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Anna Pochmara
University of Warsaw

Like Mother, Like Daughter?: Matrilineal Opposition in African American Mulatta Melodrama

Abstract

The article juxtaposes representations of mothers and daughters in selected African American novels that feature near-white female protagonists: W. W. Brown's *Clotel, Or the President's Daughter* (1853), Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), Charles Chesnut's *The House behind the Cedars* (1900), and Pauline Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter* (1902). It explores the matrilineal opposition through a formalist close analysis of the melodramatic poetics of the texts and examines the political significance of such aesthetic choices. The novels expose the American history of interracial relations through their foregrounding of the mulatta protagonists and numerous scenes of *anagnorisis* of their multiracial identities. Simultaneously, their "erotics of politics" rewards the choice of a black spouse and thus celebrates the emergence of the self-determined black community.

"The loveliness of Negro women of mixed blood is very often marvellous, and their condition deplorable. [...]; their mothers were like themselves; their fathers they never knew; debauched whitemen are ever ready to take advantage of their destitution, and after living a short life of shame, they sink into early graves."

(Hopkins 1902, 159)

"In the historical and political account of society given in sentimental fiction the central unit in which experience is recorded is not the individual, the class, or the society, but the family."

(Fisher 101)

"Races are like families."

(Hopkins 1900, 198)

"[M]elodrama aggressively domesticates [...] the public sphere."

(Hadley 535)

As the epigraphs suggest, in this article, I will analyze literary representations of matrilineal relationships and their correlation with race politics and melodramatic aesthetics. Though my main focus will fall on turn-of-the-twentieth-century

African American fiction, I will begin my analysis with W.W. Brown's *Clotel, Or the President's Daughter* of 1853, the incontestable ur-text for the African American mulatta tradition, without which it is difficult to understand the intertextual complexity of the later works. J. Noel Heermance, in one of the first comprehensive analyses of *Clotel*, finds the work flawed and inconsistent due to its borrowings and heteroglot structure; in his words, it contains "enough material [...] for a dozen novels" (165). Although recently critics have been much more generous for Brown's aesthetics,¹ Heermance's statement is correct in the sense that at least "a dozen novels" have been written by the recasting of *Clotel*'s plots.² The three turn-of-the-century texts I will explore here – Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), Charles Chesnut's *The House behind the Cedars* (1900), and Pauline Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter* (1902) – form a complex network of intertextual connections to *Clotel*. The fin-de-siècle melodramas rewrite Brown's excessive material in diverse ways. Harper's and Chesnut's novels contain subtle though meaningful allusions to the 1853 narrative, whereas Hopkins quotes it extensively without even changing the names of characters. All these intertextualities are further intensified by resonances among the turn-of-the-century works themselves. Both the intertextual reverberations among the novels and intratextual reiterations of melodramatic recognitions in the selected texts exemplify a repetition compulsion, and thus I will argue help manage the ideological anxieties and fantasies central for the period indelibly marked by the rise of racial segregation and interracial violence.

From the point of view of the present article, the most important diegetic similarity is their retelling of a story of a mulatto mother and daughter. The continuing popularity of the theme proves that with the end of the Slavery Era and the rise of the Jim Crow regime, the narrative of the matrilineal line of near-white heroines not only retained but actually even reinforced its appeal.³ Building on the recently mushrooming body of mixed race studies as well as critical discourses on the Black Woman's era and melodrama,⁴ I would like to complicate the generalization of the mulatta figure, which is visible already in titles of some recent scholarly works in this field, such as Teresa C. Zackodnik's *Mulatta and the Politics of Race* or Susan Bost's *Mulattas and Mestizas*. As I intend to demonstrate, despite many apparent similarities, there is a significant difference between two different embodiments of the mulatta, which will be explored in a close analysis of the problematic mother-daughter relationship as represented in the selected novels.

Most critics in the field have acknowledged that the texts clearly centre on the black family and privilege the matrilineal line, and they have exploited the multifarious meanings of "child following the condition of the mother" rule and pointed out "the centrality of Black maternity" or the "mother's law" (Zackodnik 89–90; Foreman 99, 104; Tate 169). The excessive, repetitive poetics of the texts largely stems precisely from the intergenerational similarities between mulatta characters in each novel. As one of the very few white female characters of

Hagar's Daughter claims in the utterance cited as an epigraph (159), the mulatta literally and tragically follows the condition of her mother. Although a similar statement is later repeated by the intrusive narrator (238), the level of the plot in Hopkins's work – and other texts analyzed here – disproves the thesis that the mulatta daughters are just like their mothers. Focusing especially on the narrative construction of courtship, romantic choices, and the setting, I will argue that the figure of the light-skinned slave or a slave-like mother functions as the foil for her free or freed daughter. All the four novels correlate the mother with slavery and reconstruct the popular seduction plot with a white lover as the suitor to represent her victimhood. The daughter, on the other hand, epitomizes freedom, self-reliance, and romantic self-control, whereas her ability to pass as white underscores her self-determined choice of black identity.

The need for disidentification with the mother figure and the significance of her passive character have been examined by critics of hegemonic “woman's fiction.” Nina Baym argues that the mother often represents “the passive woman,” who serves as a foil for the protagonist and highlights her independence (28). Another insightful scholar of popular fiction for women, Tania Modleski, also analyzes the role of the passive mother figure and claims that especially the Gothic novel's depictions of women's isolation and victimhood manage “separation anxieties” and further the necessary separation from the mother: “Gothics in part serve to convince women that they will not be victims the way their mothers were” (73–83). Modleski's claim, at first sight, fits all too neatly the representation of African American filial bonds in the selected works. Since the mothers are either literally slaves or are metonymically marked by the condition of slavery, their powerlessness is not simply a hyperbolic metaphor. The postbellum daughters' identification with their mothers is necessarily wrought by fears of reliving their mothers' victimhood and is driven by a need for individuation and separation. Hence, the mulatta victim-mother can be explained as way to manage these post-emancipation “separation anxieties” of black women.

On the other hand, this augmented need to disidentify with the mother figure is problematized by the repetitive images of family separations both in the analyzed novels and in the collective imagination fuelled by nineteenth-century reform discourse's strategies of compassion.⁵ Whereas Modleski's woman reader and heroine need to disidentify with their mothers to gain autonomy, the black heroine is frequently traumatized by a premature separation with her mother. The mulatta narratives are driven by a desire for a multigenerational family reunion, which balances the need for filial separation. Furthermore, since, as many critics have pointed out, African American narratives tend to challenge the helplessness of the tragic mulatta stereotype (Carby 1987, 73; du Cille 24; Fabi 5–6), the mulatta mothers are necessarily less passive or immature than their white counterparts. They do not fully fit Baym's depiction of the passive woman as “incompetent, ignorant, cowed, emotionally and intellectually undeveloped” (28).

Hence, the contrast between the mother and the daughter in African American narratives, though it is dramatized by the opposition of slavery and freedom, is not as pronounced as in hegemonic woman's fiction. The relationship could be aptly described with the phrase used by Deborah McDowell to talk about different generations of black women writers – “the changing same” (xi). The change and the difference are nevertheless visible, significant, and as I'm going to demonstrate, intricately related to the aesthetics of melodrama.

1. Mulatta Melodrama

As many critics have pointed out, mulatta novels are in a complex dialogical relationship with woman's fiction and melodrama, and both literary traditions help them reimagine national politics in terms of the family body (Tate 7–9; McCann 791, 808). Following Sean McCann's reclamation of, rather than lament over, melodrama in the works of Hopkins, I intend to analyze the ways in which all the selected works deploy “melodrama in the service of a racial” – and I would add gender – “politics” (McCann 791). The political dimension of private stories in the novels and intricate parallels between the family body and the national body are well exemplified by a statement from *Iola Leroy* about “being destined to pass through the crucible of disaster and defeat, till she was ready to clasp hands with the negro and march abreast with him to freedom and victory” (Harper 24). The sentence's feminine subject is “the Nation” yet it perfectly fits the eponymous character's story. After her own “crucible” of “pain and suffering,” Iola is ready to “clasp hands with the negro,” in her case a representative of the rising black professional class, Doctor Latimer. The melodramatic mode's distortion of the boundary between the secret/private and the public/political is crucial for the critical edge of all the texts analyzed here. As critics have argued, melodrama privatizes the political: it “domesticates [...] the public sphere” and foregrounds “an erotics of politics” (Hadley 535; Gillman 22).

