹ E. Shelley Reid makes a similar argument about a new generation of authors who are aware of Morrison and Walker and acknowledge their influence, but seek to present new perspectives. “Many 1990s novels clearly reveal their debts to earlier black women’s narratives,” argues Reid, “while adding viable and sometimes compelling new perspectives” (313). Reid includes in her analysis works by African American female authors McMillan, Bebe Moore Campbell, Sapphire, A.J. Verdelle, as well as Susan Straight, who she identifies as a “white woman writing about African American communities and characters” (314). In her analysis of 1990s fiction, Reid identifies many of the same characteristics identified by Thulani Davis in her 1990 article. Unlike Davis, however, who criticizes these new authors for moving toward the “white mainstream,” Reid argues critics should look at what the new authors are adding to the African American tradition. My study is in line with Reid’s analysis, looking particularly at the significance of popular romantic fiction like McMillan’s for African American literary studies.

fiction but other contemporary works.¹⁰² The result is the acknowledgment of what Daphne Brooks accurately identifies as the “sexual and material *discontent* of the middle-class contemporary Black female consumer” (“It’s Not Right” 42). Yet, for these readers, the recognition and identification of this discontent in black cultural texts such as McMillan’s fiction does not necessarily perpetuate the discontent as Brooks suggests. As argued in this chapter, McMillan’s fiction challenges societal representations that stand in opposition to her characters’ experiences and self-identity, helping to redefine contemporary perceptions of black female identity and sexuality.

Thus, it is more likely that McMillan’s fiction, and others like hers, works to, as Jacqueline Bobo argues in her groundbreaking study of black women as cultural consumers, “nourish and sustain” their readers (6). Bobo argues that the black women in her study typically sift through popular culture for positive images of themselves, often reading texts differently from the dominant culture. Similarly, Eva George argues in her 2004 study of black female spectatorship that the black women in her study “purposely choose types of media that sustain their sense of self and help them maintain a positive identity.” Both Bobo and George base their analyses in part on the experiences of black females in their respective studies reacting to representations of McMillan’s fiction.

¹⁰² This concept is informed by a short piece I co-published with two other graduate students at the University of Maryland (Koritha Mitchell and Kenyatta Albeny) in a special issue of PMLA that focused on future lines of scholarship. In the piece, we call attention to the “body of relationship fiction that dominated African American literature in the 1990s,” and name authors such as Terry McMillan, E. Lynn Harris, and Bebe Moore Campbell. We argued that “as these texts articulate the values and concerns of black women in the United States, they create what we have termed the ‘cult of single black womanhood’ both inside and outside the text. The main feature of this cult is an anxiety about achieving domestic success, particularly through marriage” (2015).

While Bobo and George do not rely on textual analysis or other traditional tools of literary scholarship in their studies, their studies do suggest a path for literary critics to pursue in assessing the significance of McMillan's fiction—one that challenges traditional hierarchies of textual production and literary criticism and that acknowledges what McHenry says has always been true: "There are different ways to know a book." One of the readers in Bobo's study objected to the tendency among critics to position a "popular" McMillan in opposition to more "canonical" writers: "Critics shouldn't try to compare McMillan's novels to those of Alice Walker or Toni Morrison or Gloria Naylor: 'It's like she [McMillan] said herself. She's a storyteller. I don't think she's concentrating on being heavy. So we don't compare her with the other writers. *We read her differently; we relate to her books differently*" (emphasis added 20). George's study further confirms this need to read texts differently:

The responses of the women in the Waiting to Exhale group shattered the notion that individuals have neatly categorized readings of the films—dominant, oppositional, or perverse readings, for example. The women in this group demonstrated that an individual's identification involves a much more complicated process that likely includes all types of readings. For example, Petra may have identified with the film mostly on the level of class (Savannah's mother being on federal aid), yet she did not identify with the film's main theme of finding heterosexual love. Ami, on the other hand, thought about the question of identification, and revealed that she connected to the film on the level of finding love (heterosexuality aside). The women in the

Waiting to Exhale group illustrated various readings that one person can have while watching one film. (153)

It is important, therefore, in analyzing the literary significance of McMillan's fiction that critics move beyond existing critical paradigms and toward those that encourage evaluation of popular romantic fiction on more substantial grounds than its commercial success. These new paradigms should challenge traditional canonical protocols of racial uplift and social protest, break down binaries between the scholarly and the popular, allow for discussions of communal processes of reading and other extra-literary factors that also determine the contingencies of value in literary texts.

