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Her Mammy's Daughter:
Symbolic Matricide and Racial Constructions of Motherhood in Charles W. Chesnutt's "Her Virginia Mammy"

Laura Dawkins 1
Murray State University

The black mother in slavery and beyond has inspired a growing body of contemporary literature by African-American women. Following Margaret Walker's lead in her 1942 poem "Lineage," and--more famously--Alice Walker's example in her landmark essay, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1983), a significant number of black women writers have honored their foremothers in poetry, fiction, and memoir.[1] Indeed, the celebratory strain in African-American women's writings about maternal influence upon their lives and work has been so pronounced that Marianne Hirsch, discussing the pervasiveness of daughterly "matrophobia" in twentieth-century literature, admits that she cannot comfortably include works by black women in her parade of examples, since so many of these writers--in contrast to their white contemporaries--seem determined to avoid any hint of "mother-blame" in both fictional and non-fictional works. Pointing out the "tremendously powerful need [for black women writers] to present to the public a positive image of black womanhood," Hirsch quotes E. Frances White's declaration of the African-American woman's singular obligation to suppress less-than-ideal portrayals of black maternal figures: "How dare we admit the psychological battles that need to be fought with the very women who taught us to survive in this racist and sexist world? We would feel like ungrateful traitors" (177).

Yet according to Mary Helen Washington, the absence of "matrophobia" in works by contemporary black women writers reflects not a suppression of the issue of mother-daughter conflict (as Hirsch and White suggest), and an impossible idealization of maternal influence

(such as critic Dianne Sadoff finds in Walker's essay),[2] but the actual healthy state of affairs between black mothers and daughters. Washington affirms the "generational continuity between [black daughters] and their mothers," an enduring bond that inspires many African-American women writers to "name their mothers as models," and to "challenge the fiction of mother-daughter hostility" (160). In Washington's view, black mothers and daughters, both because of and in spite of the painful historical legacy they share, do not succumb to the anger and upheaval associated with the traditional mother-daughter relationship.

Yet some African-American women writers--most notably Patricia Williams--seem uneasy with the attractive but uncomplicated view of black mothers and daughters that critics such as Washington embrace. Williams suggests that "matrophobia" (the "fear of becoming one's mother," in Adrienne Rich's words)[3] is a guilty secret that many African-American women share. As Williams personally testifies in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, the late twentieth-century black daughter and her mother may in fact conspire to disrupt generational continuity and to deny their deepest and most painful bonds. Williams's searching analysis must be quoted at length:

> When my mother told me that I had nothing to fear in law school, that law was 'in my blood' [since Williams's white great-great-grandfather was a well-known lawyer], she meant it in a complex sense. First and foremost, she meant it defiantly; no one should make me feel inferior because someone else's father was a judge. She wanted me to reclaim that part of my heritage from which I had been disinherited, and she wanted me to use it as a source of strength and self-confidence. At the same time, she was asking me to claim a part of myself that was the dispossessor of another part of myself; she was asking me to deny that disenfranchised little-black-girl who felt powerless and vulnerable.
>
> In somewhat the same vein, my mother was asking me not to look to her as a role model. She was devaluing the part of herself that was not-Harvard . . . She hid the lonely, black, defiled-female part of herself and pushed me forward as the projection of . . . a masculine rather than a feminine self . . ..

Reclaiming that from which one has been disinherited is a good thing. Self-possession in the full sense of that expression is the companion to self-knowledge. Yet claiming for myself a heritage the weft of whose genesis is my own disinheritance is a profoundly troubling paradox. (216-17)

Williams admits that she was successful in law school because she was "quietly driven by the false idol of white-man-within-me, and absorbed much of the knowledge and values that had enslaved my foremothers" (155). She recognizes that she can measure her achievement in terms of the distance she has traveled from her mother and from her matrilineal heritage. The "profoundly troubling paradox" that her success owes much to her "disinheritance" of "the subjugated part of her self" leads Williams on a journey into her genealogical past, and to the discovery of a great-great-grandmother--slave and concubine of the white lawyer who "gave" Williams the "law in her blood"--now lost to history. Searching for the "shape described by her [great-great-grandmother's] absence," Williams uncovers a matricidal script:

> What could it have been like for my stunned, raped, great-great-grandmother--an unwed teenage mother in today's parlance--so disliked and isolated from even her own children that the stories they purveyed were of her laziness? Her children were the exclusive property of their father (though that's not what they called him). They grew up in his house, taken from her as she had been taken from her mother. They became haughty, favored, frightened house servants . . .reverent of and obedient to this white man . . .. Her children must have been something of an ultimate betrayal; it could not have been easy to see in them the hope of her own survival. Freed from slavery by the Civil War, they went on to establish respected black Episcopal churches and to learn to play the piano. They grew up clever and well-bred. They grew up to marry other frightened, refined, master-blooded animals; they grew up good people, but alien. ... There is no surviving record for what happened to my great-great-grandmother, no account of how or when she died. (18-19)

