

*Black American
Women's Writing
A Quilt of Many Colours*

Eva Lennox Birch



HARVESTER
WHEATSHEAF

New York London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore

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Women's Writing***
A Quilt of Many Colours

In memory of my mother, Florence Gertrude Lennox,
who made everything possible

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Introduction

A woman wrote a book on women writers, and she has an apology in the preface in which she explains why the book doesn't include any black women writers. I think that's dishonest scholarship. I may be wrong but I think so, and I took the trouble to tell her that. I feel perfectly qualified to discuss Emily Dickinson, anybody for that matter, because I assume what Jane Austen and all those people have to say has something to do with life and being human in the world. (Toni Morrison)¹

'Dishonest scholarship' aptly describes any exclusion of books by black writers on literature courses in institutions of learning that cater for a predominantly white population, and it applies with equal force to those white critics who avoid offering critical comments on that work. Morrison's words stand as my own answer to those who interpret any examination of the writing of black women by white women, as an insidious attempt at appropriation. If Morrison defends the right of a black American to study and enjoy Austen and Shakespeare on the grounds that any literature worth reading has something to say to us all about being human, then a conscious avoidance by whites of the work of black writers is indefensible. It also leaves the white critic vulnerable to the accusation that avoidance is simply a deliberate ignoring, identified by Barbara Smith in her challenging essay 'Towards a black feminist criticism'² as a product of racism. Smith equates white avoidance of black concerns with blindness 'to the implications of any womanhood that is not white womanhood' and challenges 'ostensible feminists' and 'acknowledged lesbians' to 'Struggle with the deep racism in themselves that is the source of their blindness' (p. 3). In that same essay Smith castigates Elaine Showalter for her failure to mention any black or third world

writer in her essay for *Signs* in 1975.³ Yet almost twenty years on in her work tracing tradition and change in American women's writing, Showalter includes both Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker as significant participants in that process.⁴ Such an inclusion is a measure of the recognition of the contribution made by black women writers to the culture of America, but it also marks a shift in the perspective from which literature is viewed in academia. Showalter's own repositioning stems from her engagement with the constant challenge to the canon offered by white and black feminists, and is contained in her questioning of whether 'in the multi-cultural reality of the present we can continue to assume a monolithic national identity' (p. 5). In an America where many inhabitants do not have English as their first language, or in a Great Britain wherein exist thriving communities of Asian and West Indian citizens, the challenge to a notion of an exclusive white male Eurocentric cultural dominance cannot go ignored.

The press for audience of the hitherto muted voices of women, black and white, has produced an ongoing, sometimes vituperative, debate concerning the ways in which their writings should be approached. In discussion of white women's writing, white women critics have found tools of analysis in feminist theory, whether it be from the disparate locations of the theoretical positions of Michèle Barrett⁵ or Hélène Cixous,⁶ with which they felt comfortable. When it comes to an approach to the work of black women, they have experienced a deep unease. Ever conscious of the accusation of 'cultural imperialism' that was levelled by Smith at Showalter, white women teachers have been only too aware of the truth of Smith's observation that 'When white women look at black women's works they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics'.⁷ This is a self-evident truth but will only become an impassable barrier to understanding if the *only* way of looking at that work is from the viewpoint of race. It would be facile and dangerous, however, to suggest that because the writers and critics are women, communication is effected without effort or is uncomplicated by the real experience of race and class. Showalter in *Sister's Choice* warns against the dangers of reductivism inherent in any assumption of a monolithic national identity which ignores these factors in the production or the reading of literature. She also alerts us to the danger of assuming that all writings by women have a universal sameness. To embrace such a position is to move towards an over-simplified

acceptance of an essentialism based on theories of woman's biological and psychological constitution which are under constant interrogation by women in literary, medical and psychological discourse. My own position is akin to Showalter's in that, like her, I believe that all writing must be seen and approached as the product of a particular historical conjuncture within a particular national context. Such an approach is possible only if we begin by expecting difference and will be productive only if we do not allow the difference to produce and perpetuate division.

So what is my own subject position when I approach the writing of black American women as reader and teacher? I am white, female and, by virtue of education and occupation though not family origins, now regarded as 'middle class'. I am quite definitely middle-aged. I have spent my working life teaching literature to children and adults who have approached that study with a variety of motives and degrees of commitment. In my teaching at the Metropolitan University of Manchester where my students have *chosen* to follow particular courses, there is a special pleasure in designing programmes of study that are negotiated between staff and students. Over the last decade students and teachers have shared an enthusiasm for the study, discussion and examination of an increasing body of texts by black women writers. Students, male and female, welcome the opportunity to discuss texts they themselves have discovered in bookstores, and that have hitherto remained outside the prescribed male, white, literary canon. My own teaching is focused on two areas: one is the teaching of the American novel, in which one term is devoted entirely to the teaching of black American literature, including the works of Zora Neale Hurston; the other is women's writing over the last two centuries, where texts from Europe and America are studied. It can be argued that it is a sad reflection of our society's attitude towards race and gender that either of these expressions of experience have to be singled out for special study. On the other hand, perhaps their value can best be assessed as steps towards recognising and hopefully eradicating any oppression which is founded on the rejection of difference, for although Manchester has a large black population, black students are not fully represented in our higher education institutions. New access courses are hopefully, if slowly, correcting this underrepresentation in the student body, and the recent appointment of two black teachers in the School of English at my own institution promises radical alteration in the content and the thrust of some courses.

