

HEAR THEM WRITE: ELLEN WATKINS HARPER & PAULINE HOPKINS

The Emergence of The New Woman of Color in the Late Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century saw a handful of middle class African American women writing for publication. They wrote fiction, poetry, autobiographies and biographies. At a time when even free African Americans were subjected to virulent racism in the north, and women held little standing in general, these women applied their strength and creativity to overcome tremendous barriers in answering an inner call to express themselves and their ideas publicly. In novel form they were able to expose another dimension of themselves that necessity and self preservation demanded be concealed from a dominant white society. A middle class educated African American in this country in this time had to fictionalize her own and other's real experience in a racist society or risk severe reprisal. Through their writings they gave an honest voice to the truth which was denied them in every other public forum. These strong independent women wrote for themselves, unlike their sisters who had to tailor their narratives of slavery with an eye to gaining the sympathetic ear of white anti-slavery audiences. The women I write about were the precursors of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker who would follow in the next century.

Ellen Watkins Harper and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins are outstanding examples of this intellectual breed of nineteenth century African American writer. They are of particular interest because they stand on either side of the generational divide created by the Civil War. Harper represents the antebellum woman's ideas and attitudes while Hopkins the ideas and attitudes of the post Civil War woman. Both authors, through their writings and political and social activism, shed light on the emergence of the New Woman of Color within the middle class African American community. How these women were able to prevail in the face of overt racist attitudes to create a sense of power and place in the late nineteenth century is the question I intend to address in my research.

The importance of studying the 1890s is paramount to understanding our country's transition to a modern culture which had its genesis in this period. The dictates of the Victorian age were being challenged in all quarters as we labored to give birth to a modern society. It was a period in which the printed word held great influence over public opinion and Harper and Hopkins both understood its persuasive value. Although their struggles are more than a century old now, Harper's and Hopkins' writings still provide insights applicable to modern women entering the twenty-first century.

Frances Watkins Harper (1825-1911) was the only child of free black parents in the slave state of Maryland. She became known as the "Bronze Muse," authoring short stories, serialized fiction, sentimental novels, political poetry, historical novel, essays and speeches, all of which provide a rich literary vein by which to trace her life. She was considered "the major black woman poet of the nineteenth century" and was involved in all the major social movements of the period. Her 1892 Iola Leroy was the second novel written by an African American woman in the 1800s and the 1859 The Two Offers was in all likelihood the first short story published by one. Women's rights were one of her major concerns and she focused much of her poetry on women.

Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins (1859-1930) was born in Portland, Maine, and grew up in Boston. She wrote biographical sketches, editorials, essays, fantasy fiction, historical romances, musical works, novellas, plays, serialized fiction and short stories. According to Contemporary Authors, Hopkins was one of the first writers to “introduce racial and social themes into the framework of traditional nineteenth-century romance novels.” Her major contribution was the 1900 Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South, which traces a family throughout the nineteenth century from slavery in the South to freedom in the North. Both authors were free women who offer different regional perspectives on the African American experience.

My decision to approach this project by studying both the lives and fictions of these authors is directly related to my reading of Glenda Gilmore’s Gender and Jim Crow. Her methodology of presenting biographical portraits of popular literature authors to expose their underlying personal motivation was impressive. In this way Gilmore emphasized the power of the printed word in the nineteenth century and how it was manipulated to gain white middle class acceptance of gender and race constructs. I believe training the same lens on the life and fiction of these educated middle class African-American authors in the 1800s will provide an equally informative way of interpreting the forces which shaped them and had a profound influence on their audience.

As a first step, I will research the formation of their personal lives and explore their writings within the period in which they lived. My plan is to do a close reading of each woman’s body of written work, examining their fictional output against the background of the personal details of their lives gleaned from biographies, letters and diaries. I will investigate how the historical changes taking place socially, politically and economically actually played out in their lives and how this was translated into fiction. At the center of my project will be an exploration of the extent that prevailing stereotypes of African Americans were confronted in their writings as well as social and moral concerns. I will research scholarly criticism to determine what effect it had on contemporary readers. I also will ascertain how these novels were received by white society and if they were read by this audience. In following this plan, I expect to be able to extrapolate the underlying meaning of the fiction to the lives of ordinary African American women of their class. Also I will explore how this turning point in our country’s history impacted the emergence of the New Woman of Color and whether it is discernible in the author’s writings.