Confessing that she sacrificed her mother as model to the claims of the "white-man-within," and disclosing her ancestors' repudiation of matrilineal familial ties, Williams challenges Mary Helen Washington's suggestion that "the existence . . .of generational continuity," the "making

of meaning through . . .mothers," represents an unbroken tradition among African-American mothers and their daughters. Yet the intention of Williams's brutally honest narrative is by no means to deflate African-American women's faith in the power and endurance of the black mother-daughter bond. If, as Dianne Sadoff asserts, Alice Walker's portrayal of an "idealized matriliny" serves to "conflate the female generations . . .obscur[ing] cultural transitions and familial tensions," and to "cover over the troubling history of black women's motherhood" (211), then Williams's account, by contrast, reminds us of that troubling history, and of cultural transitions still in the making. What road did African-American mothers and their daughters have to travel in order to achieve the bond celebrated in contemporary black women's literature? And, as Williams implies, do unarticulated tensions or "shame" persist as guilty secrets between black mothers and daughters?

In the early decades of the twentieth century, certainly, public celebration of African-American mothers appeared to be the province of black men. Although Maureen Honey notes that "one of the primary metaphors of the New Negro movement [of the 1920s] was that of the young mother leading her race to a brighter day," she adds that male artists of the Harlem Renaissance were responsible for the mother-glorification associated with the period (21). W.E.B. DuBois' famous 1920 tribute to the black mother, in which he affirmed that "the land of the mother is and was Africa... Isis, the mother, is still titular goddess, in thought if not in name, of the dark continent" (166), was followed by the "black Madonna" poems of Countee Cullen and Albert Rice, and by the well-known "mother poems" of Langston Hughes ("Mother to Son" and "The Negro Mother").[4] On two occasions when African-American women *did* write in praise of mothers, the writers--curiously enough--chose to adopt a masculine persona, or to laud the black mother of sons. In Jessie Fauset's "Oriflamme," the poet honors the tragic and indomitable slave mother "Reft of her children, lonely, anguished, yet/Still looking at the stars," but speaks from the perspective of a young black male generation: "Symbolic mother, we thy myriad sons/Pounding our stubborn hearts on Freedom's bars" (122). Similarly, in "An Old Slave Woman," Harlem Renaissance poet Joyce Sims Carrington pays tribute to a black woman who has bequeathed a legacy of devotion and endurance to specifically male children: "You

cannot say/That hers/Were/ Empty hands/For/About her sons/Is wound/The golden thread/Of Hope and Love/And in their faces/Shines the rising sun" (125).

During an era that honored the "black Madonna," a literary focus upon the mother-son dyad, evoking Christian iconography, is perhaps not surprising among both male and female African-American writers. More surprising--and disturbing--is that included among the very few works about black mothers of daughters by early twentieth-century African-American writers are three short stories with distinctly matricidal plots: Charles W. Chesnutt's "Her Virginia Mammy," a turn-of-the-century work contained in Chesnutt's short-story collection *The Wife of His Youth* (1899); Angelina Weld Grimké's "Jettisoned" (ca. 1920), a novella-length work unpublished during Grimké's lifetime and only recently anthologized; and Dorothy West's "Mammy" (1940), a little-known story available in a collection of West's short fiction, *The Richer, the Poorer* (1996). At first glance, these stories appear no different from the "passing" fiction so familiar to readers of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African-American literature. Portraying mixed-race daughters who enter white society, the stories deal with the conflict between race allegiance and social ambition. Yet the "passing" tales these stories tell share a significant plot line: all three works depict a daughter who "passes" successfully by making her mother into a "mammy"--converting a blood-tie into a master-servant relationship. The figure of the mother-turned-mammy, most famously employed by Mark Twain in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) to illustrate the social construction of identity, gains new resonance in the fiction of Chesnutt, Grimké, and West as a trope for the tragic, self-alienating internalization of "white" values within the African-American community.

Clearly the most complex and artistically accomplished of the three tales, Chesnutt's "Her Virginia Mammy" anatomizes both the racial construction of motherhood and the ways in which antebellum cultural myths have damaged the American psyche. While Grimke's "Jettisoned" and West's "Mammy" focus on "passing" daughters who choose individual advancement over family loyalty, "Her Virginia Mammy" provides a more subtle portrayal of a foster child in search of her origins, who—imbued with the cultural mythology of the American South—fails (or refuses) to recognize the face of a past that would dismantle this mythology.