In the light of conditions that would seem unpropitious for extensive engagement with the work of women from another culture, we must ask *why* do students ask for books by black American writers to be included, and why do we as white teachers feel the need to teach these? I think the obvious answer to the first question is that they enjoy them as literature, but there are other, more profound reasons. In answer to the second question, honest scholarship provides another easy response. In any sustained study of the American novel it would be ludicrous to neglect examination of the work of black women writers who have received acclaim and whose work commands so much interest outside America. To exclude such works because they have emerged from a different culture in which the writers' colour is significant, is inherently a racist exclusion. Teachers of literature have both opportunity and responsibility to facilitate the building of racial bridges by joining students in serious reading of writers whose cultural and historical roots are significantly different to those of white British and white American writers. This is particularly pressing in Britain, where our need is to give positive support to the development of a truly multi-racial society in which the term 'ghetto' should have no place.

'Ghettoism' is the inevitable product of a refusal to accept and examine difference, which exacerbates suspicion and mistrust of that difference. Hence white teachers should be encouraged to include black writing on their literature courses at all levels in the education process. The important consideration to bear in mind, however, is that literature that has been shaped by cultural forces that differ from our own, must not then be judged by critical criteria that are themselves sexist or racist. Any approach to black American women's writing demands an awareness of the historical and cultural forces that shaped it, and any criticism should be, in my opinion, from a feminist standpoint. Yet I am aware that even this statement is not uncontentious. Because I am not black I cannot have complete identification with the body of black feminist critics such as Barbara Christian or Barbara Smith who have successfully encouraged the development of black feminist theory. Nor can I pretend that real divisions have not arisen within the feminist movement because of the perceived racism of white members. One has only to read bell hooks' impassioned account of racism and feminism in American society in *Ain't I a Woman*⁸ to have any idealistic notion of automatic sisterhood between black and white women dismissed. She reminds

us that 'sisterhood cannot be forged by the mere saying of words' (p. 157) and stresses that the onus for real change lies with the individual whose self-examination will reveal that 'labelling ourselves feminists does not change the fact that we must consciously work to rid ourselves of the legacy of negative socialisation'. Here hooks was speaking specifically of American women but her comment could be applied with equal veracity to women in British society, who have inherited the same legacy of 'negative socialisation' within patriarchal, capitalist structures. This perhaps provides a valid starting-point for a feminist approach to black American women's writing.

Just as there is productive debate amongst feminists about the politics of their movement, so the whole field of feminist literary critical theory teems with approaches that compete for our attention. Some theorists would have us ground our examination of women's literature on the biological determinant of sex, and whilst agreeing that women have been undervalued in patriarchal societies both as writers and as individuals, would still urge that we evaluate the creativity of women artists as examples of this 'natural' difference. We have seen, however, that acceptance of 'essentialism' simply perpetuates notions of female inferiority. As Newton and Rosenfelt argue in their introduction to *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*,⁹ this essentialism 'subsumes women into the sisterly category of "woman" despite real differences of race, culture, class and historical condition, or posits women's nurturing and relational qualities as in themselves a counter to male domination' (p. xvii). Other theorists would have us see racial difference as the single platform from which to evaluate the writing of women from different cultures. Yet the whole concept of racial difference in a multi-cultural society is problematic, especially as interbreeding has blurred the supposed difference between the races. In the field of black American writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, exemplified in Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Nella Larsen's *Passing* and *Quicksand*, this problem was embodied in the 'tragic mulatto' who was to be a dominant preoccupation of black writers for a few decades. Other Marxist feminist critics might emphasise the economic circumstances of production and consumption as paramount considerations in our approach to women's writing. Yet others direct our attention to the 'negative socialisation' of women as the result of gender ideology, and it is this position in particular that I find offers most productive access to literature written by women. As Foucault argues, gender is a social

construct designed to limit the range of life choices available to humankind for the convenient operation of social institutions. This has resulted in the inscription and imposition of immutable gender positions in Western society. The position of women as the 'other' and 'inferior', as Simone de Beauvoir defined it, as well as the imposition of compulsory heterosexuality resultant from this ideology of gender, are responsible for that 'negative socialisation' which all women share.

