

“Split At The Root”: The Reformation of The Mulatto Hero/Heroine In Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy*

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Since 1892, when Frances E.W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* introduced the reformation of tragic mulatto characters, African American writers like Pauline Hopkins, William Wells Brown, and Linda Brent used re-occurring literary themes equating whiteness with elitism and privilege. Harper’s revolutionary narrative posits these lighter-hued characters as the only qualified pre-cursors of Alain Locke’s “New Negro” where “...he must know himself and be known for precisely what he is....” Because “*tragic*” designates a flawed double -consciousness between color and race, Harper’s decision to make the ill-fated mulatto “*un-tragic*” consolidates the mulatto’s ethnic dilemma of what to do with “one drop of Black blood.” Additionally, Harper used the nineteenth century conventional sentimental novel to address the stereotypes of African American masculinity and femininity where both are marginalized and excluded. Therefore, Harper’s reconfigured novel is a better more developed model where there is a clearly defined consciousness between Black men and women. Harper also used this novel to debunk a very marginal and narrowly constructed ideology of Black patriarchy used by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. However, like Stowe, Harper also shares her critique of the under- developed dark hero, but she envisions a different unfolding of this hero that is explicitly masculine and is directly tied to an equally conscious Black woman. Harper uniquely responds to two very important exclusions: Black womanhood and the invisible Black man. By rejecting whiteness, Dr. Frank Latimer and Iola Leroy chose to become African Americans with a particular ethos that “enables its members to lives unhampered by the machinations of the larger society, and could raise children who could envision a different world in which to live and then go about creating it.”

Harper locates and produces two politically-savvy characters-Dr. Latimer and Iola Leroy - whose claims on the rights of African American citizenry propels them to embrace a more clearly defined racial aesthetic where the “*mulatto*” is oriented in an African historical framework. By consciously embracing a “Black” identity, they are immediately bonded to a shared cultural, racial and ethnic experience. As a controlling image, color is recognized as an identifiable external marker that normally limited racial production. Harper, then, reproduces and changes this ideology and in this process makes Dr. Latimer more masculine and Iola Leroy more feminine where each are political activists unified in marriage but still portrayed to “instill into our young people that the true strength of a race means purity in women and uprightness in men...” A great deal of literature, during the nineteenth century, by white American men value the patriarchal ideals of physical aggression, heroic conquest and intellectual domination. Such ideals are also desired by the newly-emancipated Black man, for without these manly attributes he is considered less masculine. Harper therefore gives the nineteenth - century man very similar patriarchal ideals and values adjusted to his own image where Black masculinity is defined by participation in the Civil War as well as being engaged in the intellectual and rigorous debate against slavery with a social responsibility toward the Black community. However, Harper clearly recognizes that the differences in actual circumstances where Black men are unable to exercise patriarchal authority because they are undervalued is important. Therefore, there is a contextual resistance against a kind of Edenic ideology where Black men are forced to the margins and rendered invisible and against women who reject passing [power] to a male protagonist. Harper subverts and corrects this mythology by creating

an African American heroic male who shares a collective Black consciousness with a Black woman. Thus, Harper concludes that the development of a strong self-sufficient community lies with the potentiality of men and women working together. But to achieve this would also require the talents of the entire family. This, according to Harper is achieved by Black women giving “something more tangible than elegant papers, beautifully framed resolutions and pretty speeches.” Contextually, *Iola Leroy* challenges the prevailing notions in the Black community about the role of women. “They [Black women] expanded their roles in ways that enable them to maintain traditional values of family/community and at the same time move into spheres and relationships with each other and with the men in their lives....”

Within the Antebellum period, the tragic near-white female is a stock and central character in American and African American fiction. After William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853), this mulatto tragedy became a main theme found in nineteenth-century African American novels as well as in Frank Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), in Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), in James Howard’s *Bond and Free* (1886), in Frances Ellen Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892), in Charles Chestnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), and *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), and in Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* (1900). For example, Eliza, in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, became so popularized in the literary consciousness of the American author that she was routinely reproduced as a permanent prototype. Briefly, the stereotypical tragic mulatto is usually “a beautiful young girl who possesses only the slightest evidences of Negro blood, who speaks with no trace of dialect, who was raised and educated as a white child and as a lady in the household of her father and who on her paternal side is descended from ‘some of the best blood in the ‘Old Dominion.’ In her sensibility and her vulnerability she resembles, of course, the conventional ‘victim’ of sentimental romance.”⁸ Unfortunately, after her father’s death, her true origins are revealed – that she is also the daughter of a former slave that her father owned but did not free. As a slave, her tragedy is that she must now live her life as a slave, victimized by slave dealers or overseers who sought to sexually violate and abuse her. While her condition may have improved with the love and devotion of a young northerner, usually white, any attempts to rescue her from slavery failed and ultimately, her fate was sealed with death.. Ironically, even when her gentility, beauty and moral conduct places her high on the pedestal of true southern womanhood; her “tragic” fate directly links her to the “one drop rule” that renders her a slave. However, *Iola Leroy* has been strategically changed and did not share this similar fate or condition. Set in a different racial and political role; she is written as being highly educated and genteel; her function is newly interpreted to corroborate the reformed, often negative stereotypical ideas of Black female reality. This author converges in *Iola*’s characterization, who by appearance looked more white than Black, the same intrinsic values found in the southern elite. Harper effectively changes her light-skinned character who reconsiders her racial identity with a man who in marriage will help to uplift the race and quell further miscegenation. Harper’s attempt to correct this embedded imbalance of immorality, sexual impropriety and white America’s fear of racial assimilation is found in this reconstructed *Iola Leroy*.