The lost daughter Clara's acceptance of the fiction that her recovered biological mother is instead her black "mammy" emblematizes a society in which antebellum relationships between blacks and whites are romanticized while the history of miscegenation within slavery is consistently suppressed. By "disinheriting the subjugated part of the self," Clara gains a place among the white elite, but sacrifices her true ancestral and familial heritage. Cultural myths designed to secure racial "purity" and intact social hierarchies thus leave Clara—and by extension the entire society—emotionally and spiritually orphaned.

Hortense Spillers has observed that "the 'romance' of African-American fiction is a tale of origins that brings together once again children lost, stolen, and strayed from their mothers" (148). Certainly, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are rich in examples of African-American texts in which the recuperation of disrupted black families is a central preoccupation.[7] However, a much bleaker version of this "tale of origins" emerges in Chesnutt's story, a tale contemporaneous with Frances Harper's novel of racial uplift and restored connections, *Iola Leroy* (1893), and Pauline Hopkins' disturbing but ultimately affirmative portrayal of African-American familial recovery in *Contending Forces* (1900). "Her Virginia Mammy" depicts a black mother who finds her lost child and then loses her again; indeed, the scene of reunion between mother and daughter is also the moment of final and irrevocable parting, since the mother relinquishes her recovered child into a world of racial privilege from which she herself will always be excluded. The "romance" of origins thus ends not, as in Harper and Hopkins, with the dispossessed African American's joyful embrace of a rediscovered heritage, but with a willed severance of newfound filial ties.

Yet on the surface, "Her Virginia Mammy," unlike the later stories of Grimké and West, describes not a daughter's shocking betrayal of a mother, but a mother's selfless sacrifice for a daughter; in fact, Chesnutt's plot reads like a script from the "maternal melodramas" so popular in thirties film.[8] The story depicts a young ballet instructor whose ignorance of her family history makes her reluctant to accept the marriage proposal of a well-connected suitor. Orphaned after a shipwreck and adopted by German foster parents, Clara Hohlfelder has vague

fears about her unknown ancestry, and tells John Winthrop that she cannot "consent to burden [him] with a nameless wife, one who does not know who her mother was...or her father" (28). Although John assures her that he would want to marry her "even if [she] were one of [her] dancing class"--a "colored class," whose members are all "a little less than white" (35)--Clara cannot overcome her doubts. Saddened and confused, she impulsively unburdens herself to Mrs. Harper, a light-skinned black woman who serves as a companion to some of Clara's pupils. As Clara tells her story, Mrs. Harper realizes with growing excitement that the orphaned woman must be her long-lost daughter--a hope confirmed when Clara reveals two keepsakes recovered from the remains of the steamboat. However, Mrs. Harper conceals her true identity, allowing her daughter (implicitly the offspring of a union between master and slave) to believe that both her father and her mother, now dead, belonged to the "first families of Virginia," and that Mrs. Harper was merely the "colored nurse," the "mammy," who tended Clara in infancy. Although John discerns the truth when he sees the resemblance between mother and daughter, he, too, lets Clara preserve the illusion that she comes from an "old and aristocratic family" (55). The story concludes as Mrs. Harper gazes upon the happily united pair "with moistened eyes in which joy and sorrow, love and gratitude, were strangely blended" (59).

Although William L. Andrews insists that "Her Virginia Mammy" cannot be included among Chesnutt's finest fiction, since the plot of maternal sacrifice diminishes the ethical complexity so evident in other of the writer's "passing" narratives, his contention that "the felicity of this interracial couple is predicated on their ignorance—not on the kind of self-knowledge and difficult moral decision which are among the best features of Chesnutt's color line fiction" (109) overlooks the moral dilemma with which Clara's mother must struggle in renouncing her claim to her daughter. Andrews concludes that "Her Virginia Mammy," proceeding inevitably to its bittersweet denouement, fails to "free itself from some of the plot clichés of sentimental 'tragic mulatto' fiction" (108). Yet the mother's decision to sacrifice her motherhood by withholding her identity is certainly as complexly motivated as any ethical choice in Chesnutt's later "color line" fiction. Why does Mrs. Harper choose to give her daughter--who has longed for a "fond, impulsive mother to whose bosom she could fly" (43)--only a dead white mother and an outgrown "mammy" figure? Is this choice simply mandated by the conventions of sentimental fiction (as Andrews might suggest), or is it impelled by a deeper,

more tragic acknowledgment on Mrs. Harper's part that she can never be the mother Clara desires? Indeed, Chesnutt's story portrays a society in which the racial bifurcation of maternal roles and qualities makes Clara's dream of the ideal mother impossible: neither the white "mother," an absent "lady," nor the black mother, a socially degraded "mammy," can provide the intense mother-daughter bond that Clara envisions. "Her Virginia Mammy" explores the seductive possibility of a close union between mother and daughter, yet suggests that such a union is doomed to failure.