Conclusion: Critical Needs and the New Literary Marketplace

In a 1992 article in the Boston Globe, the reporter writes of being in the presence of three powerful “goddesses,” wielding their power, sharing their wisdom, and training others to join their ranks. But what might appear at first to be a story of fantasy and make-believe is actually one based on real-life events: the three “goddesses” were Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Terry McMillan, and their novels had just appeared simultaneously on the New York Times best-seller list, ushering in a new era of popularity for black women writers and their fiction.

It is Walker who characterizes herself and the two others as powerful goddesses. When asked what it meant to have three black women on the best-seller list at once, she told the interviewer: “What we are seeing is the manifestation of the triple goddess. It’s no longer about one figure. It is about power. Now we have more of it. One black woman is powerful. Two are formidable. Three are invincible” (Smith B1). Morrison, however, credits her success to female elders, both real and make-believe: “When I’m having trouble defining a character, I ask an older woman, one of my older characters. They are the authenticating figures for me. From them, I get a strong sense of approval or disapproval. And then I can go on” (Smith B5). Finally, McMillan was the most direct in her answer: “I have a lot of respect for Toni and Alice, but I don’t do what they do and don’t try, and they don’t do what I do. Our voices are completely different, but all of our stories are valid” (Smith B5).

McMillan's comments point to the significance of the moment beyond the simple headline: three black women make the best-seller list at the same time. The more consequential story is about their differences, specifically how their novels represent different audiences, literary strategies and purposes, and, in so doing, expand the category of black women's fiction and what we consider black popular fiction. Morrison's Jazz, like many of her other novels, weaves a story of black history, culture and love and the social implications of race and racism in the United States. Walker's Possessing the Secret of Joy calls attention to the ritual of genital mutilation and revisits familiar themes in her works—female abuse and powerlessness. McMillan's Waiting to Exhale fictionalizes the everyday pressures for young, urban, upwardly mobile black females negotiating expectations in relationships—with family, between friends, and among lovers.

Fast forward almost two decades and these differences still persist in best-selling fiction by black female authors. A random glance at the New York Times hardcover fiction list shows that there is likely to be more than one black female author. In January 2009, Morrison, Sister Souljah and Kimberla Lawson Roby are all on the list, but more importantly, again, their voices are “completely different,” and their “stories are valid.” Morrison's novel, A Mercy, is set in seventeenth-century America and focuses on one household, where African slaves, indentured servants, Native Americans and a white mail-order bride all converge. In Midnight, popular hip-hop star and political activist, Sister Souljah, provides a prequel to her 1998 best seller The Coldest Winter Ever. In this new novel, she provides a coming-of-age story of a Sudanese immigrant growing up on the streets of Brooklyn. Finally,

Roby's The Best of Everything revisits a familiar character in her books, Curtis Black, a scandalous and unlawful preacher. This book centers on his 22-year-old daughter Alicia and her relationship with her new husband, who is also a preacher.

Since 1992, therefore, the milestone of Morrison, Walker and McMillan has been repeated again and again. And while the feat of three black women on the best-seller list no longer makes headlines in daily newspapers and mainstream magazines, it remains significant, having redefined literature in a number of ways. In the past almost two decades, the marketplace has witnessed the emergence of new categories of fiction written by black authors and targeted to black readers. Souljah's book is marketed as "street lit," or "street fiction," also called "urban lit," or "urban fiction." Readers of this type of fiction expect certain elements from these novels, including stories of a drug culture and prison life. The popular African American writer Zane is among a group of writers of "erotica" or "erotic fiction," which is defined by its explicit descriptions of sex and intimacy. Also, as discussed in this study, in the mid-1990s, "black popular romance" novels, written by best-selling authors such as Sandra Kitt and Beverly Jenkins, became staples of the marketplace.