The clearest view of the ways in which sexuality, class, race and gender have become encoded in social institutions in America and Great Britain, is to have a vantage point that is positioned outside, in the position of the 'other', which is where feminist criticism begins. Jonathon Culler in his essay 'The power of division' in *The Difference Within: Feminism and critical theory*¹⁰ poses the question: 'Is feminist criticism the study of women writers as a separate activity, or is it a perspective on literature of all sorts, and other discourses as well?' (p. 150). I would argue that it is too limiting to see it only as a function of a separatist activity; a feminist critical perspective is not limited in application only to the texts of women, and is equally useful as a means of opening up male texts. It also functions most productively in the opportunities it provides for the deconstruction of other discourses as well as the literary. Like Culler I see the strength and the dynamics of a feminist critical approach resting on the very diversity of perspectives that it embraces. Some critics devoted to a single critical approach would suggest that a divided mind is no mind; I would suggest that only division allows for growth, and that a lack of plurality, or the facility to recognise the benefits of plurality, are phallogentric and authoritarian. Nevertheless from the ferment of opinion and the variety of philosophical bases on which such criticism rests, a consensus can be found concerning the fundamental aims of feminist criticism. These can be identified as the need to interrogate the literary canon; the need to identify a tradition in the writing produced by women; and the need to investigate the possible distinctiveness of women's expression. Taking these as guidelines enables teachers and students alike to analyse *why* they are so drawn to the writing of black American women.

Upon analysis of questionnaires, designed to gauge student response to the content of courses within the Department of English in which I teach, it emerges that the areas with which greatest engagement is professed by the majority of students are those outside the white, male canon. This is partly explained by the preponderance

of female over male students in the degree programmes for which the English section is responsible within the Humanities faculty. However, further questioning elicits particularly eager responses to the writing of black women, sometimes on the grounds that they are 'different' and therefore interesting, but most usually because the women students feel that they are engaging with texts that have something to say to them about being female, irrespective of the racial and national divide between the writers and the readers. My experience of teaching this literature has revealed that women readers feel nearer in spirit to the works of black women writers, whose experiences are of our time, than they are to the 'greats' of the white, male canon. Perhaps one reason for this is that black women writers speak of and from a position of marginalisation that in itself is recognisable to women of any colour. The examination of racial and sexual oppression in their writing inevitably starts with, but crosses the bounds of race, and emphasises the universality of women's sense of the constraints with which a socially constructed gender position burdens them.

The focus of attention in the writing by black women is not single. Indeed, Barbara Christian points to this specifically in her essay 'Trajectories of self-definition'¹¹ in which she says:

For what Afro-American women have been permitted to express, in fact to contemplate, as part of the self, is grossly affected by other issues. The development of Afro-American women's fiction is, in many instances, a mirror image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in this country. (p. 234)

The personal struggle of Afro-American women against marginalisation in America, channelled into establishing for themselves a self-definition in which their beauty, strength and individuality is recognised, is not just one of race, but of gender too. In examining racial prejudice black women writers expose the cultural constraints of class, gender and religion with which white women can also identify. White women cannot, as Barbara Smith points out, share the experiential reality of white racism suffered by black women, but by being exposed to a literature expressing that reality, they can move towards an understanding of their own culturally shaped prejudice, confront their own fear of difference, and realise that there is more that joins black and white women than should ever keep them apart.

One area in which both black and white women writers experienced

exclusion, though admittedly to a different degree and on different grounds, was the right to a place in the literary canon. Because of their unique historical roots as enslaved people in American society, black women were excluded much more firmly from engagement in discourse than were their white sisters. Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*¹² testifies to the white, male domination of the literary canon throughout most of her formal education, which kept her ignorant of her own black literary heritage. Paul Lauter's research into the production and perpetuation of the American canon led him to the conclusion that:

By the end of the 1950s, one could study American literature and read no work by a black writer, few works by women except Emily Dickinson and perhaps Marianne Moore and Katherine Anne Porter, and no work about the lives or experiences of working-class people. (p. 23)¹³

This echoes my own experience as an undergraduate in the mid-1950s in England. Taking an Honours degree in English at an all-women's college of London University, I was never *once* offered the work of a woman as part of the canon (except the meditations of a medieval nun written in Anglo-Saxon). No woman novelist was studied as the course content did not include the novel, presumably in the belief that it was a 'bastard' production. I did not hear of Aphra Behn for many years.

If, as Paul Lauter sums up in the above-quoted essay, the canon is 'A means by which culture validates social power', it follows that in a social organisation in which women are held to be subordinate to men, the culture validated by that society will be a male construct. Lauter goes on to identify the forces which shaped the American canon as political in aim: to create a 'usable' past and to lay claim to an American literary tradition which was not merely a copy of the European. In this construction women in general and blacks in particular were excluded. This was despite the obvious fact that the only indigenous American expression – apart from the American Indian oral culture – free from the desire to ape a European culture, came from the African people brought to America as slaves, and which is inscribed in their folklore, songs and inventive use of the English language. Yet their culture was silenced, ignored and devalued. In her discussion of women's writing in the American tradition, Showalter asks the question: 'Does a muted culture have a literature

of its own, or must it always revise the conventions of the dominant?'¹⁴ The answer is not simple, for although black women writers have displayed remarkable ingenuity in their re-visioning and re-working of established literary forms, they are still working within the parameters dictated by those forms. They have nevertheless a literature of their own in the sense that they have constantly addressed issues of which only they, as black women, had any knowledge. In their challenging of the negative stereotypical presentation of black men and women found – if they are there at all – in the writing of white writers, they are engaging in debate with canonical assumptions. They have entered this debate after centuries of struggle to be recognised as full members of American society, during which time social forces were determined to silence them.