Susan Fraiman, the only scholar who has discussed the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in "Her Virginia Mammy," believes that the bond between Clara and Mrs. Harper does *not* fail; indeed, she claims that the "mother-daughter romance" in the story is "urgent and erotic," that it "rivals, delays, and finally adjusts the male-female relation" (444). According to Fraiman, Clara's yearning for "maternal love" of "another and more romantic type" ("Her Virginia Mammy," 43) expresses her need for "the empowering original mother: a positive model for female identity, an ancestral structure, an idea of who she is" (445). Fraiman admits that Clara and her mother finally "conspire to preserve the patrilineal structure" which requires that the mother's influence be effaced; Mrs. Harper thus becomes a "model of resignation who renounces the mother-daughter romance so that the male-female romance may proceed" (446). But neither mother nor daughter yields willingly to separation, and the story's closing moments, in Fraiman's view, illustrate "the remarkable stamina of the mother-daughter romance":

> The heterosexual dyad with which the narrative began is revised by Clara's final gesture. Refusing to give up the mother--the model--she has unwittingly discovered, Clara impulsively reaches out to her Virginia mammy and pulls her close. Clara's last words, and the last words of the story, are: '<u>And</u> my mammy-- my dear Virginia mammy.' So the mother is inserted beside the bride and groom, making the closing vignette a triad . . . (44)

From Clara's perspective, however, this "mother-daughter romance" involves not a mother and a daughter, but a mammy and a mistress. By defining Mrs. Harper as her "mammy," Clara creates with one word a family history that will forever confirm and perpetuate her irreparable distance from the maternal figure she has fortuitously discovered. And it is certainly Clara who embraces and insists upon the term "mammy," repeating it four times in the course of her conversation with Mrs. Harper. As Kimberly Wallace-Sanders points out, not only does Clara "suggest the word 'mammy'" when Mrs. Harper claims that she was with Clara's parents on the doomed steamboat, but "from that moment on it is [also] Clara who assumes real control over the dialogue" (89). Why is Clara so eager to make Mrs. Harper into her mammy? What kind of "family romance" is she constructing by her repeated use of the term?

In a rigidly race-stratified society, Clara's anxiety about her ancestry may clearly be seen as racial anxiety. She is haunted by the possibility that her "origin was the worst it could be" (33). Such immoderate concern about her genealogical past indicates a suppressed terror that racial otherness may lurk in her buried history. (She notes that her foster parents were "fair" while she is "dark"). Clara's genteel racism becomes apparent early in the story when she "hesitate[s]" to teach the "colored" dancing class, having "never thought of colored people as possible pupils" (36). Clara ultimately decides to teach the class for purely financial reasons ("She taught for money, which was equally current and desirable, regardless of its color"), and is "somewhat surprised, and pleasantly so, when her class came together for their first lesson, at not finding them darker and more uncouth" (37). She assures herself that "personally she had no. . . prejudice, except perhaps a little shrinking at the thought of personal contact with the dark faces . . ." (36). Clara's initial reluctance to teach the class, her "shrinking" from "personal contact" with people of color, parallels her "shrinking" from knowledge of her origins: both her pupils and her past may turn into mirrors that give back unwelcome reflections.

But the possession of a mammy dissolves all racial anxiety, and that is why it is so imperative for Clara to acquire one--why she interrupts Mrs. Harper *before* the woman identifies herself, jumping in with the appellation "mammy" as if to forestall an unwanted confession on her mother's part; why she repeats the word several times as if to fix it in place as Mrs. Harper's

label; and why she fails to recognize her resemblance to her mother, a likeness which her fiancé easily discovers. Is Clara really ignorant of the truth her mother suppresses? Is Mrs. Harper's masquerade a sacrificial gift to Clara, or are mother and daughter silently complicit in the fiction? After all, the transformation of mother into mammy will simultaneously remove the threat of racial stigma that haunts Clara, and give her the "old and aristocratic" name she craves.