Initially Harper uses the very similar plot and theme to rewrite the tragic mulatto motif already found in William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*. “thereby reinstating the significance of a romantic vision but politicizing it so that the biracial woman effects social and political transformation and uplift.”⁹ In the 1988 re-publication of *Iola Leroy*, Frances Smith Foster states in her introduction that

Some, such as Vasti Lewis, ultimately conclude that in using a ‘near-white female’ as her protagonist, Harper perpetuates negative

stereotypes about women of darker skin (322). Still, Lewis maintains that Harper's women 'are portrayed in historically sound roles' (316) and that, rather than imitating Brown's *Clotel*, Harper breaks new ground in the development of the tragic mulatto character.¹⁰

Harper's novel, continues Lewis, "is significant in American literature...like Brown's [*Clotel*] ...is significant because near-white females are portrayed in historically sound roles for black American women. Although Harper depicts them in situations that are entirely different from those in antebellum antislavery fiction..."¹¹ Foster also indicates in her preface "that she wrote for a mixed-race audience, and in the novel she both addresses women's concerns, such as rape and egalitarian marital relations, and valorizes black women's ability to lead and transform the race with pride."¹² Very early on, the basic premise of Harper's novel denotes a very similar theme of the nineteenth-century romantic genre with Iola and her mother being mirror images of the early nineteenth-century mulatto archetypes. "Both Iola and her mother, Marie, are carbon-copy images of Stowe's 1852 portraiture of Eliza, the beautiful, light-skinned quadroon whose "beauty was of the most dazzling kind"¹³ and Brown's 1853 depiction of Clotel, whose complexion was white and whose features were "as finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon."¹⁴ Similarly, Harper described Iola as being "a most beautiful creature....She has the proud poise of Leroy, the most splendid eyes.. ever saw in a woman's head, lovely complexion, and a glorious wealth of hair."¹⁵ However, Harper's initial revision of Iola Leroy starts with a northern education, even though she and her manumitted mother, Marie, are sold into slavery following the death of her father. This education sets Iola apart from the majority of female slaves as well as young southern white women, "She is just as white as we are, as good as any girl in the land, and better educated than thousands of white girls."¹⁶ Iola, therefore, becomes a more idealized Black version of white women, but whose role "challenge the anti-miscegenation laws of the United States and legitimized liaisons between white men and black women during the era of slavery."¹⁷ Despite Harper's attempt to break new literary ground in the use of tragic mulatto, the debate of Iola's introduction to slavery is illustrated between Louis Bastine, the attorney representing Lorraine, Leroy's heir apparent and his friend, Camille Lecroix:

To tell you the truth, Bastine, I feel sorry for this girl.
And when you come to look at it, isn't it a shame to attempt
to reduce that girl to slavery?... A girl with her apparent
refinement and magnificent beauty, were it not for the cross
in her blood, I would be proud to introduce to our set.

As Bastine contrives to kidnap her, Iola Leroy's plight becomes precariously close to other more conventional mulatto women who "were entirely ignorant of their lineage, but when their father died it was discovered that their mother had been a slave. It was a fearful blow. They would have faced poverty, but the knowledge of their tainted blood was more than then could bear....They both died, poor girls. I believe they were as much killed by the blow as if they had been shot."¹⁸ While the more typical version of this scenario found the tragic mulatto outside of the white protected environment of southern womanhood; Iola's rejection of Bastine's sexual advances are fueled by nineteenth-century social tenets of piety, virtue and honor that normally rendered her untouchable. Uniquely, Iola herself is convicted with the concepts of good breeding, where "a Southern lady, whose education and manners stamp her as a woman of fine culture and good

breeding... ,”¹⁹ whose father’s death is “immediately catapulted [her] into the system that legitimates the rape of female slaves by white owners.”²⁰ Yet, Iola rejects this normative positioning that otherwise makes her role as victim repetitive. Her fight suggests Harper’s personal assertion that relocates Black women out from under the figurative and literal bodies of white men. Iola Leroy’s own “civil war” is marked by her moral right and outrage to fight against sexual oppression.

From this dream of bliss she was awakened by a burning kiss pressed on her lips, and a strong arm encircling her. Gazing around and taking in the whole situation, she sprang from her seat, her eyes flashing with rage and scorn, her face flushed to the roots of her hair, her voice shaken with excitement, and every nerve trembling with angry emotion.

Harper’s reclamation of Black female agency is a “re-coloring” of Iola’s racial identity that once depicted her as a Caucasian, unaware of an African ancestry. Perhaps the most devastating event that occurs in Iola’s life is the discovery that her privileged status marked by her white father’s wealth as a plantation owner is now marred and forever changed by not only her discovery of her Blackness but by her innocent defense of slavery. Vasti Lewis explains her dilemma. “Slavery can’t be wrong...for my father is a slave-holder, and my mother is as good to our servants as she can be. My father often tells her that she spoils them, and lets them run over her. I never saw my father strike one of them.”²² Clearly Harper’s critique of Iola’s sentimental analysis of slavery is based on her unawareness of the female slave’s condition as noted by her comments, “I love my mammy as much as I do my own mother, and I believe she loves us just as if we were her own.”²³ Harper also contrasts Iola’s white status with the reality of learning about the African blood that she now knows that runs through her veins. Marie and Iola face their fate together as slaves. “I have Negro blood in my veins. I was your father’s slave before I married him. His relatives have set aside his will. The courts have declared our marriage null and void and my manumission illegal, and we are all to be remanded to slavery.”²⁴ Harper’s use of Marie as a maternal conduit where strength and love are usually reserved for daughters born into slavery, she cannot save Iola’s youngest sister, Gracie and “consign her to the deepest grave than see her forced to be a slave.”²⁵ However, she gives Iola the groundwork for survival and makes into law “the strong against the weak....Strive to be a Christian, to have faith in the darkest hour. Were in not for my hope in heaven I couldn’t all this trouble.”²⁶ Even as Iola’s intellectual analysis and subsequent rejection of “these...Christians who made these laws which are robbing us of our inheritance and reducing us to slavery,” Marie differentiates between the hypocrisy of southern slave religion and her faith. ““My dear child, I have not learned my Christianity from them. I have learned it at the foot of the cross, and from this book,” she said, placing a New Testament in Iola’s hands. “Some of the most beautiful lessons of faith and trust I have ever leaned were from among our lowly people in their humble cabins.”²⁷ Slavery, then becomes a unique opportunity for Iola Leroy to become an inheritor of a Black family and community. Harper also uses Iola’s slave condition to traverse the ex-slave into new roles and designations later found in the status of African American women of the 20th century. Harper also uses this opportunity to create an equal sentimental ethos formed as an heroic mulatto male, identified as African American but in body – a white man.