In the very act of writing at all, black women writers have interrogated the validity of the American canon in a more positive way than perhaps white European women can be said to have questioned theirs. In her essay *A Room of One's Own*,¹⁵ published in 1929 (when Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen were achieving published success), Virginia Woolf identifies British women's lack of education and their economic dependence on men as significant reasons for their non-representation in the English canon. She also defines white women writers as suffering the constraints imposed by their having only male language, male sentences at their disposal. She has nothing to say about the language of black women writers whose previous exclusion from literary discourse on the grounds of race as well as economic impoverishment, had done nothing to dull the vitality of their expression, or their rendering of experience. Of course, as the wife of Leonard Woolf and the daughter of Lesley Stephens and a member of the Bloomsbury literati, Virginia Woolf was writing from within a privileged, intellectually stimulating and – compared to most of her compatriots – an economically sound circle, and we cannot castigate her for the accident of birth. However, although Woolf urges women to 'write as a woman', one suspects that she took for granted that this writing would still be in the standard English which she associated with literary production. Perhaps what she could not at that time envisage was a woman's writing, such as that of the black American woman, which owed its lyrical power to its use of the oral heritage of its author's people.

Writing within a dominant white male culture, black women writers have not only entered with the richness of their own linguistic

heritage, but as the research of many black and white scholars has increasingly shown, have developed a literary tradition of their own. In the discussion of the work of Jean Toomer and Toni Morrison, in his essay 'When Lindbergh slept with Bessie Smith',¹⁶ Houston A. Baker Jr concludes that 'What is compelling about comparison of the two works is that Morrison would, indeed, seem to emanate from a tradition different from that of Wright and Ellison' (p. 94). The result is a literary tradition that is not only black, but also distinctively female, characterised by a celebratory embracing of the writer's African cultural heritage, and a determined retrieval of their mothers' stifled creativity. They speak and write out of themselves, practising, without an avowed awareness of it, the process described by Hélène Cixous in 'The laugh of the Medusa' (see note 6) as necessary if women are to 'write as woman':

If a woman has always functioned 'within' the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this 'within', to explode it, turn it round, and seize it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of it. (p. 257)

I believe that in the writing of black women we do see this dislocation of the 'within' because they were positioned so firmly on the outside of that 'within'. As such, although they undoubtedly speak as, for and to black women, they also speak much more clearly to white women than do some white writers. What we find in their writing is what Marjorie Pryse describes as 'The strategies by which individual women overcame every conceivable obstacle to personal evolution and self-expression'.¹⁷ Victims of 'negative conditioning', their writing reveals a complete rejection of this process to which all women have been subjected. In questioning the fictional stereotyping of black women, they question all such stereotyping, and in celebrating their own language they challenge the hegemony of white male language. In this developing tradition they have also freed themselves from many novelistic and literary conventions, allowing space to experiment with form, narrative time and theories of genre. Above all, their writing challenges the received orthodoxy of the dominant culture, in which are inscribed those ideas on race, gender, class and religion on which oppression is built.

This book is not offered as, nor is it capable of being, a comprehensive survey of black women's writing in America. What I hope to do is to examine certain distinctive elements in early black writing and oral culture, such as spirituality, political awareness, community, creativity and the effects of slavery, which have been identified by black scholars as distinctive determinants in the creation of a specifically black women's literary tradition. These elements, as American black scholars have demonstrated, are the products of particular social, political and historical circumstances, which white students have to recognise in their approach to black writing. I then intend to discuss from a feminist critical viewpoint a few writers whose work I believe has developed these cultural strands in a particularly interesting way. Because of the particular focus of my argument, many favourite writers have had to be excluded and those examined are offered as exemplars of the richness of the literary tradition of black American women writers. To avoid diffusion I have also limited my focus to black women as writers of prose, although some of those chosen have also reputations as poets.

I hope to demonstrate that the tradition under discussion was consolidated to a great extent in the published work of Zora Neale Hurston, whose research and writing is now accessible, and to whom later twentieth-century black women writers frequently acknowledge a respect and debt. The other writers have been selected because I judge them to have built strongly upon particular foundation-stones in Hurston's work. Audre Lorde and Paule Marshall I consider as exemplifying and celebrating the variety and difference in black women which Hurston was at pains to point out; Maya Angelou as revealing the beauty, power and inspirational force of autobiography; Toni Morrison as a writer who 'puts it all together' in novels which emphasise community and a cleaving to ancestral history as the path to racial – and human – health; Alice Walker as exploring a female spirituality born of political involvement. All, I think, are positive and optimistic writers. Their protest against racial and sexual division is not directed by hatred, but by a loving desire for an holistic society that can accommodate all differences.