Indeed, it is the acquisition of a mammy that makes Clara truly white. By placing herself and her mother on separate sides of an oppositional social structure--mistress and mammy--Clara does not merely validate, but actually constructs, her racial privilege. Ruth Frankenburg, among other scholars,[9] has defined "whiteness" as "fundamentally a relational category" by which "the Western subject discursively constructs a sense of self through producing, naming, and 'bounding' a range of Others . . .Within the dualistic discourse on culture, whiteness can by definition have no meaning: as a normative space it is constructed precisely by the way in which it positions others at its borders" (193-6). Clara's "whiteness" becomes visible only in juxtaposition to the "blackness" of a mammy. Accordingly, her racial anxiety can only be quelled by such constant juxtaposition, as Judith Butler, in another context, observes about the white husband of the mixed-race Clare Kendry in Nella Larsen's *Passing*: "[Jack Bellew] cannot be white without blacks and without the constant disavowal of his relation to them. It is only through that disavowal that his whiteness is constituted, and through the institutionalization of that disavowal that his whiteness is perpetually--but anxiously—reconstituted" (171). Just as Bellew needs "his Nig," "the spectre of a racial ambiguity that he must subordinate and deny" (173), Clara needs her "Virginia mammy," an institutionalized performance of blackness against which her own whiteness (as mistress) stands out in relief. As Frankenburg contends in a later essay, "Whiteness is, while as relational as its others, less clearly marked except, ironically, in terms of its not-Otherness . . . There are times when whiteness seems to mean only a defiant shout of 'I am not that Other!' (75). Thus, when Clara draws her mammy into the circle that she and John form, she is arguably not sealing her intimacy with her mother, as Fraiman suggests ("making the closing vignette a triad"), but instead anxiously securing a hierarchical relationship

that she hopes will render her indisputably white both in her own eyes and in those of her blue-blooded fiancé.

Whether Mrs. Harper alone confers whiteness on her daughter through a self-sacrificing surrender of her maternity, or whether Clara, too, is complicit in a symbolic matricide, remains uncertain. What is more certain is that Clara relinquishes a mother and gains a mammy only at the price of her true heritage. The fabricated ancestry she is handed must sever her permanently from any link with a different familial past--from ancestors whose “warmer, richer blood” also “course[s] in [her] veins” and who “seem to call to her in clear and certain tones” (31). Has Clara been left, like James Weldon Johnson’s protagonist in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, with “a mess of pottage”?[10] Ann Douglas maintains that the “rescripting of racial origins” is “far more costly to a black. . .than to a white. . .because to deny the most painful and conflicted material in one’s assigned identity, whatever it may be, is to block, even forbid, psychological coherence” (271). Perhaps even more damaging than Clara’s severance from her racial past, however, is her loss of the biological mother about whom she has fantasized--a mother “to whom she could communicate her sorrows and trials; who would dry her tears and soothe her with caresses” (43). Clara ends up instead with two mothers, each implicitly unable to fulfill her “ideal of maternal love” (43): an unknown white mother who has died and left Clara an aristocratic name, and a surrogate mother, a “mammy,” who is both her racial subordinate and (according to the fiction of Clara’s past) her former slave.

The significance of these juxtaposed figures--the dead white mother and the mammy--has been overlooked in critical discussions of “Her Virginia Mammy.” The irony implicit in Clara’s imaginings about her lost mother--her “dim and dreamlike” memories of “tender, brooding care” (42)--is that if she accepts Mrs. Harper’s version of her history, she must accept, too, that her mother never actually bestowed that care; rather, her mammy provided “her conception of a mother’s love” (42): “Upon my bosom you have rested: my breasts once gave you nourishment; my hands once ministered to you; my arms sheltered you, and my heart loved you and mourned

you like a mother mourns and loves her firstborn" (550). Her high-born mother, on the other hand, has left her "[her] name and [her] blood" (57). Of course, the reader (and perhaps Clara as well) knows that it was not her mammy but her biological mother who cared for her. Nevertheless, Chesnutt's story creates a disturbing portrait of racially constructed motherhood. Suggesting that Clara's desired mother must be split in two, one a remote ideal and the other a dispenser of bodily nurture, "Her Virginia Mammy" captures the dualistic conception of the mother's role in postbellum America. Fatally channeled into racialized functions, the "romantic" motherly love that Clara envisions can never be embodied in a single maternal figure.

Southern patriarchy's creation of oppositional mammy-mistress roles has been fully explored by Barbara Christian and Hazel Carby, among others.[11] Christian has defined the mammy as the "necessary correlate of the lady. If one was to be, the other had to be" (12); similarly, Carby has shown that "the figurations of black women existed in an antithetical relationship with the values embodied in the cult of true womanhood" (32). While the white mother was "genteel," "delicate," even "ethereal," the black mammy was "earthy," "strong," and "warm." By taking over the function of physical nurture, the black woman, according to Christian, enabled the white woman to sustain her image of untouchable perfection: "the mammy. . . [was] desired and needed since ideal white women would have to debase themselves in order to be a mother" (2). Exploring the mythic origins of the mammy-mistress dichotomy, Richard King notes that, according to Otto Rank, the "foster 'mothering agent' of the mythological hero was usually someone of low or peasant origin or even, as in the Romulus and Remus legend, an animal.' King concludes that the "mammy," as the "loving foster mother to whom the Southern hero owed all," resembles the "legendary 'kind animal' . . . a cultural rebuke to the stereotypically cold and distant white mother" (37).