The other driving force of melodrama is to make the secret and private public. According to the most influential study of this aesthetics, Peter Brooks's *Melodramatic Imagination*, “The desire to express all seems to a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode” (4). Christine Gledhill, drawing on Brooks's findings, contends that melodrama “draws into a public arena desires, fears, values and identities which lie beneath the surface of the publicly acknowledged world” (33). This drive towards revelation is most conspicuously visible in recognition scenes that are central for mulatta melodrama. Terence Cave's monumental study *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (1990) posits a complex epistemological significance of literary *anagnorisis*. He claims that recognition always evokes an epistemological crisis: “a disquieting sense [...] that the commonly accepted co-ordinates of knowledge have gone awry” (2). Rather than stabilize

and clarify, literary recognitions evoke “radical uncertainty” and a constant threat of “an imposture, the arrogation of a false identity and a false past” (240–241). Moreover, *anagnorisis* typically discloses sexual knowledge and a threatening, buried past (241). The knowledge recovered in recognition scenes is “perverse,” “improper” (3), “dubious or disturbing” (7), and “reveals [...] the monstrous transgression of a taboo” (209). It is a *paradoxical* knowledge; a knowledge that transgresses a given *doxa* (Cave 203), a knowledge that goes beyond, as Gledhill puts it, “the publicly acknowledged world” (33).⁶ Hence melodramatic recognition simultaneously makes the transgressive, private, and intimate past public and destabilizes the basic epistemological categories of truth and plausibility.

As Cave argues, referring to Brooks, “The dynamics of repression and the return of the repressed figure the plot of melodrama” (201). In early African American fiction, the mulatta is the repressed that keeps returning, and the melodramatic desire for revelation of transgressive, *paradoxical* knowledge primarily concerns racial identities of characters, whose mixed-raciality is repeatedly revealed to themselves, to other characters, and to the reader. The obsessive repetitiveness of scenes of *anagnorisis* in the novels may be a way to insist on the *recognition* of the interracial sexual history of illegitimacy and white sexual domination. On the other hand, all the texts promote the erotics of politics in which the female protagonist is rewarded with a happy ending only having chosen the black suitor and thus having identified with the black community.

The combination of the mode of melodrama and the figure of the mulatta – which is defining for the analyzed novels – produces interesting conceptual tensions. As Brooks argues, one of melodrama’s defining features is the exclusion of “the middle ground,” which stems from the polarization of opposites (18, 36). When melodramatic aesthetics is populated with mulatta characters, which precisely constitute the racial “middle ground,” it exposes the *paradoxes* inherent in what Franz Fanon calls “Manicheism delirium” (183), that is American “melodramatic” imagination of irreducible race difference. The contrasts between characters and ideas cease to be reducible to irreversible black and white oppositions, and hence the typical melodramatic conventions are distorted. As Susan Gillman claims, on the one hand, the melodramatic mode fits the radicalism of turn-of-the-century race relations and representations; on the other, the revelation frequently fails to result in a complete closure and the novels’ endings insist on the impossibility of resolution (6). Another traditional element of melodrama complicated by the race factor is its relationship to the past. As David Grimsted states, melodrama tends to contrast “degenerate present,” most frequently urban, with typically rural “immediate past as an epoch of great moral superiority,” which in the American context echoes Jeffersonian pastoralism (224). Since the immediate rural past in mulatta melodramas is necessarily linked to the era of slavery, it cannot be unproblematically linked to virtue and bliss. Even though the selected novels depict moments of pastoral idyll, because of the looming shadow of slavery,

all are short-lived and fatal. This ambivalence in the representations of pastoral scenes, where idyll is exposed as almost Gothic isolation, will be central for my reading of the mother figure as the foil of the mulatta daughter.

2. The Two Mulattas

The historical past of slavery and the present of freedom are melodramatically reconstructed as intergeneration matrilineal conflict. The polarization of the mother and the daughter functions on several levels: from romantic, geographical, historical to economic, all mutually informing one another. The mothers are represented as very easily courted and eager to either cohabit with or get married to a white man. There is hardly any representation of their decision-making process, self-awareness, or desire. Significantly, the setting of the quickly terminated idyll is rural or suburban, always isolated and private. The natural setting, on the one hand, serves as an argument by analogy for the natural character of the interracial union; on the other hand, its secluded character and lack of integration with the social texture exposes the myopic and fatal character of the relationship. The mothers remain in most cases marginal figures and serve as foils to the protagonists – their daughters, whose courtship is extensively prolonged by the narrative and interpolated with numerous obstacles. The novels' closures range from an excessively happy ending in *Iola Leroy*, to tragedy in *The House behind the Cedars*, to the intermixture of the two in *Hagar's Daughter* and *Clotel*. Despite these differences, all are infused with the melodramatic poetics of coincidence, which either artificially fix what seems irreconcilable and thus “draw attention to themselves – and to literary form as a whole – as artifice” (Cave 2; *Clotel*, *Iola Leroy*) or, to the contrary, to emphasize the improbability of legal interracial relationships after emancipation (*Hagar's Daughter*, *The House behind the Cedars*). Their excessive, forced, or failed closures enable the texts to shift “the attention of [the] reader from individual to nation, from acts of particular characters to systemic oppression,” as Hazel V. Carby claims in reference to the ending of *Hagar's Daughter* (Carby 1987, 152).

Apart from the explicit criticism of racism and social segregation, the novels, partly through their rewriting of hegemonic woman's fiction and women's reform discourse, voice many gender-oriented criticisms. The fact that the mother always lives in seclusion can be read, for example, as a hyperbole of the relegation of nineteenth-century hegemonic femininity to the private sphere and isolation that is its necessary result (Epstein 83–87). Yet, the introduction of black characters also exposes the limitations of hegemonic fiction's logic and highlights the specificity of black women's condition. Apart from the mother-daughter dyad, the narratives, though to different degrees, feature the white father, whose irresponsibility is solely or partially blamed for the “ordeals,” “trials,” and “sufferings” of women. Thus,

the novels criticize the systemic dependence of women on men and expose the tenuous and illusory character of protection offered by the ideology of domesticity, especially for black women, who from being isolated in the private sphere may easily become literal private property.

3. Prompt Courtships and Secluded Gardens of Eager Mothers

Historically, all mothers in the novels – Molly in *The House behind the Cedars*, Marie in *Iola Leroy*, the eponymous Clotel, and Hopkins's explicit rewriting of her as Hagar – are correlated with the condition of slavery, whereas formally, their storylines parallel the temptation plot dating back to the eighteenth-century novel (see Baym 26). Characteristically, in all postbellum novels, the mother's story is either revealed in fragmented retrospections, rather than chronologically, or as in Hopkins's work, represented in a separate and minor part of the text. Such narrative positioning highlights the distance between the mother's antebellum subplot and the daughter's central plot. In Brown's work, this marginalization is marked by the fact that the mother, despite being the eponymous character, dies in the middle of the narrative, and it is the daughter's storyline that closes the novel.⁷ Thus, the mother figures tend to be relegated to the peripheries of the texts, and accordingly they have attracted less scholarly attention than their heroic daughters. I intend to uncover their stories and examine ambivalences inherent in them to show how they serve to foster the individuation of the next generation of female characters and their assertion of female agency.