In *Iola Leroy* Frances Ellen Watkins Harper recasts the tragic mulatto character, Dr. Latimer, to contradict the key principals of sufferance and sacrifice found historically in domestic anti-slavery

fiction. Ironically, it is their proposals of marriage by Dr. Latimer and Dr. Gresham that become a direct cure for the crisis of race found in the mixed-race Iola Leroy. However, it is only Dr. Latimer who argues for marriage within the race as a means to uplift the moral status of Black Americans. Hence, this legally-recognized union is a necessary masculine right that denotes the more positive traits of responsibility, manhood and African American progeny. Harper rewrote and made [un]tragic the mulatto characters whose otherwise plight would be an unrealistic representation of racial tragedy. Therefore, the role and the function of the “white” hero is to renounce the kind of righteous suffering usually embedded into the condition of his half-white female counterpart and to blur the “boundary between violent rebellion and liberation.”²⁸

The complexity in this emergence of masculinity in the ex-slave set against the Civil War suggests that by placing the male slave in the battlefield enabled Harper to create positive role models who “reshape[d] the paradigms of the traditional wartime plot,”²⁹ particularly in the roles of Black men. *Iola Leroy* opens in the middle of the war, on a North Carolina plantation where the arrival of northern troops meant an opportunity for Tom Anderson and Robert Johnson to participate in the war as well as being freed by Union soldiers. By being literary witnesses, the “presentation of black male heroism, which directly contradicted Southern the horrific onslaught of negative imagery that motivated and authorized Southern lynching crusades against black men in the 1890s.”³⁰ Harper places Johnson and Anderson into the middle of the war, where their actions are viewed as being heroic; their experience in the war [were rescued] “from fictional oblivion.”³¹ Harry Anderson, Iola’s lost brother also joins a “colored regiment” and with these “three black male characters,[they] exemplifies the courage of black soldiers. However, it is only Tom Anderson who is unqualified for active service because of “physical defects” and becomes, instead, a scout and helper. Ironically, it is Tom’s openly-viewed sacrificial death that “offers an arena in which to fight for freedom, one in which a man’s personal heroism – a commonplace of war narratives – takes on the representatives role of liberating entire race.”³² However, in contrast to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the protagonist Uncle Tom’s de-masculinized “death” is non-redeemable as it reflects the Deep South’s ideology that the dark bodies of “good” male slaves are expendable. By comparison, Tom Anderson’s death is much more recognized and even though his “Blackness” has been de-valued in this half-white narrative; Tom’s “goodness” is considered heroic.

Thomas Riggio in his article, “Uncle Tom Reconstructed: A Neglected Chapter in the History of a Book”³³ critiques the Old South’s unique myth:

Anyone who reads (or sees) that latter-day paean to the Old South, *Gone with the Wind*, knows that the Old South was both a pre-war South and a lost Golden Age. Every schoolboy recognizes the trappings of the legend. There was, of course, a stately mansion, usually white and upheld handsomely by Corinthian columns, between which stood the Southern Gentleman. A descendant of Cavaliers, the gentleman demanded two things of life – racial purity and an adherence to a strict chivalric code. [I]n this scheme belonged to the blacks, the dancing darkies who worshiped their mistress and master, sang songs....³⁴

Instead of the popular revisionists’ stance found, for example in Thomas Nelson Page’s *Red Rock* (1898), Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots: A Romance of the White Man’s Burden* (1902), and

John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn or A Sojourn in the Old Dominion* (1832) Stowe's creation of the novel's arch-villain, Simon Legree becomes an anti-slavery archetype who cruelly abuses Uncle Tom and is the ultimate cause of his death.

'Now,' said he, doubling his great, heavy fist into something resembling a blacksmith's hammer, 'd'ya see this fist? Heft it!' he said, bring it down on Tom's hand....Ye won't find no soft in me, nowhere. So, now, mind yerselves; for I don't show no mercy!'³⁵

As Tom is the antithesis of Legree, Stowe "[i]n her attempt to make Tom the ideal Christian, ...deprives him of most of his imperfect human nature; he becomes...a moral miracle."³⁶ In her efforts to make Tom this moral representative of an honorable slave; Stowe demasculinized him and makes him more female than male. "With Uncle Tom, the gender inversion occurs once again, for it is Tom, first with Aunt Chloe and then with Cassy, who provides the religious forbearance, indiscriminate love, and intuitive faith conventionally associated with women. Indeed, as Elizabeth Ammons has pointed out, "'Stowe makes him a heroine instead of a hero."³⁷ "Stowe constructs a man whose emotional and moral life is centered on domination or competition but on the self-conscious, vigorous exercise of communal love – a man who unites the virtues of "'kindliness and benevolence" with dignity and a "'broad-chested" and "'powerfully made" physique."³⁸ Hence, Stowe's problematic characterization of Uncle Tom is indeed limited as a much stronger, more masculine male is a direct yet, fearful affront to white supremacy, therefore, Stowe has no choice but to kill him.