I take my subtitle from the quilt as a symbol of the co-operative creativity celebrated in so much of the writing by black women. Their literary tradition has indeed bright and startling flashes of colour and texture provided by the work of particular writers, but it is not a tradition built simply of stars. It is one that celebrates black

womanhood and pays homage to the foremothers whose creativity has gone unsung. In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*¹⁸ Lily Bart experienced 'an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the other side where the threads are knotted and the loose ends hung' (p. 279). Lily did not find this a pleasant experience because this location emphasised her exclusion from the New York society for which she had been 'negatively conditioned' to belong. In the quilting together of the tradition of black women writers, their ancestors are the enabling 'threads knotted behind the loose ends'. They are not hidden, however, but recognised for the part they played.

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Pioneering voices

It is beyond my present competence and scope to offer anything other than a selective sampling of particular modes of black address from the nineteenth century. Those chosen have been identified by black critics as the foundation stones on which a black American women's literary tradition was built, and consist of slave narratives, spiritual autobiographies, autobiographical as well as sentimental novels, and oral culture. None of these cultural manifestations was the preserve of females alone, but subsequent women writers have used them differently from men.

Any white reader who approaches black American literature must start by recognising that the experiential reality described is a unique one. Black roots in American history were planted in institutionalised slavery. To this fact white readers of black writers must constantly return, for it is the source of the gulf which lies between our history as white imperialists, and theirs as the oppressed. Individual voices from slavery, in the form of slave narratives, unite in clear testament to the inhumanity of enslavement. Their importance lies in the fact that they express the only area of a slave's life over which the slave could exercise control: her thoughts and feelings. Consequently the autobiographical statement in black literature has acquired such significance for critics that Selwyn R. Cudjoe describes it as 'the quintessential literary genre',¹ allowing insight into the psyche of the black American in slavery. The black scholar Stephen Butterfield also identifies slave narratives as the building bricks of black American literature:

And little by little, book by book, they construct the framework of a black American literature. Autobiography in their hands becomes so powerful, so convincing a testimony to human resource, intelligence,

endurance, love in the face of tyranny, that, in a sense, it sets the tone for most subsequent black American writing.²

Those qualities of resourcefulness, intelligence, love and endurance described by Butterfield, survive and are celebrated still in the writing of black American women today, echoing the thoughts and struggles of their ancestors.

There has been an endless procession of books about slavery, though few written by slaves, which is why the authentic voices of the slave narratives demand our attention. Some of these accounts were collected in slave times at the prompting of active Abolitionists who used them as evidence in their struggle to rid the South of slavery, and the circumstances of their production mean that they speak of collective physical and emotional suffering. Almost three-quarters of a century after Abolition had been achieved, in the 1920s and 1930s, over two thousand former slaves were interviewed, whose oral statements were transcribed by willing researchers.³ These accounts remained largely unpublished until the 1960s, when the Second Black Renaissance in art, writing and music coincided with the Civil Rights Movement. Previous historians had expressed doubt about the historical accuracy of recollections of people considered too old to remember reliably. Now that we have access to these accounts of lives spent in disparate geographical locations in the South, an undeniable common truth emerges about the conditions endured. Particularly poignant are the shared concerns and anguish of the female slaves who, although ignored by history, were not silent and whose oral accounts of their enslaved condition, as Marjorie Pryse suggests, 'enlarge our conventional assumptions about the nature and function of literary tradition', in that they force us to recognise the oral as an integral part of that tradition.⁴ These narratives record how the female slave had to endure the same harsh physical working conditions as her male counterpart, as well as those accorded to her because of her sex. Her additional burdens were sexual exploitation – which could mean rape – and the demands of child-bearing. A reading of these accounts dispels any doubt that black women were vulnerable to physical, sexual and emotional abuse at any time from their white owners. Regarded by the worst of the owners as livestock, some were bred for sex and sale, put to work as children, and lived lives of unremitting toil.

Black women were considered to be 'naturally' sexually available, more passionate than white women, more willing to have sexual

intercourse. With such an opinion of their sexuality, it is not surprising that the rape of a black woman by a white man was not considered a crime. The vulnerability of female slaves to sexual ambush and exploitation is that which marks off their experience as being different to that of the men. It also marked them off from white women who were the untouchable wives and mothers of the white owners. The definition of the black woman in terms of rampant sexuality and the denial of that same sexuality to the white women, did nothing to foster sisterly bonds between them. As Harriet Jacobs shows in her autobiographical account *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,⁵ such a distinction added further trials to the already harassed slave girl. Not only did Jacobs have to endure constant sexual attacks from her master Flint, but she had to contend with the vicious jealousy of his wife. The 'jealous mistress' became a vindictive and relentless persecutor who vented her own sense of sexual inadequacy and marital betrayal on the defenceless object of her husband's lusts. Harriet Jacobs explains her taking of a white lover to free herself from Flint's attentions, but even the birth of her children did nothing to alleviate her situation. Many slave narratives attest to the vehemence of the attacks made upon black women by white mistresses driven to desperation on the birth of their slaves' half-white children, whose arrival faced them with the unpalatable fact that their own husbands and sons had fathered them. The slave narratives also reveal that maternal bonding could be emotionally catastrophic for women whose children could be sold away from them, with no account taken of the parent's or child's anguish. Harriet Beecher Stowe's stand against this in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*⁶ is conveyed in a narrative consisting of 'mother' stories, in which the inevitable evil of separation of mother from child is castigated as being even more destructive than physical violence. The enslaved mother was denied what nineteenth-century domestic ideology deemed to be the most sacred duty of the white mother: that of providing constant physical care and moral guidance to her children. Yet these black women survived, quickly learning strategies for survival for themselves and their children. Moreover, the enforced sundering of maternal ties intensified the bonding, particularly between mothers and daughters, through whom family history is traditionally passed on. Over a century after Abolition Toni Morrison re-creates the intensity of a slave mother's maternal feelings in her flight for freedom, and her determination to have her

own children out of bondage, in her novel *Beloved*, which is a fictive rendition of a history found in the slave narratives.