In Brown's *Clotel*, the title heroine meets her white lover, Horatio, at a quadrillion ball, and although he is described as her "conquest," the affair is narrated only through her mother's thoughts and his desire "for the most beautiful girl, coloured or white, in the city" (48). In a frantic narrative pace of hyper-condensed action, which characterizes many chapters of the novel, it takes Brown just one paragraph to place the young couple at a secluded cottage, where they pass "their time as happily as circumstances would permit," and then to announce the birth of their daughter and Horatio's political ambitions, which consequently destroy the "quadrillion's home" (65–66). The next chapter devoted to Clotel's subplot is entitled "Separation." The diegetic tempo of this section accurately exemplifies what Gérard Genette names a summary in his typology of narrative movements (94–106). Its pacing is further highlighted with a narrative pause: the description of couple's home. The passage depicting the cottage is long, elaborate, detailed, and hence worth a closer scrutiny. For a careful reader, the tenuous character of the couple's relationship is already foreshadowed by the fact that the cottage is "hired" rather than bought (64). The description highlights the seclusion of the house, which is located far from the city centre, "scarcely to be seen," "retired from the public roads," and "almost hidden among the trees" (64). Such isolation

mimics and reinforces the “social wall of separation” “the edicts of society had built up” between Clotel’s home and Horatio’s public life. As a result, Horatio is “often absent day and night with his friends in the city” (65). Hence, Clotel’s position at her cottage is a hyperbolic image of nineteenth-century hegemonic femininity, confined to the private sphere and relegated to the obligations of maternity. The novel dramatizes the helplessness of such position, which is possibly one of the factors that made *Clotel* an attractive text for white female audience. The politics of white female empathy for black bondswomen have been recently criticized as objectifying by scholars of African American studies (Zackodnik 42–74). Yet in the melodramatic title of one of the chapters, “Today a Mistress, Tomorrow a Slave,” Brown problematizes the easy analogies and identifications in the nineteenth-century suffrage movement. As the story unfolds, Clotel is sold down the river, and it turns out that for a black woman forced mobility,⁸ separation, and displacement are far worse a fate than confined domesticity. Faced with the choice between death and slavery, Clotel jumps into the Potomac and dies. As Zackodnik argues, referring to Philip Brian Harper’s analysis of *Iola Leroy*, the black woman may not “appeal to the rhetoric of separate spheres” in the same way as white women do. Paradoxically, when the “private” bliss ends, she becomes “the private property of [a] white man” (Ph. B. Harper 17; Zackodnik 108). Hence, the isolated setting of the idyll both criticizes the hegemonic separate spheres ideology and, by racializing the narrative, exposes the specific systemic oppression of black women.

Apart from this critical dimension of the description of the cottage, the long paragraph in an evocative way celebrates nature’s hybridity and productive coexistence of different plant species: “The *pride of China* mixed its *oriental* looking foliage with the *majestic magnolia*, and the air was redolent with the fragrance of flowers, peeping out of every nook and nodding upon you with a most unexpected welcome. The tasteful hand of art had not learned to imitate the lavish beauty and *harmonious disorder of nature*” (64; emphasis mine). When pointing out its lack of originality and its indebtedness to Lydia Maria Child’s “The Octoroons,” Ann du Cille claims that the passage is a “metaphor for racial and marital accord” (26). Beyond stating that Brown improves the description, however, she does not go into details, arguing that his “highly appropriative style makes such a formalist reading difficult” (26). Yet when compared to the original sentence in, which “Magnificent Magnolias, and the superb Pride of India, threw shadows around [the cottage], and filled the air with fragrance” (Child 61), Brown’s passage is slightly though significantly changed; it makes the trees “mix” and emphasizes the “oriental” character of the pride of China.⁹ Hence, the juxtaposition of the two trees is racially charged in a more explicit way: the “oriental” metonymically stands for the racially-marked blackness and “magnolia” for Southern whiteness and plantation magnanimity. Other details in the description, taken verbatim from Child’s short-story, further emphasize the diversity and fertility of the garden. The

reader may imagine how the two species of vines covering the piazzas – clematis and passion flower – must have beautifully and irrevocably intermingled. The profusion of different flowers results in the “lavish beauty” and “harmonious disorder” of the garden. Since the passage celebrates coexistence of different genera, it can be seen as alluding to racial hybridity. The correspondence between floral and racial interbreeding is also used by Hopkins in her earlier novel, *Contending Forces*, whose intrusive narrator explicitly postulates such an analogy: “Combinations of plants, or trees, or of any productive living thing, sometimes generate rare specimens of the plant or tree; why not, then, of the genus homo?” (Hopkins 1900, 87). As Gillman convincingly argues, Hopkins strategically uses here the nineteenth-century language of evolution, extending its logic and pointing out to its contradictions, arguing for the possible profits of the presence of racially-mixed people in African American community (68).¹⁰ Hence, apart from the fact that the natural setting, “a perfect model of rural beauty,” naturalizes the union of Clotel and Horatio, the specific images aestheticize racial diversity and hybridity of nature and represent it as productive and harmonious.

A strikingly similar setting is introduced in Chesnutt’s *The House behind the Cedars*. John Warwick, having passed for white for many years, decides to visit his mother and sister during a passing visit in his hometown. Unknowingly, he follows his sister Rena back to their family house.¹¹ The reader follows Warwick and recognizes the eponymous “house behind the cedars.” Chesnutt, analogously to Brown, highlights the isolation of the place, yet here the distance from the town centre is made visible by the length of the walk, taking up seven descriptive paragraphs, and subsequent changes in the surroundings. “They passed a factory, a warehouse or two, and then, leaving the brick pavement, walked on mother earth, under a leafy arcade of spreading oaks and elms” (273). The move is away from the urban and industrial and towards the rural and natural. Since Warwick comes back to his childhood home, the movement is also temporarily regressive and potentially nostalgic. The walk reverses industrialization, a force critically represented in one of novel’s subplots, and recovers the romanticized pastoral ideal of “the mother earth” (273).¹² The distance from town goes hand in hand with “the decline of respectability” of the neighbourhood and its racialization – Rena on the way helps an old black woman “lift a large basket” and place it on “the cushion of her handkerchief” and “pull[s] a half-naked negro child out of a mudhole” (274). The houses grow “scattering and the quarter of the town more neglected,” and finally as they meet their destination, Warwick realizes that he is following his own sister to a “yard shut off from the street by a row of dwarf cedars” (274). As he peeps through “narrow gap in the cedar hedge” (275), he sees a garden, in which:

walks were bordered by long rows of jonquils, pinks, and carnations, enclosing clumps of fragrant shrubs, lilies, and roses already in bloom. Toward the middle

of the garden stood *two fine magnolia trees*, with heavy, dark green, glistening leaves, while nearer the house two mighty elms shaded a wide piazza, at the one end of which a honey-suckle vine, and at the other a Virginia creeper, running over a wooden lattice, furnished additional shade and seclusion. [...] The house stood on a corner, around which the cedar hedge turned, continuing along the side of the garden until it reached the line of the front of the house. The piazza to a rear wing, at right angles to the front of the house, was open to inspection from the side street, which, to judge from its deserted look, seemed to be but little used. the back yard [...] was only slightly screened from the street by a *china-tree*. (275; emphasis mine)

The privacy of the house, already announced in the novel's title, is emphasized by the details: the thick "dwarf cedar hedge" with only "narrow gaps;" "a honey-suckle vine [...] and a Virginia creeper," providing "additional shade and seclusion;" and finally "a china-tree" concealing the house from the street. Different flower species are not separated but intermingled and listed in a long and specific catalogue: "jonquils, pinks, and carnations, enclosing clumps of fragrant shrubs, lilies, and roses already in bloom" form a "bright carpet of flowers" (275). Just as in Brown's text, both the magnolia and china-tree are present. All this makes the representation of the setting strikingly similar to *Clotel's* cottage – secluded, divided from the rest of the neighbourhood, far from the town centre. The combination of the natural setting and seclusion is further underlined through the last name of the house's proprietor. Rena's mother, who owns the house, is called Molly Walden, which triggers associations with Thoreau's famous experiment and resultant memoir. Yet even though both Molly Walden's and Thoreau's reclusive lives were most likely contemporaneous, their meanings were quite opposite. His gesture signified transcendentalist self-reliance, freedom, and volition; whereas hers was naturalistically due to "circumstances, some beyond her control" (289).