With the destruction of his body, Tom is left entirely pure and ready for Heaven....Tom's violent death, though deplored, is also celebrated as a victory, as a way of making the nation safe. Stowe is caught in a series of contradictions: She loves the "'animal" body – which is to say that she gives careful, lingering descriptions of blackness, and especially of black males – but she disapproves of the disruptive potential of this same body... She shows that desire, signified by blackness, must be purged from American social body if true womanhood and the order of the family are to be saved.³⁹

Within the terms of the narrative, Uncle Tom's death "leaves no doubt that Legree and his vicious mode of conquest have been morally and emotionally supplanted."⁴⁰ Yet, his death is solitary, only witnessed by Legree, George, his former "mas'r" and other slaves where in this fictional world; a slave's death is soon forgotten as " [t]here [was] no monument to mark the last resting place...."⁴¹ Hence, the disposal of the more African or darker bodies of Uncle Tom and later, Tom Anderson is predictable and draws Blackness into direct opposition to the mulatto, color-coded world of Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*. In this world, in order to become the "heir apparent" to the future of Alain Locke's "New Negro," the nineteenth-century dark-skinned Black man is initially obliterated; his role is un-necessary and under-developed. However, by the Harlem Renaissance, Iola Leroy's relationship with Tom Anderson is a literary foreshadowing of the familial coupling between mixed-raced women and their darker male counterparts.

As *Iola Leroy* is centered around the complexities of the Civil War, this war alters the

relationship between Iola Leroy, Robert Johnson and Tom Anderson.

The arrival of the army means the rescue from slavery means a chance for several of the male slaves, including Robert Johnson and Tom Anderson, to participate in the Union cause; it also means the rescue from slavery (by a union general) of the light-skinned Iola Leroy, a woman of beauty and virtue to whom Tom and others have been attracted.⁴²

Significantly, it is the connection between Tom and Iola Leroy that alerts the change between the mulatto and the darker-skinned counterpart. While this relationship is centered around Tom's death, Harper rejects the status quo where the normative friendship between the two would have been impossible by virtue of their racial coloring. While the mulatto legacy maintained its safe distance between the two, Iola embraces it. "Nursing Tom, she says, "You are the best friend I have had since I was torn from my mother. I should be so lonely without you." As Tom lay dying from the fatal wounds he received from his heroic acts, his sacrifice is both noble and "nuthin.'":

Tom took in the whole situation, and said: 'some one must die to get us out of this. I mought's well be him as any. You are soldiers and can fight. If they kill me, it is nuthin.' So Tom leaped out to shove the boat into the water. Just then the Rebel bullets began to rain around him. He received seven or eight of them, and I'm afraid there is no hope for him.'⁴³

While Tom's efforts of self-sacrifice and martyrdom are considered traits normally heralded as being masculine and heroic, his Blackness disallows for a complete transformation from slave property to human being. His death, like Uncle Tom's is necessary and recasts Iola Leroy as the more centralized figure. "He smiled faintly, took her hand in his, stroked it tenderly, looked wistfully into her face, and said "'Miss Iola, I ain't long fer dis! I'se' most home!" However, Iola's connection to Tom remains maternal and non-sexual and relieves Tom's Black body of its sexual threat. "As Iola gazed upon the kind but homely features of Tom, she saw his eyes open and an unexpressed desire upon his face."⁴⁴ In this view, Tom's "desire" is a direct yet oppositional contradiction. "To write about blackness, then, [is] to write about desire. But to write about blackness [is] also to avoid desire altogether, for the black figure represents both sexual desire and childish innocence."⁴⁵ Harper's recast of Tom is an atypical response to the prevailing ideology of Black sexuality as bestial and violent, involuntarily redirects them to commonly share a Christian experience. "Tenderly and sadly bending over him, with tears in her dark, luminous eyes, she said, 'Is there anything I can do for you?' 'Yes,' said Tom, with laboring breath; 'let me hole yore han', an' sing 'Ober Jordan inter glory' an' 'We'll anchor bye and bye.'" While Tom's Black body is "off limits" to Iola, Harper's depiction of their relationship offers two definitive objectives: "For the nineteenth-century lady [Iola] maintains her moral authority by siding with restraint and self control" and "Blackness becomes another opportunity to affirm a Christian, maternal love...."⁴⁶ Harper, then removes the more troubling image of Blackness found in Tom Anderson," Iola, with tearful eyes and aching heart, clasped the cold hands over the still beast, closed the waxen lid over the eye which had once beamed with kindness or flashed with courage...." As Harper consumes and

redefines the Black body, she refocuses on Iola, the mulatto, being “most refined and lady-like,” her accent is slightly Southern, but her manner is Northern. She is self-respecting without being supercilious; quiet, without being dull. Her voice is low and sweet....”⁴⁷ In part, Harper does not follow Stowe’s portrayal of the mulatto, particularly Cassy whose direct militancy against slavery is out of character for the more subdued Iola. “Cassy is a far more dangerous figure, for there was no readily available paradigm for acceptable female heroism that would safely permit her insurgence to stand unqualified by her apparent emotional derangement.”⁴⁸ As Uncle Tom is the more the feminine in his Christian pathos, Cassy rejects any kind of religious offerings, “...*He isn’t here!* there’s nothing here, but sin and long, long, long, despair!”⁴⁹ Cassy’s redemption comes in the form of her resistance thereby, making her more manly saving not only herself but a younger mulatto, Emmeline as well. By giving Cassy what she does not give to Tom, Stowe adds to the already misconstrued message that Black men are powerless. Yet, it is Iola, not the more powerful Cassy who fits the criteria for the nineteenth-century heroine. In her depiction of Iola’s qualities, Harper posits her differently, she actually rewires the sentimental compulsion that naturally paired her with someone white. Unlike the popular romantic tradition, Iola Leroy is made incompatible and while her white appearance initially sustained the status quo in reference to the unrequited love between a Caucasian lover who discards the mulatto for his own race, Harper rejects this classical conclusion and selects a mate for Iola that is her racial, political and cultural equal.