Actual slave narratives are testaments describing appalling physical and emotional cruelty, and as such are addressed to the white oppressors. They stand as indictments of an horrendous evil and detail both resistance and reaction to that evil. In them, women record their abuse, men their anger and frustration at their own impotence to change the situation. In his work on black autobiography, Butterfield identifies the voice of the 'mass' in these narratives as dominant:

[The black autobiographer] is not an individual with a private career, but a soldier in a long, historic march towards Canaan. The self is conceived as a member of an oppressed social group, with ties and responsibilities to the other members.⁷

Butterfield traces the links between the slave narratives and twentieth-century black autobiographers, and in his analysis of the autobiographical voices of male writers this connection is affirmed, but he admits that the female autobiographer, exemplified in Maya Angelou, was writing out of a different, female tradition in autobiographical statement. Many black male slave narratives, like that of Frederick Douglass⁸ who was born in slavery in 1818 and who rose to prominence to become a federal administrator, were inspirational 'success stories', written as protest, accusation, defiance and intention: to shake dominant white society into effecting social change. The informing impulse in these is social rather than personal. The black woman, perhaps reflecting the position of women in the white, patriarchal society from which she was excluded, ponders the personal, expresses the intimate, salvages the emotional highs and lows of female experience. Even in those narratives written by women at the instigation of Abolitionists there is an insistent demand for self-fulfilment, in their expressed desire for work that would provide economic independence. The perceived need for self-definition through work is as strong in these narratives as is the cry from Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*.⁹ This novel challenges and questions the ideology of gender in the West which had rendered the middle-class white British woman impotent and often redundant within her society. The demand of such white women was for an education and economic independence which would enable them to escape from the confines of the domestic sphere. How more challenging to this

ideology was the very existence of enslaved women who could demand nothing, and for whom 'escape' meant something very different. For black women the idea of female exclusion in the supposed safety of the domestic sphere was an unimagined luxury. The narratives they have left constantly interrogate those notions of gender which, although inscribed in the social institutions of British and American society, were applicable only to white women. Sojourner Truth summed this up in her gesture at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 when, addressing a racially mixed audience, she bared her breast and asked 'Ain't I a woman?' Clearly Sojourner Truth was demanding an examination of the construction of gender in American society, and asking why it excluded black women. Yet despite their perceived 'inferiority' to white women, what emerges from a reading of these narratives is a refusal of the female slave to accept victim status. Many detail attempts to escape, to find work as free women, and to buy relatives out of bondage.

That the slave narratives are at the root of much of the black writing which followed, as protest and witness to black status in America, cannot be denied. However, not all blacks were slaves. Some had been freed, some had bought freedom, some had escaped. As early as the 1830s in Boston and Philadelphia black women were forming their own literary societies, thus giving opportunity and encouragement to those amongst their number who wanted to write. That some black women *could* write and manipulate the English language more skilfully than could many whites had already been shown in the eighteenth century in the writing of Phyllis Wheatley, whose devotional poetry disproved the white assumption that the blacks were incapable of ever aspiring to the same level of literacy as their masters. Other challenges to notions of white intellectual and moral supremacy came in the shape of the spiritual autobiographies, the earliest of which pre-date the fugitive slave narratives by some fifty years. This is not surprising in the light of the enforced illiteracy of the slave, and the access to literacy of free blacks. The slave narratives express in particular the narrators' awareness of a physical self, the spiritual autobiographies an awareness of the spiritual self. William L. Andrews, in his introduction to three nineteenth-century spiritual autobiographies by women, comments that 'Like the fugitive slave narrator, the black spiritual autobiographer traced his or her freedom back to the acquisition of some sort of saving knowledge and to an awakening from within'.¹⁰

Of the women whose autobiographies are edited by Andrews, Jarena Lee (born in 1783) and Zilpha Elaw (born in 1790) were the daughters of free parents, whilst Julia Foote (born in 1823) was the child of former slaves who had bought freedom. Their autobiographies express a common demand for individual female self-hood, through spirituality. This is still extant, and is a predominant concern expressed in the writing of Alice Walker today, although she rejects Christianity as a channel for that spirituality. Paradoxically, although Elaw, Lee and Foote demanded a freedom to preach a religion now depicted by their twentieth-century literary descendants as a factor in women's oppression, their demands can be recognised as an expression of a 'womanism' with which Walker could not argue.