Yet, it does not mean that Molly's seclusion is totally devoid of emancipatory potential. As evidenced by the extensive quotation, both in *Clotel* and in *The House behind the Cedars* considerable space, unparalleled by descriptions of other places, is devoted to the depiction of the amazingly fertile flower gardens. The sheltered garden signifies secrecy but also potentially constitutes a heterotopian space that challenges boundaries between races and species. Michel Foucault, in his very short, very sketchy, and very influential essay "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," claims that the garden is the oldest example of "contradictory heterotopias," which are able to "juxtapos[e] in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (25). Interestingly, in the text, he refers to Persian gardens and their affinity with carpets, which "were originally reproductions of gardens (the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space)" (25). Hence, Chesnut's use of the by-now-worn-out simile of "the bright carpet of flowers" can be read as a celebration of harmonized differences, where "foreign" or otherwise "incompatible" elements harmoniously interact.

The garden is the buffer zone between the public street and the private house of Molly Walden, a former mistress of a nameless white man, father to her two children. Its long description, just like in *Clotel*, is contrasted with the scarce space devoted to Molly's relationship. This imbalance further emphasizes the lack of her agency, since as György Lukács claims, in his seminal "Narrate or Describe?," heavy descriptiveness, which characterizes naturalist fiction, precludes the characters' development of subjectivity (110–148). Since the narrative begins many years after Molly's lover's death, their relationship is represented in a few fragmented mentions that at first keep the reader in the dark about its interracial character, suggesting that she might be a white "fallen woman," at the time highly popular with both dime-novels and naturalist narratives. In the introductory pages, the reader is informed that she "accepted less than marriage" and "if she had sinned, she had been more sinned against than sinning" (Chesnutt 347, 286). Only a couple of chapters into the book is the secret racialized, and not until the beginning of the second part of the text is the whole story explicitly revealed.

Just like in the case of *Clotel* and Horatio, Chesnutt does not go into any detail of the relationship. Molly's perspective is completely absent from the diegetic *analepses* that summarize her love life, which precludes reader's sympathy for or identification with Rena's mother. We are told she was a young beautiful mulatta, playing next to a well, which through biblical associations with the Samaritan woman, possibly foreshadows Molly's outcast social position. "A gentleman drove by one day, stopped at the well, smiled upon the girl, and said kind words. He came again, more than once, and soon, while scarcely more than a child in years, Molly was living in her own house" (371). The narrative plays into the ethnic difference between Jesus and the Samaritan woman of the biblical scenario and the illegitimacy of her relationships with men. Here, however, the well is the beginning of Molly's moral decline rather than salvation suggested in the Bible. Despite this reversal, the association with the biblical character may serve to partially cast off the spectre of illegitimacy of Molly's position. Mirroring the pace of Brown's narrative, in the next paragraph, the white father dies and leaves the family without the legal protection of a will. Thus, an analysis of depictions of gardens and the relationships between mothers and their white lovers demonstrates that both novels underplay the romance and courtship, simultaneously focusing on the description of the setting that is provided for their short-lived relationships.

It must be emphasized, however, that the house is owned by Molly and though her interracial relationship begins before Emancipation, she is not a slave in contrast to all other analyzed mothers. Despite the significant difference in her condition – "she yet had freedom of choice, and therefore could not wholly escape blame" – Molly's plot closely parallels the remaining narratives (372). This resemblance is plainly visible in the similarity between two passages of intrusive narration from Brown's and Chesnutt's novels. Justifying *Clotel*'s illicit relationship, the narrator explains that "amongst the slave population no *safeguard* is

thrown around virtue, and no *inducement* held out to slave women to be chaste” (Brown 46; emphasis mine) and analogously the narrative voice in *The House behind the Cedars* excuses Molly, who “with every *inducement* to do evil and few *incentives* to do well” is “entitled to charitable judgment” (Chesnutt 372; emphasis mine).

The promptly entered illicit unions of Clotel and Molly in many ways parallel the marriages of mothers to white gentlemen in Harper’s and Hopkins’s novels. Most importantly, both are declared illegal, when it comes to light that the women are not white. Despite the initial lawful character of the relationship in *Iola Leroy*, the courtship proceeds in the one-or-two-paragraph pace that was used by Brown and Chesnutt. Fresh from school, not having seen her owner Eugene Leroy for years, Marie immediately responds to his proposal: “she bow[s] her beautiful head and softly repeat[s]: ‘Until death us do apart.’” An immediate “strictly private” wedding follows, and “Marie return[s] as mistress to the plantation from which she ha[s] gone as a slave” (Harper 74, 65, 76). The reader, however, is informed of Eugene’s intentions before Marie, as the male character takes up one whole chapter to tell his part of the story, which is constructed as a narrative of a decadent aristocrat ultimately saved from overindulgence and death by his octroon nurse. The addressee of this confession is his cousin Lorraine, the melodramatic villain of the text, rather than the object of his affections. Marie’s focalization of courtship is completely missing from the novel.

What follows is the familiar state of idyll, although Harper’s text emphasizes the utopian and escapist seclusion rather than the natural beauty of a heterotopic garden. “In a quiet and beautiful home,” on a “lonely plantation,” Marie is “sheltered in the warm clasp of loving arms” and “her life” seems “like a joyous dream” (76). Just as Clotel, who lives behind a “social wall of separation,” Marie is also “shut out from the busy world, its social cares and anxieties” (86). The end of the bliss is quickly foreshadowed with the visits of Lorraine. For Marie, “with his coming a shadow [falls] upon her home, hushing its music and darkening its sunshine” (89); for her husband, he is “the only relative who ever darkens [their] doors” (90). The narrative confirms Marie’s premonitions. Lorraine, after Eugene’s sudden death of yellow fever, takes over their fortune, challenges his wife’s manumission and their marriage license, consequently remanding her and their children to slavery. The narrative highlights the idyllic natural setting – “birds [...] singing their sweetest songs, [and] flowers breathing their fragrance on the air” – only to contrast it with the family tragedy (93). Just as in *Clotel*, the seclusion of the place is unable protect the family bliss. To the contrary, after the wife becomes a slave, the isolation of the sheltered space is a key factor that reinforces its dangerous character. As Harriet Jacobs alias Linda Brent memorably argues, especially for female slaves, life on “a distant plantation” was much more dangerous than in town where it was easier to make slaveholders’ “villainy [...] public” (47). Her statement is supported by historians who analogously claim

that “the rural isolation of plantations shielded many offenders from the eyes of the community” (Fox-Genovese and Genovese 375). Thus the remoteness and social separation of the Leroy’s home facilitates the ease with which Lorraine turns the women in the private sphere into his private property. Putting an end to the pastoral idyll in the novel, Harper recasts the narrative device of husband’s sudden death, which was frequently used in hegemonic woman’s fiction. This diegetic turn leaves the woman powerless, and thus criticizes the absolute financial dependence of women on men and their subordinate position.¹³ Marie’s predicament is further dramatized by the fact that her helplessness is a result of literal rather than metaphorical slavery. Hence, analogously to *Clotel*, Harper’s rewriting of the popular narrative twist makes the novel appealing to all women anxious about their dependence on men, yet simultaneously the literal slavery of her characters problematizes the straightforwardness of the popular nineteenth-century “woman as a slave” metaphor.¹⁴

In Hopkins’s novel, the setting for Hagar and Ellis’s love affair reminds of the extensively described Jamesian mansions, and the narrative implicitly acknowledges this association: Enson Hall “remind[s] one of English residences with their immense extent of private grounds” (31). Again, the desiring and courting are narrated from Ellis’s perspective, and the scene of engagement bears the traits of the natural idyll from the previous works as the place is “closed to the public” (31). The scene also epitomizes the romantic view of transcendence through nature. In a complete isolation from social reality, Hagar rests suspended in a hand-made hammock. “Lying there, with nothing in sight but the leafy branches of the trees high above her head, through which gleams of the deep blue sky came softly, she felt as if she had left the world and was floating, Ariel-like in midair” (36). When Ellis comes and disturbs her, she falls out of the hammock; he catches her, asks her to marry him, she succumbs to his “passionate kisses” (38). Thus they are betrothed and get married in the next paragraph, even though the narrative needs to make an account of Hagar’s mother’s death before the wedding takes place.¹⁵ In the compulsive repetitiveness of the novel’s poetics, this pace of courtship is duplicated when Hagar gets engaged to her second husband. The narrative evocatively points to “her eager acceptance” of the proposal (81). Ultimately, as in the other works discussed in this article, Ellis’s engagement promise to Hagar that she will be “so loved and shielded that sorrow” will never touch her is not fulfilled (38). Just as Marie, she is remanded to slavery after her husband is pronounced dead.