In the context of *Iola Leroy*, Harper uses the white Dr. Gresham as an instrument of rejection as Iola must consider her own racial identity “in order to decide whether marrying white constitutes further miscegenation.”⁵⁰ Aware of her audience, Harper combines the romantic with the political, thereby disallowing a love that is based on pity. “The white Dr. Gresham falls in love with Iola because he believes that her unfortunate racial taint renders her helpless.”⁵¹ Dr. Gresham’s racial bias compels him to “see” Iola as an other, as being different; therefore, his choice is based on a secrecy that is predicated as protection.

Without any effort or consciousness on her part, his friendship ripened into love. To him her presence was a pleasure, her absence a privation; and her loneliness drew deeply upon his sympathy....All the manhood and chivalry of his nature rose in her behalf, and, after carefully revolving the matter, he resolved to win her for his bride, bury her secret in his Northern home, and hide from his aristocratic relations all knowledge of her mournful past.⁵²

Further, Dr. Gresham “had lived in a part of the country where he had scarcely ever seen a colored person...their misfortunes had thrown a halo of romance.”⁵³ To him, Iola represents “all the manhood and chivalry in his nature rose in her behalf, and he was ready to lay on the altar of her heart his first grand and overmastering love.”⁵⁴ However, by rejecting Gresham’s proposal, Iola rejects “the racial assimilation [he] represents” and the very common accepted ideology of white masculinity. “Her “civil war” culminates in a victory over the impulse to pass for white and to assimilate to the chivalric, inegalitarian model of marriage that Gresham represents.”⁵⁵ Further, Iola makes a very definitive racial decision about her former condition and clearly passes judgment on those she considers responsible for her enslavement. “But in her lonely condition, with all its background of terrible sorrow and deep abasement, she [has] never for a moment thought to giving

or receiving love from one of that race who [has] been so lately associated in her mind with horror, aversion, and disgust.”⁵⁶ Yet, Harper clearly takes to task the nation’s position on slavery and “prompts her to make a decisions about gender roles.”⁵⁷ Through Iola, the preconceived notions of sexual impropriety and lewdness are challenged and ironically, Harper exposes the subjugation of Black womanhood. “I have heard men talk glibly of the degradation of the Negro, but there is a vast difference between abasement of condition and degradation of character. I was abased, but the men who trampled on me were the degraded ones.”⁵⁸ Dr Gresham naively assumes that “the negro has no other alternative than to make friends of his calamities.”⁵⁹ Again, Iola overturns this very common nineteenth-century concept of integration and assimilation as an answer to the “Negro question.” Iola answers Dr. Gresham, saying “The Anglo-Saxon race is proud, domineering, aggressive, and impatient of a rival, and, as I think, has more capacity for dragging down a weaker race than uplifting it.”⁶⁰ Harper overturns Gresham’s false assimilationist fantasy and rightly corrects it with a dose of realism that Black Americans would be judged fairly by learning to “struggle, labor and achieve....they will be judged in the future.”⁶¹ Harper overturns Gresham’s vision as Iola refuses his marriage proposal, particularly after his hesitation on the possibility of nonwhite babies. In fact, miscegenation and the transmission of Black ancestry become the division between Iola and Dr. Gresham. Race-mixing, or the lack thereof, becomes more of a sense of pride than an embrace of it as Iola’s refusal to marry “white” is a direct embrace of the Black community. In other words, Dr. Gresham is an unacceptable mate as his whiteness becomes an impediment in her “more urgent goal to serve her people.”⁶² This commitment toward the revitalization of Black progeny “allows Harper to take a political stand championing black pride and the choice of black husbands for light-skinned women.”⁶³ Iola’s assertion that “[t]he best blood in my veins is African blood, and I am not ashamed of it”⁶⁴ signifies Harper’s shift in promoting self-worth and racial pride. Further, Iola’s allegiance to the Black community entails an equal and opposite break with the ideology of white womanhood. Iola, though Harper becomes much more politicized than her former white counterparts; her transformation is a more direct correlation to the Club Movement of the 1890s⁶⁵ than feminism. Iola explains: “I have a theory that every woman ought to know how to earn her own living. I believe that a great amount of sin and misery springs from the weakness and inefficiency of women....I am going to join the great ranks of bread-winners.”⁶⁶ Reconstruction, therefore, implicates not only a rebuilding of the South after the Civil War, but an assertion of change in gender roles for Black women. Hence, when Iola does “accept a marriage proposal, she chooses Dr. Latimer, who is also light-skinned and middle-class” and is the only man considered worthy.

Harper compromises her heroine’s vision by having Iola marry a very light-skinned man who passes for a white doctor....But Dr. Latimer’s deliberate choice *not* to pass for white makes him all the more admirable, and a suitable mate for Iola and her political goals.⁶⁷

Together, “the negotiation of this marriage [is seen] as a partnership”⁶⁸....cemented in the reformation of positive masculine and feminine gender roles. As seen in the feminization of Uncle Tom, Stowe undermines and blurs the line between the separated and distinct spheres of human sexuality by making Tom less manly. To this end, Harper revises slavery’s model of Black masculinity that delineates from the forced equalization of traditional gender roles. Within this

context, Dr. Latimer is made purely and simply, a man.