The elusiveness of Clara's white "mother" as a flesh-and-blood figure, her function as disembodied "name and blood," captures the white mistress's shadowy role in the old South. The question that remains unanswered in "Her Virginia Mammy" is whether this mistress, "Mary Stafford," actually existed. Was she the legitimate wife of Clara's father, or is she a fiction

created by Mrs. Harper to conceal her own role as the white man's concubine? Significantly, as an imagined ideal and certification of breeding, she fulfills, even in her absence, the narrowly defined maternal destiny of the plantation lady. And the "mammy" who provides essential physical care must also play a limited, provisional role, since her labor is viewed as "primitive" and "custodial," and she can claim no filial tie to the child she nurtures; her status remains that of a servant. Even Clara, effusive in her gratitude and affection for her "Virginia mammy," ironically establishes her relationship to Mrs. Harper on an implicitly economic basis: "How can I ever repay you?" (55).

The societal splitting of maternal roles along racial lines--the black woman as "primal" mother and the white woman as cultural model--strategically disempowers all mothers, as Adrienne Rich has noted: "The culture makes it clear that neither the black mother, nor the white mother, nor any of the other mothers, are 'worthy' of our profoundest love and loyalty" (254). Susan Fraiman rightly points out that Mrs. Harper's renunciation of a claim upon her daughter replicates every mother's surrender of her child within patriarchy; however, she suggests that the difference in each mother's dispossession lies only in degree: "To the extent that [Mrs. Harper] is excluded she implies the exclusion not only of blacks from a white society, but also of mothers from a patriarchal one. Her blackness encodes the invisibility of all mothers, black or white . . . the same structure disinherits them both and, disinheriting them both, doubly disinherits the black woman" (448). Positioning the black mother at the outer extreme of disinheritance, Fraiman applies what Elizabeth Spelman terms the "additive" analysis of oppression to the black woman's experience, maintaining that she is "doubly" handicapped by race and gender.[12] Yet as Spelman proposes, it is perhaps more useful to consider "intersecting structures of oppression"--the means by which racialized gender roles, oppositional yet contingent, reinforce existing power relations. As Chesnutt's story demonstrates, the very divergence in the cultural construction of black motherhood and white motherhood--the racial bifurcation of the maternal role--facilitates the dispossession of both mothers. Each serves a circumscribed function, the "mammy" an ample breast meeting infantile needs and the white mother a distant model; each therefore becomes an unwitting instrument in the displacement of the other's maternal authority.

Perceiving the hyperembodied mother of infancy as an outgrown wet nurse, Clara transfers her allegiance first to the white mother (significantly dead; without corporeality) who forms the center of her "family romance" of high-born parents, and then, inevitably, to the insistent fiancé (who claims that Clara's parents "brought you up for me"). The socially mandated detachment from maternal influence is thus completed, and Clara's fantasy of a different, more "romantic" kind of mother love remains unfulfilled.

Clara's destiny, in psychoanalytic terms, reproduces every child's acquiescence to maternal diminishment. Kelly Oliver, glossing Julia Kristeva, defines "abjection" as "the struggle to separate from the maternal body. This body, having been the mother, will turn into an abject...The mother is made abject to facilitate the separation from her" (56). The maternal body as the "corporeal abyss," the "unspeakable," the "outside-of-meaning," becomes "repugnant" to the child seeking autonomy. Yet the child's identification with the mother has been so close that abjection as a necessary rite of disengagement also contaminates the child. To avoid such contamination, the child must divide the maternal figure in half: "The mother is split in two: the abject and the sublime. Making the mother abject allows the child to separate from her and become autonomous. But if the mother is only abject, then she becomes the phobic object and the child himself becomes abject" (61). The "sublime" mother therefore displaces the "corporeal" mother, and the child "sacrifices an identification with the semiotic maternal body for an identification with the symbolic mother, a paternal mother..." (520). If the (white) Virgin Mary, in Kristeva's view, epitomizes the "sublime" mother within Western patriarchy,[13] then the black "mammy" of national myth accordingly represents the racialized and institutionalized abjection of the maternal body.