Thus the novels’ insistent representations of seclusion as the setting for the myopic and prematurely terminated family idyll posit the necessity of social integration and insist that the private should be made public. The private/public binary in the texts functions in two different but interrelated ways. Since all works rely on melodramatic aesthetics and its will to revelation, through repeated moments of *anagnorisis* they insist that the private secret is always made public.

When a white lady, for example, asks Molly's daughter about her race, she asks her "something very *personal*" and then adds that Rena "must have a *romantic history*" (Chesnutt 427; emphasis mine). The personal secret is Rena's race, which, when revealed, publicizes the *history* of Southern interracial "*romantic*" relations. Even though the works I analyze do not portray women's lack of consent, as for example Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* or Hopkins's *Contending Forces*, their representations of mothers' uncritical and prompt acceptance of the proposal bear the traits of the seduction novel, especially since all the women in fact enter relationships that turn out to be "less than marriage" and all unions result in pregnancies. The obsessive repetitiveness of *anagnorisis* – mostly of the daughters' true identities – may be a way to insist on the *recognition* of this interracial sexual history of illegitimacy of their mothers. Apart from the relentless drive of private stories to be exposed as national history, the public-private boundary is challenged in yet another way. Through the contrast between mothers and daughters, the texts insist that women's seclusion in the private is dangerous, myopic, and impossible in the modern times, and accordingly the daughter's presence in the public sphere though frequently perilous is represented as inevitable.

4. The New Mulatta's Discontents and Freedoms of the Public Sphere

The enslaved, victimized, domestically confined mothers, all too eager to enter interracial relationships, serve as foils that highlight the self-determination and independence of their daughters. In contrast to the mothers, the daughters showcase self-restraint and do not get married to attractive white suitors. The narratives devote a lot of space to their decision-making process, ethical development, and growing self-awareness. Two of them – Iola and Mary – after extended trials are rewarded with respectable black husbands. In contrast to the antebellum, pre-modern, rural context of their mothers' subplots, the daughters' storylines are predominantly positioned in the postbellum public sphere. The women enter the work force as nurses, teachers, and office workers or at least engage in some travelling. The narratives either embrace the newly gained self-determination or at least represent dynamic modernity as inescapable and the rural idyll of secluded cottages as utopian and short-sighted. Even though they do depict the threats of the public sphere and feature scenes of a lonely woman in danger, they tend to challenge the familiar scenario of a damsel in distress saved by a knight in shining armour. Just as in hegemonic woman's fiction analyzed by Baym, "the traditional rescuing function of the novel is denied to" the male protagonist (40).

The contrast between Clotel and her daughter Mary is primarily visible on the level of plot resolution. Mary's storyline exemplifies Brown's signature poetics of narrative chaos and excessive coincidence. Her choice of a husband is introduced in a passing remark that artificially stitches together different plots yoked in the

space of a single paragraph. The fragment, whose logic borders on the stream of consciousness, begins with a retelling of Clotel's arrest and death, moves on to the concurrent slave revolt, introduces its last insurgent, George, and narrates his whole life story, including a summary of his trial and a full record of his impassioned abolitionist speech. Despite his references to the American Revolution, which move the audience and the intended reader, George is pronounced guilty. Such tragic yet logical closure of his story is quite unexpectedly disrupted, and the last sentence in this several-page-long paragraph moves back from the trial to George's earlier spousal choice: "he was sentenced. Being employed in the same house with Mary, the daughter of Clotel, George had become attached to her, and the young lovers fondly looked forward to the time when they should be husband and wife" (Brown 191).¹⁶ The dramatic arbitrariness in the narrative logic of the paragraph reflects the lack of coherence and absurdity of slavery as experienced by the characters and points to the ways in which the political and the private are interconnected in the narrative. It forcefully illustrates Giulia Maria Fabi's claim that Brown "obliges the reader to experience the incoherence and displacement that he sees central to slave's life" (9).

Reversing the sentimental damsel-in-distress plot, it is Mary who saves her lover by changing clothes with him. Unlike her mother, she does not experience even a moment of rural idyll, and the wedding is postponed until the very end of the novel – by three chapters and by ten years. George, continuing the reversal of gender roles, dressed-up as a woman, manages to escape to Canada, then, unable to find Mary, moves to Europe, where the two are finally reunited by an improbable, coincidental *anagnorisis*, which is delayed and complicated by Mary's dark veil and in turn facilitated by George's lost book. In contrast to the illusorily safe, secluded setting of Clotel's cottage, the scene of the wonderful recognition of George and Mary takes place at a public spot, a cemetery in Dunkirk. After two meetings, her and his fainting, and his "bursting into a flood of tears," the extensive two-chapter *anagnorisis* is complete (202). The narrative makes their meeting possible through an introduction of a Frenchman who helps Mary escape and takes her to France. The text insists on the platonic character of their relationship as Mr. Devenant only "transfers" his brotherly love onto Mary, who closely resembles his dead sister (204). Additionally, the reader is informed that George has continued to be at the centre of Mary's life since her only son with Devenant is named after him. Furthermore, the narrative follows George rather than Mary, and thus, the French husband is present only in Mary's reminiscences and is conveniently dead when the near-white lovers reunite. This complex stratagem allows for the preservation of Mary's respectability and the final happy family reunion. At the same time, both its narrative and chronological postponement and its radically coincidental character suggest the unlikelihood of such reunions for black families in general. Significantly, the final happy ending in *Clotel*, a text with plots "enough [...] for a dozen novels" (Heermance 165), is reserved for the

only mulatta who chooses a black husband, even though he is light-skinned and does not openly identify with his African origins or slave heritage.

In the post-Emancipation version of the novel, Mary comes back to the United States, works as a nurse during the Civil War, and then becomes a teacher in a school for freedmen.¹⁷ Harper's 1892 character to a large extent follows in her footsteps. Iola represents self-determination, self-restraint, and devotion to social work more intensely than any other mulatta in African American literature. Her story to a large extent parallels the "trial and triumph" trajectory – the central plot of hegemonic woman's fiction according to Baym (40, 104). The narrative similarity is further reinforced on the lexical level as the words "trial" and "tried" are used eleven times in the novel to refer to hardships experienced by Iola and other black female characters (Harper 54, 104, 106, 115, 118, 210, 227, 247, 250, 272). Yet the diegetic expectations raised by woman's fiction do not prepare the reader for the inordinately delayed triumph of Iola. It does not immediately follow the trial, and the trial itself is narrated with many narrative gaps and silences. Because of legal flaws in the documents, with her father's death, Iola's social status suddenly changes from white to black and from free to enslaved, which begins what the narrative repeatedly and vaguely refers to as the above-mentioned "the hour of trial" but also "fiery ordeal," "siege of suffering," "ministry of suffering," and "crucibles" (106, 114, 195, 196, 256). Her story is not narrated in a chronological order, and Iola herself is introduced only in the fifth chapter of the novel. Such narrative absences and gaps formally highlight the unspeakable character of her experiences.¹⁸ The shock of being remanded to slavery and resisting more or less explicitly described attempts at seduction are followed by two legitimate marriage proposals from a young white doctor, whom Iola seems to be in love with, yet whose offers she rejects out of racial loyalty and ethical responsibility. The fragmented story of her past is communicated through mentions in dialogues and through extradiegetic narration, abounding in words such as "self-respect," "resolve," "pledge," "duty," and "purpose" (57, 117; 112, 118, 208, 209, 211; 118; 56; 60, 200, 205, 219, 263, 271; 114, 144, 235, 236). In one such conversation, her husband-to-be Dr. Latimer thus summarizes Iola's story:

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 adviser. This young lady was *alone* in 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*, closed her ears to the *syren song*, and could not be *lured* from her purpose. (263; emphasis mine)

The "siren song" of marriage proposal and "love, home, and social position" rejected by Iola accurately describes Eugene Leroy's offer so promptly accepted by her mother. Volition and solitude highlight Iola's self-reliance, whereas the "syren" "lure" accentuates the necessarily relational character of her position.