The portrayals of the mixed-blood by Harper and Stowe are delineations of this character in traditional nineteenth-century American pro-slavery fiction. The mulatto, to their advantage entered the anti-slavery fiction at the zeal and furor of an abolition that sought to either further the pro-slavery propaganda or to challenge the prevailing stereotypes of the ex-slave. Unfortunately, the writers of these texts were devoted advocates of these causes. Thus when the ill-fated mulatto appeared, a victim of racial or sexual injustice and the progressive race conscious Black leader is intentionally conceived; he is designed with a new reality in mind. When Stowe asks, "What do you owe to these poor unfortunates, oh Christians?...That the providence of God has provided a refuge in Africa is, indeed, a great and noticeable fact...."⁶⁹ Harper's answer is clear, "And I believe we are to be fixtures in this country. But beyond the shadows I see the coruscation of a brighter day; and we can help use in it...."⁷⁰ Harper, then, as author becomes the political voice of Dr. Latimer....[T]he doctor figure, with his presumed powers of character diagnosis, becomes a sand-in for the writer, and perhaps as well for the realism's failure to treat adequately the "race" problem...."⁷¹ Therefore, when Dr. Latimer is first introduced, he is locked in a heated debate between him, Robert, Rev. Carmicle, Dr. Gresham, and Dr. Latrobe. In his analysis, Dr. Latrobe, a white Southerner is harsh in his criticism of the African American's involvement in politics. He takes to task the white politician, "I am not afraid of the [N]egro as he stands alone, but what I dread is that in some closely-contested election ambitious men will use him to hold the balance of power and make him an element of danger. He is ignorant, poor, and clannish, and they may impact him as their policy would direct."⁷² Latrobe's dissatisfaction stems from his concern that Blacks may ban together and shift the southern stronghold as he holds very similar beliefs that "[s]outherners will never submit to negro supremacy. We will never abandon our Caucasian civilization to an inferior race."⁷³ Further, continues Latrobe, "the [N]egro...always has and always will be an element of discord in our country."⁷⁴ He briefly outlines his agenda by " 'eliminat[ing] him [the African American] from the politics of the country.' " Harper challenges and reverses this ideology through Latimer:

'If,' said Dr. Latimer, 'the negro is ignorant, poor, and clannish, let us remember that in part of our land it was once a crime to teach him to read. If he is poor, for ages he was forced to bend to unrequited toil. If he is clannish, society has segregated him to himself.'

Dr. Latrobe's analysis manifests many of the South's anxieties about race-mixing, especially in its characterization of the former ex-slave. " 'The men into whose hands you put the ballot were our slaves, and we would rather die than submit to them.'"⁷⁵ While Latrobe determines that the threat of violence lay at the hands of the former slave, Harper's hero suffices that the flip side of integration/assimilation is a reversion against it. " '...the negro is not plotting in beer-saloons against the peace and order of society. His fingers are not dripping with dynamite, neither is he spitting upon your flags, nor flaunting the red banner of anarchy in your face.'"⁷⁶ If this "gap" signifies impending racial chaos, the African American will not be at its helm. " 'Protect them in peace!' " said Robert, bitterly. " 'What protection does the colored man receive from the hands of the Government? I know of no civilized country outside of America where men are still burned for real or supposed crimes.'"⁷⁷ At this juncture, Harper does not attempts to rewrite Robert's

unapologetic stance against the idealistic romantic racialism of the sentimental novel, in fact through this character, Harper imposes a clear sense of corrective realism, particularly against the racially conservative Dr. Latrobe. “ ‘I think,’ said Dr. Latrobe, “ ‘that we are right in suppressing the negro’s vote. This is a white man’s government, and a white man’s country. We own nineteen-twentieths of this land, and have about the same ratio of intelligence. I am a white man, and, right or wrong, I go with my race.’ ”⁷⁸ Dr. Latimer repudiates the issue of race as Harper strives to correct an imbalance where *Black* men with “Anglo Saxon blood” paradoxically reject and embrace the privileges of whiteness as a mean to develop positive images of Black masculinity. “ ‘The blood of that race is coursing through my veins. I am one of them,’ replied Dr. Latimer, proudly raising his head.” Harper, in fact, gives us a total different representation of the mulatto whose appearance is antithetical to his emerging Black consciousness.

Within the ethos that trapped the images of Black rebellion as brutal and deadly, Dr. Latimer is poised for non-violent defiance. In *Iola Leroy*, Tom Anderson was probably modeled after Stowe’s Uncle Tom whose death was passive and not duplicated by Harper. His death is considered much more heroic but ill-fated. However, both “Toms” are frankly too dark to achieve the kind of noble status reserved only for white men. Dr. Latimer is also too white to be given the role of a martyr. Historically, in anti-slavery fiction, Black male and female bodies were inflicted with violence and abuse as a means of personal transcendence. But for the white body, this rule does not apply. In fact, white men were rarely abused or humiliated and the mulatto male, often portrayed as the master’s son was considered unfit for slavery and thus, was usually educated in the north or abroad. “Put another way,” states Bentley, “the physical humiliation of a white man is obscene in the domestic novel; the representation can only degrade, never redeem.”⁷⁹ The dilemma, therefore, resides in Harper’s reconstruction of the “tragic” mulatto as the model of Black masculinity that transforms him from being the “oedipal son of a white father.”⁸⁰

Deflected away from the superiority of this white body, Harper attempts to legitimize the “one drop rule.” She combines both sides of this racial equation by the removal of any racial ambiguity. Frank Latimer “as the natural grandson of a Southern lady, in whose family his mother had been a slave. The blood of a proud aristocratic ancestry was flowing through his veins, and generations of blood admixture had effaced all trace of his negro lineage... Before him loomed all the possibilities which only birth and blood can give a white man....[is unwilling] “to forsake his mother’s race for the richest advantages his grandmother could bestow.”⁸¹ Harper gives him a rather unique choice of identity by removing the importance of white paternity :