As white women writers such as Adrienne Rich and Lillian Smith have testified, the symbolic division between black mother and white mother was often acted out for the privileged white child in the antebellum and postbellum South.[14] Rich has described how the white child's allegiances shift when the "mammy" whom "one has loved and been cherished by" becomes "somehow unworthy of such love after a certain age . . . she was meant to be utterly

annihilated" (254). As the abject maternal body is repudiated--transformed, in Kristeva's terms, into the "phobic object"--the white mother replaces the "black mother" as the child's object of loyalty; however, this mother serves not as a fount of physical nurture, but as a distant moral guardian and upholder of paternal law--one who "carried out" the "father's orders" (224). In *Killers of the Dream*, Lillian Smith has also painstakingly documented the white Southern child's historical battle between "two mothers":

> It is as if he were fastened to two umbilical cords which wrap themselves together in a terrifying tangle, and then suddenly, inexplicably, but with awful sureness, begin steadily to move, each in a different direction . . . his conscience, as it grows in him, ties its allegiance to [his white mother] and the white culture which she and his father represent. But to his colored mother...easy and warm in her physical ministrations, generous with her petting, he ties his pleasure feelings. ..A profound separation has begun, a crack that extends deep into his personality. He erects 'white' image-ideals and secretly pulls them down again . . . [Life] becomes split more and more sharply into acceptable and unacceptable . . . He accords his mother the esteem and respect that are hers; he feels more and more a pulling obligation to her . . . And after a time, he . . . steals the adoration which he had conferred upon his colored mother long ago, and returns it to his white mother as rightfully hers. (127-29)

Rich's and Smith's narratives clearly have relevance beyond the rather narrow situation of the privileged white child tended by the black mammy. The cultural bifurcation of maternal roles inevitably infects the black family as well, as Clara's identification with the world of her white "mother" rather than with the social realm of the "mammy" reveals. By making her mother into a mammy, Clara aligns herself with the culturally valorized white lady, while distancing herself (through the very appellation "mammy") from the "abject" maternal figure of her early childhood.

Whether matricide or maternal sacrifice, Clara's final disassociation from her mother is carefully prepared for throughout the story. Clara, who "finds pleasure in dancing, even by way of work" (39), and who has "help[ed] support the family" with her labors, is nevertheless viewed as an easily fatigued and fragile "lady": her fiancé tells her that she is "not fit for toil" (30) and that "this work is too hard; you are not fitted for it. When are you going to give it up?" (27). John looks forward to the day when he can "take [her] out of this" by marrying her (30). By contrast, Mrs. Harper has survived enslavement. Her response to Clara's urge to confess her romantic troubles is perhaps tinged with irony: "Tell me your story, child, and perhaps, if I cannot help you otherwise, I can tell you one that will make yours seem less sad" (44). Wallace-Sanders points out that Mrs. Harper may have endured years of sexual exploitation: "Although Mrs. Harper doesn't elaborate on her time spent in slavery in New Orleans, I suspect Chesnutt wanted his readers to associate that city with its well-known reputation for turning mixed-blood women into prostitutes" (90). The barely suggested horrors of Mrs. Harper's fate underline the vast gulf of experience separating mother and daughter.

Defined and shaped by the racial identities assigned to them, Clara and Mrs. Harper speak across an ultimately unbridgeable divide. That Clara fails to note the "point[s] of resemblance between them" when they stand next to each other, "[a] mirror reflecting and framing their image" (49), reinforces the sharp disparity in their individual histories and cultural positions. Clara's blindness to her mother's true relationship to her is perhaps both willed and inevitable: not only does she desire to see Mrs. Harper as a mammy, an identity that will confirm Clara's own racial privilege, but--blinkered by that privilege--she is also ill-equipped to perceive any other connection as possible. Embracing Mrs. Harper's version of her past, Clara implicitly renounces her fantasy of "ideal maternal love" at the story's conclusion. Mrs. Harper thus loses her daughter twice, and Clara gains not the mother of her dreams, but one who has been split into two maternal figures--each now equally inaccessible.

The figure of the mammy in Chesnutt's tale, representing motherhood degraded to enforced servitude, clearly transforms this work into more than a traditional "passing" tale. Chesnutt suggests that, in creating an identity in opposition to her maternal heritage, Clara—and by extension the society at large—commits symbolic matricide. As a symbol of devalued and disinherited black motherhood, the mammy reflects W. E. B. Du Bois's lament that "the crushing weight of slavery," under which black women had "no legal marriage, no legal family, no legal control over children," historically disrupted the "African mother-idea," leaving African-

American women with the daunting task of "saving from the past the shreds and vestiges of self-respect" (169). If, as Spillers has contended, the " 'romance' of African-American fiction is a tale of origins that brings together once again children lost, stolen, and strayed from their mothers," then the "anti-romance" of this fiction is conversely a tale of severed origins and abandoned mothers—a rupture of the "generational continuity" celebrated in contemporary black women's literature. Like Patricia Williams, who sought "the shape described by [the] absence" of her great-great-grandmother, the black daughter who journeys into her genealogical past may too often encounter the secrets and silences of a dishonored matrilineage.