Harper's narrative contains a significant element that is absent from the novels analyzed by Baym, that is race politics. In the text, Iola's racial ambiguity serves to further underline her self-determination. Her mixed race enables her to choose her identity and to make the ethical choice of being black. As the reader learns from one of Iola's strong declarations, she is "resolved that nothing shall tempt [her] to deny [her color]" and "The best blood in [her] veins is African blood" (208). Thus her near-whiteness helps emphasize her moral development and exercise of volition.

The reference to the "siren song" and the comparison of Iola to Odysseus, "bound to the mast," foreshadows the way in which the novel's happy ending is postponed. Whereas "an episode of financial reversal and an interlude of self-support became virtually obligatory in woman's fiction," and the typical heroine becomes temporarily financially independent and works as a teacher (Baym 71), in Harper's text, Iola's professional endeavours are significantly extended. As the narrative opens, freed Iola becomes a devoted nurse during the war. As soon as "hospital [is] closed. [...] Iola obtain[s] a position as a teacher" (145). Then, after her school is burnt, one whole long chapter is devoted to her attempts to find different jobs in two cities in the North. Subsequently, Iola decides to go back to teaching, and her fiancé encourages her to become a writer (262). At the end of the novel, having got married, Iola works at a Sunday school in the South. Her narrative trajectory completes a full circle – she settles down in the same town in the South in which she is rescued in the fifth chapter when she enters the narrative. What makes Iola's work-related episodes seem even more prolonged and to some extent anti-climactic is the fact that many come after the key climax in the story, the moment of family reunion, which takes place exactly in two-thirds of the text, in the twenty-second out of thirty-three chapters. Harper thus rewrites and intensifies the hegemonic "trial and triumph" formula, making Iola's trials more extended and her newly-gained independence more heroic. Such a delayed construction of the romantic narrative is also instrumental in the race politics of the novel: it helps balance the text's post-emancipation optimism with attention to the dramatic racial discrimination of Jim Crow America.

When finally the respectable black Dr. Latimer is positioned on Iola's path, their relationship is introduced in a stark contrast to the conversation between Eugene Leroy and Alfred Lorraine that announces the planned marriage of Eugene and Marie. This time it is Iola who takes up most of the chapter entitled "Dawning Affections" to eulogize the "high, heroic manhood" of Dr. Latimer in a conversation with her uncle. In addition, the marriage itself is neither secret nor immediate and takes place only a year after the proposal. In contrast to Marie's isolation in the private sphere, both Iola and Frank Latimer actively take part in the life of their community. Although Claudia Tate convincingly points to the limitations of Iola's "commitment to public service" at the end of the novel, it should be emphasized that she does not remain completely insulated within the private sphere (98).

Depictions of her home challenge the very private-public boundary: “her doors are freely opened for the instruction of the children before their feet have wandered and gone far astray. She has no carpets too fine for the tread of their little feet” (Harper 279). She metaphorically makes her home a school for freed children. The permeability of private sphere boundaries is also visible in Iola’s public service. Not only is Iola’s home open for children, but “In lowly homes and windowless cabins her visits are always welcome” (279). This affectionate, rather than forced or top-down, flexibility of the border between the private and the public in Harper’s text is the foundation of the emancipated black community. Characteristically, even though the narrative ends with a detailed report on the fates of its main characters, Iola, just like the last incarnation of Brown’s heroine as well as other daughters analyzed here, at the end of the novel remains childless. This absence of children can be read as a further refusal to relegate Iola to the private sphere. Overall, in contrast to her mother, Iola refuses to pass as white, rejects a comfortable life in the private sphere, and throughout the narrative supports herself. She chooses a black husband but does not have children. She is represented in a variety of public spaces and is socially integrated with the black community.

Whereas in *Clotel* and *Iola Leroy* the contrast between mothers and daughters primarily stems from the construction of plot, in *The House behind the Cedars* this difference is reinforced with shifting perspectives between different focalizers and the extradiegetic narrator. In contrast to the complete absence of her mother’s focalization in the summary passages depicting her interracial relationship, Rena’s consciousness and her decisions are at the centre of the novel’s attention. Her relationship is interchangeably narrated from the perspective of her fiancé and through her own internal monologues. Chesnut’s narrative is more intensely melodramatic than Harper’s, with even more coincidences and *peripeteias*, which in turn feed Rena’s extended introspections. Unlike the self-sacrificing Iola, Rena initially agrees to leave her mother Molly and to share her brother’s life of passing as white. She engages in a relationship with a white gentleman, George, and the courtship lasts for four long chapters. Because of her sense of guilt regarding both the racial secret and the abandonment of her mother, she dreams of Molly’s illness, returns to visit her, and by an improbable coincidence her black identity is discovered by her white fiancé. After this *anagnorisis*, he rejects her, and she decides she will “never marry any man” (387). Instead, in “service to her rediscovered people” (396–397), she becomes the model black female reformer – a teacher. In contrast to *Clotel* and *Iola Leroy*, whose female protagonists are rewarded with a near-white professional husband, Chesnut’s narrative interestingly revises this optimistic scenario. Jeff Wain, a mulatto who courts Rena in the latter part of the novel, is a scheming, impoverished, and immoral villain rather than a responsible bourgeois reformer. Fortunately, Rena mirrors the Baym heroine, who “is canny in her judgment of men and generally immune to the appeal of a dissolute suitor” (Baym 41), and easily sees through his plans. Molly’s explicit championing of Wain

as Rena's husband further emphasizes the contrast between the daughter's heroic self-restraint and the mother's myopic indulgence. In contrast to the triumph that closes hegemonic woman's fiction, without a viable suitor, Rena dies escaping from two admirers rather than enter a bad marriage.

In a dramatic contrast to Molly, who is confined to the house and garden virtually in all the scenes in the text, Rena from the very beginning, when her brother follows her from the town centre to her house, is predominantly positioned in public. Her errand to town directly leads to the most critical of the novel's many *anagnorises*, the discovery of her mixed-race identity by George. After the broken engagement, she leaves the secluded, private house behind the cedars for the public sphere of school and a rented room. Her ordeals in the public are not rewarded at the end of the narrative, and as Fabi points out, the novel "dramatizes the lack of safe space for women like Rena" (84). The final climactic scene in the text graphically illustrates the dangerous position of a single woman outdoors. Just before a storm, on her way home from school, Rena faces the stalking advances of both the dishonest mulatto Jeff and her former white fiancé George. Morally heroic, the mulatta protagonist does not run to the "white knight" as could be expected, but "She turn[s] and flees" (Chesnutt 302–304, 449). Moreover, since this coincidence positions the evil villain alongside the white lover, it highlights similarities between the two characters, and thus exposes the latter as a failed hero. The "evil passions" of Wain cast a malevolent spectre on Tryon's seemingly more noble advances (447). Rena's vulnerable position is accentuated with the dramatic setting of the scene: the violent storm, wild swamp, and finally a phallic "huge black snake [...] frightful in appearance" (448). Additionally, the swamp potentially positions the two suitors as slave catchers following fugitive bondsmen with blood-hounds, which is later reinforced in the case of Tryon, who follows "the false scent" (459). Tellingly, the narrative juxtaposes the pursuit of Rena with another lonely woman in public. When searching for his former fiancée, George follows clues that lead him to a woman, whose "sandhill sallowness" represents both her complexion and her class. Her lack of self-control is visible in her drunken condition as well as in the resulting "tipsy cordiality" towards George (453). The woman's appearance, intemperance, and lack of refinement make her an additional foil for Rena's fairness, moral self-control, and respectability. As George concludes, "She [i]s not fair, and she [i]s not Rena" (453). With these melodramatic juxtapositions in the novel's finale – of Rena with the nameless drunk woman and of Jeff with George – Chesnutt implicitly challenges both the absurdity of Jim Crow regime's racial boundaries and the narrative of white heroism.