Professor Alice Fahs of the History Department is my main advisor on this project and I am being assisted by Joan Ariel, Research Librarian for History and Women’s Studies, both of whom I have met with independently and will continue to do so throughout my research. I have met with Professor John C. Rowe of the English and Comparative Literature Department whose expertise is in African American Literature. He generously has offered numerous suggestions as well as agreeing to consult with me as my research progresses.

I have started the initial research utilizing the New York Public Library’s online website of The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers which provided full text copies of Frances Watkins Harper’s novel Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted originally published in 1893 and Pauline Hopkins’ novel Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South originally published in 1900.

In addition I have secured detailed biographical material through the Literature Resource Center website as well as from Harlem Renaissance and Beyond. I have a complete reference list of primary and secondary sources for each author from Black American Women Novelists: An Annotated Bibliography by Craig Werner and Casper Leroy Jordan's A Bibliographical Guide to African American Women Writers. I plan to use UCI's online Nineteenth Century Masterfile in locating pertinent books, newspapers and periodicals from that time period. An additional source of information will come from American Women's History: A Research Guide: Digital Collections of Primary

Sources

Some of the books I am particularly interested in for this research project include Black Women Intellectuals by Carol Allen, which contains an essay on Pauline Hopkins; The Work of the Afro-American Woman by Mrs. N. F. Mossell published in 1894 and reprinted by The Schomburg Library. I am currently reading the African-American literary critic and author Hazel Carby's Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (1987).

I am ascertaining what doctoral theses may provide further insights into my project. I intend to follow up additional research at UCLA, The Los Angeles Public Library, The Huntington Library, other relevant local public libraries, and use the inter-library loan system for out of state libraries in the author's home cities. At this point in my research I assume the personal letters to and from these authors, diaries, journals and any archival oral histories will provide the greatest research challenge. It is conceivable that I may visit one or two of the sites such as New York City, Boston, Massachusetts, or Maryland during the winter hiatus. This, of course, would depend on the importance of my archival findings and the financial feasibility of doing so.

ITEMIZED BUDGET

Photocopies (including rare books)	\$200.00
Microfilm copies	30.00
Inkjet cartridge	60.00
Computer Paper	20.00
Highlighters, File Folders, Index Cards, Binders & Dividers	35.00
End Notes Computer Program for Bibliography	110.00
Long Distance Phone Charges	30.00
Local Phone & postage	20.00
Local Travel	

4 trips to UCLA & LA Public Library
110 miles round-trip x 4 = 440 mi
440 mi x \$.365 70.66

1 trip Huntington Library Pasadena
130 miles round-trip
130 mi x \$.365 47.45

TOTAL \$ 623.11

*Possibility of research trip to East Coast not included as I'm not certain as yet whether I can obtain all the necessary material through UCI, ILL and other California sources or if I will have to travel east to complete my research at the Schomburg Library in New York. My estimate for this trip is \$400 which includes airfare.

RESEARCH TIMELINE

Fall Quarter:

Meet with Professor Alice Fahs on weekly basis to review progress
Meet with History Librarian Joan Ariel as needed
Consult with Professor John C. Howe on African-American literature
Continue researching sources on general historical background
Continue researching biographical material on Hopkins and Harper
Research authors' writings (primary sources)
Research secondary sources regarding authors from bibliographies
Continue History 190 class with Prof. Fahs on the 1890s including
general reading on the period.

Winter Break

Analysis of Fall quarter research
Research trip to East Coast for archival material (TBD)

Winter Quarter

History 192 class with Professor Fahs (The 1890s)
Outline Research Paper to date
Additional Research as required
Continue to meet with Professor Fahs on Weekly Basis
Consult with Professor Howe
Analysis of Fall and Winter Research
Write First Draft of Paper

Spring Quarter

Continue to meet with Professor Fahs
Consult with Professor Howe re first draft
Analysis of all material
Refine 1st Draft
Additional Research if needed
Write Final Draft
Prepare for Presentation at UROP Symposium
Present Paper at UROP Symposium