In her excellent essay on 'Adding Color and Contour to Early American Self-Portraits; Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women'¹¹ Frances Smith Foster argues that the life stories by Afro-American women in the nineteenth century 'present protagonists who transcend the images of the victimised slave woman and the home-bound True Woman' (p. 35). They present themselves as pioneers in the struggle of the black woman for self-definition and independence. It is interesting to examine the personal histories of Lee, Elaw and Foote in the light of this comment. All three found voice through their commitment to the Christian religion, and an organisation which because of its hierarchical and patriarchal structure seemed an unlikely breeding-ground for female independence. Yet the black African Methodist Episcopal church to which they belonged had allowed, as did the slave narratives, an expression of group humanity, and had provided opportunity for cohesion amongst the blacks. In *Long Black Song*,¹² Houston A. Baker argues convincingly that the violent disruption of the Africans' identity in slavery had been exacerbated by their enforced abandonment of native gods. Christianity was imposed upon them. When the first abducted Africans were landed in the Americas as slaves in 1619, the English Church was eager to convert them to Christianity, and slave baptismal records go back as far as 1641, although the African slaves were initially loath to embrace the religion of their oppressors. Evangelicising of slaves began in earnest in the early eighteenth century through the agency of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, newly formed in London. Such efforts were not always welcomed by the Southern whites, who feared the opportunity provided by communal worship for possible slave insurrections. So

great was the concern of some States that they enacted measures to prevent the gathering together of slaves on the Sabbath. What they could not legislate against, however, was the great tide of non-conformist religious movements that swept through the colonies in the 1730s, a time now referred to as 'The Great Awakening', to which blacks as well as whites responded. By 1775 blacks comprised nearly one-quarter of the colonial population, and had been recruited in large numbers to the Baptist Church.

This alien religion offered Africans of disparate tribal origin a common focus. Victims of a diaspora, they were quick to embrace a religion which promised liberation – albeit only in a spiritual sense – personal redemption, and eventual retribution for their oppressors. They were particularly attracted to Old Testament stories where they were able to find identity with the enslaved Israelites. Yet whilst they accepted the Christian message, they were forced to worship in a church where physical segregation of blacks from whites emphasised their supposed inferiority. They were not allowed to sit in the body of the church, nor to take Communion with white worshippers. There was an obvious contradiction in a church which preached that humankind was made in God's image, yet was unable to conceive of a humankind that was not white. Some whites justified enslavement as a natural consequence of innate racial inferiority, or as 'a punishment resulting from sin or a natural defect of the soul'.¹³ Some even argued that blacks had no souls. Jarena Lee found difficulty in convincing her employer of her religiosity until a time when he 'seemed to admit that colored people had souls' (*Sisters*, p. 47).

The first black man to be granted a licence to preach was George Leile, a slave in the ownership of a Baptist deacon. Leile assisted in the founding in 1780 of the first Negro congregation in America – the African Baptist Church in Savannah. In the same decade another ex-slave, Richard Allen, was finding a mission in Christianity. Allen was born into slavery in 1760 in Philadelphia where attitudes towards manumission were more tolerant than those in the deep South, and by the age of 17 he had bought his freedom. He then began a career as an itinerant Methodist preacher – as did Elaw, Lee and Foote, who followed him – but, unlike theirs, his mission was recognised in his appointment to the Old St George's Methodist Episcopal church in Philadelphia. Here he drew large congregations of black as well as white worshippers, until the racism of the whites erupted. They demanded that the seats be reserved for the whites, while the blacks

should stand around the walls of the church. Animosity reached its height in 1787 when white deacons seized and forced to their feet the praying Richard Allen and an associate minister Absalom Jones. Outraged at this act, Allen decided upon separation from the whites. Allen and Jones established the Free African Society, to which Jarena Lee belonged, but by 1794 the two ministers had gone their separate ways. Jones formed the African Episcopal Church which later affiliated with the mainstream white church, and Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church which has remained separate from the white. By 1815 Allen had been elected as the first black bishop of America, and the AME remains today as one of the largest black American denominations.

The AME afforded the blacks the opportunity to join in worship and to come to enlightenment in their own way. As testified to in the spiritual autobiographies, this involved a conventional path to God via conversion, prophetic dreams, trances and visions. Hurston, in *The Sanctified Church*,¹⁴ notes: 'The vision is a very definite part of Negro religion. It almost always accompanies the call to preach' (p. 85). This call to preach, however, was only acceptable in black men. The American church was clearly racist, but the black church was equally sexist. Richard Allen's only response to Jarena Lee's request for permission to be ordained, was that church rules would not allow it. In seeking to preach, women were interrogating patriarchy with questions that could not be answered. Lee asks: 'And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach? Seeing the saviour died for woman as well as the man?' (*Sisters*, p. 36). In a church that was devoutly served by women (in the capacity of cleaners, fund-raisers, needlewomen and carers), such a challenge to male authority was met with hostility. Although Bishop Allen gave Lee permission to hold prayer meetings in her own house, and later allowed her to take her mission abroad, she was never granted a licence to preach.