One drop of African blood may have determined a man’s legal identity as a negro, but — at least as fiction writers portray him — the male Mulatto possessed a white man’s body....Inhabiting that body, he is unable to gain his identity as a full subject or soul through the Christ-like self-sacrifice required of the black Uncle Tom or the Mulatta. To be redeemed the male body required either a new, literally displaced identity as an African or the inviolate identity of the white man...⁸²

Latimer, with “[h]is complexion was blonde, his eyes bright and piercing, his lips firm and well moulded,”⁸³ has a connections to maternity that would otherwise deny him a Black identity. “When freedom came, his mother, like Hagar of old, went out into the wide world to seek a living for

herself and child. Through years of poverty she labored to educate her child....”⁸⁴ In actually, slavery attempted to nullify and to destroy the Black family, often severing the ties between mother and child. However, more intrinsic within this system is that male and female slaves desperately attempted to maintain some kind of family unity. Unfortunately, “[p]rior to the 1970s, scholarship of American chattel slavery often upheld a “weak man, strong woman” thesis, arguing that African Americans men in particular had been irreparably damaged by their inability to establish patriarchy within the African American families and communities.”⁸⁵ However, within the terms of *Iola Leroy*, the family is recreated beyond illegitimacy where masculinity is combined with “the figure of an empowered black woman.”⁸⁶

Unlike the popular mulatto tradition where the mixed-race female dies tragically, *Iola Leroy* has more than just a happy ending. While the novel maintains “hegemony of class and caste in the late nineteenth century; Harper selects the perfect mate for Iola. Dr. Latimer is the exact replica of her white suitor [but they] return South to work for the uplift of the newly emancipated slaves.”⁸⁷ Additionally, Harper seeks to revoke the controlling images where the prototype of “black affirmation and protest”⁸⁸ resides in the near-white bodies of Iola Leroy and Dr. Latimer. In doing so, Harper also reverts this theme by offering initially a plot with “the marriage proposal of Dr. Gresham, a Northerner, to the Southern Iola. But the novel twice refuses to fulfill this plot....However, she reworks these plots to reject their insistent white and male bias.”⁸⁹ Iola’s response to Dr. Latimer’s proposal differs from Dr. Gresham’s. Iola’s consternation with marriage rests not in her desire to marry but “she believes that marriage compromise her more urgent goal of serving her people...”⁹⁰ Further Harper takes a “political stand championing black pride and the choice of black husbands for light-skinned women.”⁹¹ Iola makes a very conscious decision not to marry white and like Iola, “Dr. Latimer’s deliberate choice *not* to pass for white makes him all the more admirable.”⁹² Iola continues, ““You have done nobly,” answered Iola, ““if refusing your grandmother’s offer.” ““I only did my duty,”“ he modestly replied. ““But,” said Iola, ““when others are trying to slip out from the race and pass into the white basis, I cannot help admiring one who acts as if he felt that the weaker the race is the closer he would cling to it.”⁹³ At this juncture, Latimer confronts Iola about her past, thus relieving her of this racial burden”

‘But I know a young lady who could have cast her lot with the favored race, yet chose to take her place with the freed people, as their teacher, friend, and advisor. This young lady was alone I the world. She had been fearfully wronged, and to Her stricken heart came a brilliant offer of love, home and social position. But she bound her heart to the mast of duty, and closed her ears to the siren song, and could not be lured from her purpose.’⁹⁴

It is this understanding for self-definition that actively separates Iola from a more enslaved mentality usually found in pro-slavery literature. Rather than seek inclusion in a cult of womanhood defined by white society, Harper gives Iola revised ideals of womanhood that are heroic in nature because she is guided by a Black consciousness. By claiming Dr. Latimer’s and Iola Leroy’s Black identity, Harper elevates the acceptance of a new emerging feminine and masculine response against their otherwise impending fateful end. The tragic mulatto stereotype undergoes a revision in Harper’s hands. Harper uncouples the ““tragic” from the ““mulatto” and

restores her [hero/heroine] to life, bounty, and racial uplift.”⁹⁵ In the end, Harper combines the romantic esthetic with a dose of racial pride and happiness. By making Iola Leroy and Dr. Latimer “un-tragic, they are united “[i]n their desire to help the race their hearts beat in loving unison. One grand and noble purpose was giving tone and color to their lives and strengthening the bonds of affection between them.”⁹⁶

Finally, Harper clarifies any possible queries on the fulfillment of the more traditional norms of tragic finality by redefining the classic white hero:

‘I must have within me,’ answered Iola, with unaffected truthfulness, ‘a large amount of hero worship. The characters of the Old Testament I most admire are Moses and Nehemiah. They were willing to put aside their own advantages for their race and country. Dr. Latimer comes up to my ideal of a high, heroic manhood.’⁹⁷

During the course of this conversation, Uncle Robert also postulates what constitutes African American masculinity by observing that it is more admirable to reject whiteness than to pass directly into it.