Hopkins's novel, as critics have pointed out, bears close resemblance to Chesnutt's (Tate 198), which is most conspicuously visible in their closures. In both texts, the death of the near-white female protagonist prevents her from a possible interracial union. Both end with the white suitor overcoming his racial prejudice

and returning to the heroine's home only to find her dead. In *Hagar's Daughter*, in contrast to the suburban and idyllic Enson Hall that has provided the setting for her parents' brief courtship, Jewel's romantic relationship with white lawyer Cuthbert Sumner is predominantly located in public spaces of Washington. As we find out in an *analepsis*, Sumner meets Jewel as a debutante at her "coming-out" ball, yet the narrative introduces them in the streets of Washington through the eyes of the novel's villain, who, like many others "in the stream of well-dressed pedestrians [...] watch[es] with interest [...] the occupants of the handsome carriages" going down Pennsylvania Avenue, and scrutinizes the couple sitting in "a sumptuous Russian sleigh" (Hopkins 1902, 75). The visual control that is exercised by the villainous General Benson over the protagonists is repeated in other scenes where the setting of the couple's encounters is marked by analogous panopticism: in the theatre, in the prison, and in the court. The *publicity* of the couple's relationship is visible also in the attention devoted to it by the press. When reporting the murder that Sumner is framed for, the papers include profuse and alleged information of the romantic relations of the protagonists (181–184, 266–267). This public character of Jewel and Sumner's turbulent relationship is contrasted with several secrets: the villains' false identities and their conspiracy against the couple, Hagar's passing, and Jewel's hidden black identity. As melodrama, *Hagar's Daughter* is driven by the desire to make the private public, to reveal true identities of all its characters. In its narrative closure, however, the ultimate revelation does not result in the complete reconciliation that characterizes many popular melodramatic plots.¹⁹

Even though, as Tate convincingly points out, in contrast to her *Contending Forces*, Hopkins silences Jewel's voice, limits her agency, and makes her actions centred on Sumner rather than on the black community and reform activities (207), the protagonist still exhibits exceptional courage and independence. Analogously to Mary in *Clotel*, she saves her fiancé from imprisonment by hiring a detective who helps her solve the case, and subsequently she is punished with captivity – though due to the postbellum context in her case it is kidnapping rather than relegation to slavery.²⁰ In her depiction of Jewel's abduction, Hopkins recasts the image of the unprotected woman in public. She does point out that "the Washington streets [are] famous for their loneliness and seclusion, stretching like immense parks in all directions" (210). This passage represents the dangers of the public sphere as analogous to Enson Hall and its "long dim stretch of [the] woods" and "immense extent of private grounds" rather than to the expected metropolitan commotion. Secondly, even though "the streets" represent "terror for lone female pedestrian" (210), Jewel is kidnapped already after she enters her well-protected private sphere. The "thick underwood," "full and dense foliage," and "the gloomy shade of the trees" shielding her house prevent the kidnappers from being seen by her escort – Chief Henson. Moreover, the capturers are not strangers but are close relatives and loyal servants (210). Thus, even though the

chapter opens with a hint that the public sphere in the evening inspires “terror” in “lone female pedestrians,” subsequent paragraphs undermine this association. Jewel is kidnapped within “the great entrance gates” to her residence, “in the close proximity of the house,” by people her uncle hired (210). Following into the footsteps of other mulattas resisting entrapment and true to her upbringing in the West – “She had been brought up on a ranch; [...] and even in Washington she was never unarmed when without male escort” – Jewel draws “her revolver with intent to fire” and exhibits “unnatural strength in her frantic struggle for freedom” (210–211). The episode – with skilfully built suspense – nevertheless ends with the failure of her resistance. Eventually, she is rescued by her maid cross-dressed as a boy, in contrast to her mother who after her jump to the Potomac is saved by a man, a local oyster-digger, and then married by the wealthy miner Bowen (266).

Apart from the difference in the settings of Jewel’s and Hagar’s courtship, the contrast between the mother and the daughter is also visible in the narrative pace and resolution of their romantic relationships. The engagement of Jewel and Sumner is much more extended than the one of her parents although the narrative states that it is “a desperate case on both sides” (85). Whereas Hagar and Ellis’s first meeting, courtship, engagement, and wedding are all summarized within six pages, the novel devotes the whole second part, taking up twenty-nine out of thirty-seven chapters, to the relationship between Jewel and Sumner. The couple is twice separated, and both moments serve to showcase the mulatta’s romantic self-restraint. When she is led to believe that Sumner loves another woman, Jewel, like Rena, decides she will “never love – never marry” (144). The second separation follows the couple’s secret wedding and results from Sumner’s hesitation about Jewel’s mixed-race identity. In a way that reminds of Brown’s reticent representation of Mary’s marriage to Devenant, the novel implicitly preserves the protagonist’s virginity and respectability. Since Jewel and Sumner get married in prison, and their final separation happens just after he is finally released and before nightfall, the couple is not given a single night in the nuptial bedroom. Before the final resolution occurs, however, the reader follows numerous and turbulent *peripeteias*. The accidental meetings, recognitions, and misrecognitions result both from the melodramatic coincidences of the narrative and from the villainous conspiracy of its characters. Sumner becomes “The victim of a *plot*,” “a *plot* for ten millions” hatched by General Benson, Jewel’s evil uncle (93; emphasis mine), and simultaneously the lovers are at the mercy of the highly melodramatic *plotting* of the novel. Jewel is separated from her lover by a means of Benson’s plot, Sumner coincidentally finds out about the plot from his female colleague, and is subsequently framed by Benson for her murder. Meanwhile, Jewel receives help from an experienced detective, who unconsciously feels an urge to support her and, as it turns out, is coincidentally her biological father. The solution of the murder mystery and the uncovering of Benson’s conspiracy reunite the lovers and lead to their secret marriage.

The revelation of Jewel's racial identity leads to the final separation of the lovers. The closing *peripeteia* occurs in the last but one chapter of the novel, at the moment when the two couples – Hagar/Ellis and Jewel/Sumner – have already reunited, and the reader does not expect any new revelations. Hagar, in an extended scene, inspects the contents of her late husband's secret box. The narrative pace is relatively slow and abounds in pauses with digressive observations such as “she undid the knot with the feeling of pride which attends the operation of succeeding in untying a string without cutting it” (276). Having closely examined numerous memorabilia of Senator Bowen, at the very bottom of the trunk, Hagar finds “something vaguely familiar,” which turns out to be baby attire “her own hands had fashioned twenty years before” and her mother's locket that was about her baby's neck when she jumped with her to the Potomac (277–278). The use of such material evidence was already recognized by Aristotle, who classifies it as a “recognition by signs,” more particularly by “acquired” signs, such as “necklaces,” and criticizes it as “the least artful” form of *anagnorisis*, resulting from “lack of resourcefulness” (21). Hopkins's text, however, certainly is not deficient in “resourcefulness.” The sophistication of the trunk inspection scene, apart from the masterful building of the suspense, is visible in the way that the complex construction of the discovered signs parallels the intricacy of numerous interrelated hidden identities in the novel. The representation of Hagar's husband's private trunk, which contains a locket with “the intricate [...] triple case” and a hidden spring which opens its secret compartments accurately mirrors the interrelatedness and profusion of secrets in the novel (277). The evidence from the trunk reveals that Hagar's foster daughter is actually her biological daughter and hence is of mixed race. Whereas until this moment the melodramatic drive to disclose the secret has contributed to the fortunate reconciliation and has exemplified what Hillary P. Dannenberg, referring to Nancy K. Miller, labels as a euphoric family reunion (95), the introduction of the race secret complicates the closure. Jewel is reunited with her mother and father but at the same time is separated from her lover, whose race prejudice makes him hesitate for a moment too long. The novel's ending challenges the binary opposition of euphoric and dysphoric closures postulated by Dannenberg and clearly illustrates the tension I discussed at the beginning of the article – the tension between the racial ambiguity of the mulatto and melodramatic Manichaeism. Furthermore, Jewel's death, analogously to Rena's, prevents her from an interracial union. Hence, although all the works expose the inescapable, though frequently invisible, *paradoxical* historical interrelatedness of black and white communities and families through their use of the mulatta, they simultaneously insist on the self-determined emergence of the black community through the erotics of politics and reward only endogenous spousal choices of the mixed-race daughters. Both the revelation of interracial history and the erotics of politics have a deep significance of political critique when read in the historical context of the nadir of Jim Crow segregation and interracial violence.