These new works blur the lines of distinction in familiar popular literary genres. This study focuses on the romance genre, arguing that contemporary novels by McMillan, in particular, revise elements of the romance genre to portray the romantic realities of young, urban, upwardly mobile, black females. McMillan's works resist the romance genre's requirement that the novel end in marriage or engagement. The same course of revision and resistance is at work in best-selling mystery and detective fiction as well. Walter Mosely's *Easy Rawlins*, an unemployed

World War II veteran with tax problems, is an atypical sleuth, as is his ex-convict, murderous, sidekick Raymond “Mouse” Alexander. Valerie Wilson Wesley introduces a thirty-something, black female, middle-class, single mother into the realm of detective fiction in her popular Tamara Hayle mystery series. Hayle, a former cop turned private investigator, employs her investigative expertise for clients all while raising her son, caring for extended family and negotiating romantic relationships. Similarly, best-selling author Stephen Carter relies on elements of the mystery genre to foreground the life of the black bourgeoisie and to map it onto the U.S. history of racism and classicism in his novels Emperor of Ocean Park (2002) and New England White (2007). As noted in a Washington Post review of New England White, the book proved “how irrelevant genre labels have become” (Asim BW03). Carter’s own story is as much an indication of a shifting literary marketplace as his novels. In 2002, the Yale law professor was awarded a \$4.2 million advance from publisher Alfred A. Knopf, an unprecedented amount for a first-time novelist.

Perhaps, most significantly for teachers of African American literature is the way these new novels question consensus on what is considered “literary” and useful for classroom instruction. In 2000, I conducted a short survey of 15 professors of African American literature at various universities and at various stages in order to gauge the presence of McMillan’s novels in the classroom. Of the 15 professors I interviewed, four had taught one of McMillan’s novels in their classroom and five more indicated that they would consider using McMillan’s novels in a course on “popular” literature. The four courses that included McMillan consisted of a course on film that discussed the movie version of Waiting to Exhale; a course titled “Prize

Winners and Prize Worthies,” which discussed what made a text popular and the effects of that popularity; a course on Black Women Writers that included McMillan’s first novel Mama; and a course that examined the conflict between popular literature and classical works. Therefore, even though almost a third of these scholars were teaching McMillan, it was primarily in the context of her commercial success, maintaining a critical divide between “scholarly” or “literary” and the “popular.”

Ten years later, McMillan’s fiction can no longer be categorized as simply popular or in opposition to “classical” works. In today’s literary marketplace, with new categories of fiction and new manifestations of familiar genres of fiction, and where African American authors frequent fiction best-seller lists (hardcover, paperback, mass market and trade) it is virtually impossible to continue to draw clear distinctions between what is “literary,” or “commercial,” “scholarly,” or “popular.” Moreover, while a decade ago it might have been useful for teachers of African American literature, such as those I interviewed, to insist that McMillan is “popular” and Morrison is “scholarly,” this study argues analyses that constrict a text to being either scholarly *or* popular, promoting racial *or* mainstream concerns, having aesthetic *or* commercial value, seriously limit any discussion of a work’s social, cultural, historical and literary contributions.

This new expanded marketplace, therefore, calls for literary critics to adopt expanded critical analyses as well, enriched with discussions not only of a novel’s commercial success, but also of its reorientations—how it revises existing genres and challenges canonical protocols, engages new audiences and satisfies new purposes.

This new era of black popular fiction requires new tools for representing best-selling fiction in the classroom—no longer can we simply compare best sellers to “classics” and get a full picture of their significance. New tools also are required for representing those authors that have been “literary” all along. A recent Washington Post article portrayed a veteran high school teacher struggling to teach Morrison’s A Mercy to his Advanced English placement class in a public D.C. school. The students, living in what some are calling a “post-racial” climate, were unable to connect to the novel’s account of the origins of racism in America. “I read urban books like Zane,” said one student, “I don’t like this book. Toni Morrison does too much.” Another student commented that the only thing she “liked about the book was the love scene between Florens and the blacksmith” (Shapira B1). Both of their comments indicate that one model for teaching works like A Mercy and getting students to connect with the novel is through the lens of popular romance and its representations in the marketplace.

It is now clear that in 1992 when Morrison, Walker and McMillan made the best-seller list their celebrityhood influenced a larger literary and cultural landscape, “[u]pping] the ante for other writers,” as the Norton editors recognized in including McMillan in the first edition, but also for literary scholars, especially those attuned to marking cultural shifts in the literary marketplace and the influence of such on African American literary studies.

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