‘But Iola, think of the advantages he set aside. It was no sacrifice for me to remain colored, with my lack of education, and race sympathies, but Dr. Latimer had doors open to him as a white man which are forever closed to a colored man. To be born white in this country is to be born to an inheritance of privileges, to hold in your hands the keys that open before you the doors of every occupation, advantage, opportunity, and achievement.’⁹⁸

By the rejection of white patriarchy, Harper imposes on Dr. Latimer a new form of masculinity, one that negates or is no longer imbued with sexism, male dominance and violence. The denial of his role as father, husband and provider was just one part of a larger process to dehumanize Dr. Latimer and others like him. However, Frank and Iola did not easily adhere to this dehumanization. For the most part, as new African Americans, they were aware of the importance of a united family located in a more clearly defined racial identity. The convergence of the stories of Frank Latimer and Iola Leroy sets up for their embrace of a more powerful Black consciousness is a reinterpretation of the otherwise elite and privilege mulatto. Despite their social and cultural distance from slave life and less fortunate Blacks, once their racial connections are revealed they consciously align themselves with it. By “turning on its head” the normative cultural response to the mixed-race; Harper creates a movement that celebrates this kind of racial and ethnic reconciliation. Thus Dr. Latimer and Iola Leroy as mulattos become cultural hero/heroine whose synthesis and pragmatic usage of the feminine and the masculine creates a 19th century model for racial and moral uplift.

Notes

1. In Locke's "New Negro," that "...American Negroes have been more or a race more in name than in fact, or to be exact, more in sentiment than in experience. The chief bond between them has been that of a common condition rather than a common consciousness....." see Huggins, Nathan Irvin, ed. *Voices From The Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press (1976), 47-56.
2. Huggins, 51
3. Elsa Barkley Brown. "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke." Ed., Layle Phillips. *The Womanist Reader*. New York: Routledge (2006), 183. All further citations will come from this edition.
4. Frances E.W. Harper, *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (New York: The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, (1988), 254.
5. The Anglo American myth of Eden adapted from Genesis was socially constructed to rationalize slavery, particularly in the South, through the exclusion of African Americans from God's chosen people. This mythology also established or justified a religion filled with very Freudian primitivistic taboos like miscegenation as incest, black men as fallen Adams or snakes in the garden that sanctified the persecution of African Americans.
6. Brown, 183.
7. Brown, 186.
8. Jules Zanger. "The "Tragic Octoroon" in Pre-Civil War Fiction." *American Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Spring, 1966), 63-70.
9. Debra J. Rosenthal. "The White Blackbird: Miscegenation, Genre, and the Tragic Mulatto in Howells, Harper, and the "Babes of Romance." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Vol. 56, No. 4. (Mar., 2002), 495-517.
10. Harper, xxxvii.
11. Vashti Lewis. "The Near-White Females in Frances Ellen Haper's *Iola Leroy*. *Phylon* (1960-), Vol. 45, No. 4. (4th Qtr., 1984), 314-322.
12. Rosenthal, 512
13. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852; rpt. New York, 1945), 21.
14. William Wells Brown, *Clotel; or the President's Daughter* (1853; rpt. New York, 1969), 42.
15. Harper, 98.
16. Harper, 100.
17. Rosenthal, 317.
18. Harper, 100.
19. Elizabeth Young, "Warring Fictions: *Iola Leroy* and the Color of Gender. *American Literature*, Volume 64, Number 2, (June, 1992), 284
20. Young, 282.
21. Harper, 103.
22. Harper, 97.
23. Harper, 97.
24. Harper, 105.
25. Harper, 107.
26. Harper, 107.

27. Harper, 107.
28. Nancy Bentley. "White Slaves: The Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction." *American Literature*, Vol. 65, No. 3. *Subjects and Citizens: Nation, Race, and Gender from Oroonoko to Anita Hill*. (Sept, 1993), 501-522.
29. Young, 277.
30. Young, 278.
31. Young, 278.
32. Young, 279.
33. Thomas P. Riggio. "Uncle Tom Reconstructed: A Neglected Chapter in the History of a Book." *American Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Springs, 1976), 56-70.
34. Riggio, 58.
35. Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (Bantam Classic edition: October, 1981).
36. Eric Sunquist, ed., *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1986). 55.
37. Sunquist, 57.
38. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "'Masculinity' in Uncle Tom's Cabin." Rosenthal, ed. *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (New York: Routledge 2004), 69.
39. See Peter Stonely, "Sentimental Emasculations: Uncle Tom's Cabin and Black Beauty in Rosenthal's *Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin*," 66.
40. Wolff, 70.
41. Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (New York: Bantam Classic Edition, 1981), 419. All subsequent citation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are from this edition.
42. Young, 277.
43. Harper, 53.
44. Harper, 54.
45. Stoneley, 66.
46. Stoneley, 67.
47. Harper, 57.
48. Sunquist, 75.
49. Stowe, 366. Emphasis author's.
50. Rosenthal, 512.
51. Rosenthal, 513.
52. Harper, 59-60.
53. Harper, 109-110.
54. Harper, 110.
55. Young, 284.
56. Harper, 110-111.
57. Young, 284.
58. Harper, 115.
59. Harper, 115.
60. Harper, 116.
61. Harper, 116..
62. Rosenthal, 513.
63. Rosenthal, 513.

64. Harper, 209
65. See Angela Y. Davis' *Women, Race and Class*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).
66. Harper, 205.
67. Rosenthal, 514.
68. Young, 286.
69. Stowe, 443.
70. Harper, 249.
71. Rosenthal, 515.
72. Harper 222.
73. Harper, 221.
74. Harper, 222.
75. Harper, 223.
76. Harper, 223.
77. Harper, 224.
78. Harper, 224.
79. Bentley, 502.
80. Bentley, 513.
81. Bentley, 239-240.
82. Bentley, 513.
83. Harper 239.
84. Harper, 239.
85. Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Sexual Politics: African American, Gender, And The New Racism*. (Routledge: New York, 2004) 59.
86. Young, 289.
87. Lewis, 321.
88. Lewis, 321.
89. Young, 290.
90. Rosenthal, 513.
91. Rosenthal, 514.
92. Rosenthal, 514.
93. Harper, 263.
94. Harper, 263.
95. Rosenthal, 516.
96. Harper, 266.
97. Harper, 265.
98. Harper, 266.

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