There can be yet one more reading of the political import of melodramatic elements of the narratives. Analogously to the earlier texts, the two early-twentieth-century novels excessively use the melodramatic narrative devices of coincidences and *peripeteias*. Yet whereas Brown and Harper employ them primarily to highlight the improbability of black family reunion and to compensate for it with poetic justice, Chesnut's and Hopkins's use of negative coincidence in the novels' closures – both white suitors arrive a moment too late – underscores the improbability of interracial unions after emancipation. In the logic of their narratives, an interracial marriage at the beginning of the twentieth century seems less probable than a whole series of implausibly coincidental meetings of Rena and Tryon in *The House behind the Cedars* and a mother and child's survival of a jump into the Potomac and their eventual reunion in *Hagar's Daughter*. Finally, even though all texts analyzed here employ the conventional endings of death and marriage – rather than the open endings that Rachel DuPlessis labels “writing beyond the ending” (4) – their melodramatic excess denaturalizes the narrative closures. The endings either seem “too neat to be real,” artificial due to the surplus of coincidence (Cave 2), or superfluous as they follow earlier plot resolutions and frequently stop short of an ideal reconciliation. Thus, despite the seeming conventionality of mulatta melodrama closures, their artifice and excess suggest that it is impossible to tell the story of American interracial relations within the narrative options offered by the “cultural legacy [of] nineteenth-century life and letters” (DuPlessis 4).

Though the closures and marital choices of the protagonists further highlight the divergence from their mothers which I have tried to outline throughout the article, it must be underlined that the daughters' ethical development and resultant choices of race and husband stem precisely from the devotion to the matrilineal heritage. The narratives are largely driven by the daughters' desire to reunite with their mothers. As P. Gabrielle Foreman points out, analyzing *Iola Leroy*, it is central to the novel that Iola “stands by her mamma” (89). In mulatta melodrama, it is the white father's figure on whom self-indulgence, intemperance, irresponsibility, and shame connected with them are ultimately projected, which process is nevertheless an ample topic for another article.²¹

Notes

- 1 See M. Giulia Fabi's *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (7–28) and Ann du Cille's *The Coupling Convention* (17–26).
- 2 Brown himself produced several subsequent versions of the novel, each time slightly though meaningfully altering both the story and its characters' identities.
- 3 See also Hazel V. Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* (89–90) and Introduction to *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins* (xxxv); du Cille's *The Coupling*

Convention (8); Fabi's *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (5–6); and P. Gabrielle Foreman's *Activist Sentiments* (80–81).

- 4 For many decades, in the newly-written histories of African American literature, the turn-of-the-century appeal of the mulatta was regarded as a shameful chapter of self-loathing. The character was labeled as “tragic” and its dominance in the early African American fiction was indeed treated as a tragedy, as “white-faced minstrelsy” to use Houston Baker’s words (25). It was generally agreed that the texts were written under the influence of white America and the inauthentic light-skinned mulatta characters were designed to accommodate white readers’ tastes. Moreover nineteenth-century African American literary studies were dominated by the regime of authenticity, historicism, and literary realism; most scholars devoted their attention to slave narratives rather than fiction. Since the 1980s, however, a number of mostly black and mostly feminist critics have reclaimed the mulatta as subversive rather than helplessly tragic and have pointed to the significant political uses of the figure, notably including Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987), du Cille in *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, And Tradition In Black Women’s Fiction* (1993), Deborah McDowell in “*The Changing Same*”: *Black Women’s Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (1995), Claudia Tate in *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century* (1996), and more recently Foreman in *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women Writers* (2009) and Teresa C. Zackodnik in *Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (2010). The current scholarly vogue for the mulatta is intricately related to poststructuralist approaches to identity. The mulatta perfectly exemplifies Critical Race Theory, hybridity, intersectionality, Stanley Hall’s “new ethnicities,” and Butler’s performative “subversion of identity,” all based on the notion of a decentered, deessentialized subject. When read less theoretically and more in the context of recent social changes and the political climate following the election of Barack Obama as president, the mulatta is celebrated as an ideal symbol for an allegedly post-racial society. This more popular attention to the figure is analyzed by Susan Bost as a millennial “aesthetic fascination with mixed-race writers, sports heroes, and fashion models” (16). Apart from the rise of postmodern theories of identity and changes in American identity politics, a closely related shift in aesthetics has also contributed to the new critical attention devoted to mulatta melodrama. In the wake of camp, contingency of aesthetic value, and postmodernism’s revival of the aesthetics of coincidence (Dannenberg 172), their melodramatic poetics restored its aesthetic appeal, which was repeatedly denied by them in the 1980s and 1990s even in the most generous readings (Tate 8).
- 5 See Fisher (101) and Berlant (xii).
- 6 For an analogous definition of “paradox,” see also Roland Barthes’s “From Work to Text” (237).

- 7 Additionally, in subsequent versions, he changes the names of characters – and the eponymous name Clotel becomes the name of the daughter, originally called Mary in the 1853 novel.
- 8 For a discussion of forced travel see Susan Roberson’s *Antebellum American Women Writers and the Road* (98).
- 9 In the authorial note concluding *Iola Leroy*, Harper uses “the luxuriance of the Orient” to refer to the African American presence in American culture (282).
- 10 Hopkins’s narrator’s argumentation conditionally uses racist logic of race inferiority and argues that the intermixture of superior “blood,” “the best blood” can be the source of progress through interbreeding (Hopkins 1900, 87).
- 11 His gaze is interestingly charged with desire, which is non-normative in two different ways. First, he himself acknowledges that it is incestuous. Then, as the racial secret is revealed, we may interpret it as miscegenous, since at this moment Warwick identifies as white and Rowena as black. Thus the novel uses melodramatic excess to challenge the supposed opposition between incest – radical endogamy – and miscegenation – radical exogamy.
- 12 Industrialization and mechanization, especially as related to the North, are also the central theme of one of Chesnut’s most frequently anthologized short-stories, “The Goophered Grapevine.”
- 13 For an analysis of this theme in hegemonic “woman’s fiction,” see Baym’s *Woman’s Fiction* (40).
- 14 Moreover, through the name of Marie, the location of plantation in the Deep South, as well as Eugene’s and St. Clare’s humane but opportunistic attitude towards slavery, it is possible to see their marriage as a rewriting of the St. Clares from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. This intertextual echo may work in two ways. It potentially racializes the passive white lady, and, on the other hand, it taints Marie Leroy with the specter of Marie St. Clare’s passivity and egoism.
- 15 Susan Hays Bussey attributes much more self-determination to Hagar, yet she focuses almost only on her actions after the jump into the Potomac, whereas I want to highlight the parallels with the other novels and my primary interest lies in the courtship and short-lived rural bliss (299–313). Also, the focus on the first part of *Hagar’s Daughter* disproves Augusta Rohrbach’s claim that “The ideal of passivity and the romanticization of bondage is nowhere present in the magazine novels” (488).
- 16 In the 2003 edition, the original paragraph is divided into two.
- 17 As du Cille notices, her independence is all-encompassing; she is “unencumbered by child, man, or marital obligations” (28). In this ending, not only does the protagonist choose a black husband but he is dark-skinned, and she also heroically decides to embrace her blackness, which even further underlines her self-determined character.
- 18 For a reading of this ambiguity see Foreman’s *Activist Sentiments* (75, 84–86).

- 19 See Susan Gillman's *Blood Talk* (21–22) and Sean McCann's "'Bonds of Brotherhood'" (806).
- 20 Hopkins signifies on Brown's narrative even more explicitly when she introduces elements of captivity and cross-dressed rescue that recast both *Clotel*'s cross-dressing, preceding her arrest and death, as well as Mary's and George's successful cross-dressing and escape. Ultimately, Jewel is saved by her maid Venus cross-dressed as a boy. Yet an intertextual analysis of cross-dressing in the two novels requires much more space than could be provided for it in this article.
- 21 I have discussed this issue in "Failed Patriarchs, Familial Villains, and Slaves to Rum: White Masculinity on Trial in African American *Mulatta* Melodrama" (2016).

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