Laura Dawkins is an Assistant Professor of American literature and the Director of Graduate Studies in English and Philosophy at Murray State University. She has published articles on American literature and culture, and is currently working on a book which examines African-American literary treatments of historical incidents of racial violence.

Notes

[1]*Double Stitch: Black Women Write About Mothers and Daughters* (1991), a collection of short stories, poems, memoirs, and critical essays, focuses on African-American mothers and daughters throughout American history. Editors Patricia Bell-Scott and Beverly Guy-Sheftall state that the "primary goal of *Double Stitch* is to demonstrate the development of the Black mother-daughter bond and the range of experiences and traditions which have shaped it" (2).

[2]Claiming that the contemporary black woman writer "seeks her motherly precursors without apparent ambivalence or anxiety, with a necessity to survive, even with idealization," Sadoff cites Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" as an "idealized but necessary celebration" that "masks anxiety about cultural disinheritance" (205).

[3]Rich explains, "Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mother's, and in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery" (236).

[4]Hughes' "The Negro Mother," perhaps the best known of these poems, celebrates the courage, strength, and self-sacrifice of the African-American mother: "I *had* to keep on!/No stopping for me--/I was the seed of the coming Free. / I nourished the dream that nothing could smother/Deep in my breast--the Negro mother" (288).

[5]Rita B. Dandridge, editor of *Black Women's Blues*, briefly discusses "Mammy" as an indictment of intraracial prejudice: "West's story is extreme, but it does exemplify the pressure to pass for white into a world of greater opportunity, comfort, and financial security. Perhaps more important, it depicts the terrible divisiveness that intraracial prejudice could create even within one family--emblematic of the divisiveness it has created within the

larger family of African-Americans" (95). In her Introduction to *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, Carolivia Herron notes that ["Jettisoned"] adopts African-American style more overtly than do Grimké's other works" and that "it is the only one with an optimistic ending, though to get to that point her characters go through hell with problems of poverty, threatened suicide, and the pain of having relatives who pass for white" (18).

[6]In *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (1991), Patricia Morton discusses the development of the "mammy" mythology in detail. Cheryl Thurber's "The Development of the Mammy Image and Mythology," included in *Southern Women: Histories and Identities* (1992), also provides a useful overview.

[7]Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy; or Shadows Uplifted* (1893), and Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces* (1900) are perhaps the best-known works of the period that deal with issues of African-American familial reconciliation and recovery.

[8]The plot of "Her Virginia Mammy" shares many similarities with that of King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937), perhaps the most famous "maternal melodrama." Describing the issues and conflicts of Vidor's film, Linda Williams explains that Stella Dallas "sacrifices her only connection to her daughter in order to propel her into an upper-class world of surrogate family unity. Such are the mixed messages--of joy in pain, of pleasure in sacrifice--that typically resolve the melodramatic conflicts of 'the woman's film'" (2). Stella Dallas's mingled "joy and pain" recall Mrs. Harper's renunciatory parting look at Clara, "in which joy and sorrow, love and gratitude, were strangely blended" (959).

[9] For discussions of the cultural construction of "whiteness," see, for example, Richard Dyer's *White* (1997), Fred Pfeil's *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference*, and editor Birgit Ramussen's collection of essays, *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (2001).

[10]James Weldon Johnson's protagonist in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) decides to "pass" into the white world, but is haunted by regrets as the novel concludes: "I am an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money. [There] are men who are making history and a race. I, too, might have taken part in a work so glorious . . . I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (211).

[11]Christian defines the stereotypical mammy: "The mammy figure, Aunt Jemima, the most prominent Black female figure in southern white literature, is in direct contrast to the ideal white woman, though both images are dependent on each other for their effectiveness. Mammy is black in color, fat, nurturing, religious, above all strong and enduring. She makes or demands little, her identity derived mainly from a nurturing service" (85).

[12]Spelman maintains that "an additive analysis treats the oppression of a Black woman in a society that is racist as well as sexist as if it were a further burden when, in fact, it is a different burden . . . sexism and racism must be seen as interlocking, and not as piled upon each other . . ." (123).

[13]Kristeva analyzes the role of the "sublime" patriarchal mother in "Stabat Mater." *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) explores her notion of the "abject" mother.

[14]In a more recent essay on the mammy figure as a "dominant cultural fantasy," Maria St. John describes the psychic damage incurred when the privileged white child must repudiate the black maternal figure: "In what image can he recognize his love for her when her reproduction is synonymous with her debasement? How can he speak of her inestimable value to him when her devaluation constitutes the very basis on which the economy he was born into perpetuates itself?" (152)

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