Lee's autobiography was published in 1849, after which she seems to have disappeared into obscurity. She does record, however, meeting with Zilpha Elaw, another itinerant woman preacher with whom she spent some time on a joint mission. Zilpha Elaw published her memoirs in 1846, and then like Lee disappears from public record, but she has left us a full account of her many travels, which in 1842 took her as far as the north of England. In her autobiography she records that so great was the hostility aroused in English men at

the sight of a woman who dared to preach, that they offered her physical abuse: 'In one of their large chapels in which I preached, a number of young men conspired together, and came to hear me, with their hands full of stones' (*Sisters*, p. 132).

Although the avowed purpose of Lee and Elaw was to disseminate the Christian message, their life journeys as black women were implicit demonstrations of the injustices of the slave system, and certainly Elaw gave support to English Abolitionists. Their triumphs as preachers and their efforts to gain official recognition within their church show that black women were demanding the right to be part of a hierarchy that had been appropriated by black men. In Julia Foote's account of her own ministry published in 1879, the same sexism is apparent in the church's threat of excommunication and her husband's threat to have her locked away: 'He said I was getting more crazy every day, and getting others in the same way, and that if I did not stop he would send me back home or to the crazy-house' (*Sisters*, p. 197).

Clearly Foote's husband was not making an empty threat here, nor was he suggesting an unusual course of action in his proposed 'disposition' of his recalcitrant wife. The then current medical discourse had identified female defiance of male dominance as a form of mental disorder, to be dealt with by incarceration. Because of the rigidity of gender construction in the nineteenth century, women who regularly disobeyed the dictates of father, husband or brother could easily find themselves committed to an asylum for the insane. Not surprisingly the asylums for the mentally 'ill' suddenly had more female than male inmates.

In their autobiographies Elaw, Lee and Foote implicitly reveal the social injustices arising from racism and sexism. They also expose a dichotomy in patriarchal attitudes about women's social role as insoluble as that which had forced the black and white churches to split. As wives and mothers they were confined to the domestic sphere, yet as women they were regarded as 'naturally' more spiritual than men. In the preface to Foote's autobiography she is described as being 'guilty' of three crimes: 'colour', 'womanhood' and 'evangelicism'. The injustice of exclusion as preachers within the church hierarchy is the price of those 'crimes'. Perhaps another 'crime' of which the three women could have been accused – for it seems to be a subtext in the hostility they aroused – was their foregrounding of their religious over their domestic missions as wives and mothers,

which was in defiance of gender ideology of the time. In spite of their undoubted religious devotion they were seen by the church as difficult and defiant members. For such defiance Foote was threatened with excommunication, which prompted her to write a letter pleading against this punishment. The letter was dismissed as being of no importance: 'My letter was slightly noticed, and then thrown under the table. Why should they notice it? It was only the grievance of a woman, and there was no justice meted out to women in those days' (*Sisters*, p. 207). Foote's, Elaw's and Lee's autobiographies express a protest against the double standards arising from the artificial imposition of gender separation which echoes still, and to which black women writers of today give added voice.

Although the organisation of church hierarchy placed constraints upon these women as preachers, it nevertheless provided an opportunity for self-definition, in that it gave them access to language. These spiritual autobiographies, unlike the slave narratives, are couched in formal register, shaped by Biblical rhetoric, and are expressed in delicately refined and restrained language. They provided literary models for other women who felt impelled to publish their life histories. This facility with a language designed to be decorous, as befitted the female gender, is apparent in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*,¹⁵ published in 1859, and now claimed as the first novel by a black American woman. The language in this text is formal, drawing on sermonical rhetoric and moral rectitude with phrases such as 'disgrace and calumny', 'her fall', 'misdeed'. To avoid giving offence, Nig's white mother's loss of virginity is euphemistically expressed as the sacrifice of a 'priceless gem', 'the delicate virginity of May' (*Nig*, p. 6). Only occasionally does the vernacular obtrude, in Fredo's black father's use of 'dis' for 'this' or 'I's' for 'I have'. Henry Louis Gates Jr describes this text as the 'missing link' between black autobiography and a distinctive black voice in fiction.¹⁶

Wilson's semi-autobiographical story of a life in the North as a free black was written to raise money she needed for the nursing of her sick child, but it is also an exposure of Northern racism. The uncertain narrative stance comes from contradictory authorial aims, where an account of a true life, reminiscent of a slave narrative, is rendered within the formulaic framework of the popular sentimental novel. Wilson makes appeals to her 'gentle reader' for sympathy and support in the fashion typical of the nineteenth-century novel, and structurally *Our Nig* is conventional, with linear time charting the life

journey of an abandoned child into adulthood, in chapters bearing apt literary epigraphs. Gates identifies formulaic conventions which ally *Our Nig* with the then popular sentimental novel, but points to departures from that mode as evidence of the distinctiveness of Wilson's text. He notes there is no veneration of mothers in *Our Nig*, unlike the popular novel, nor does it end with a happy marriage. At times the author's chapter headings suggest autobiography: 'Mag Smith: my mother', 'My Father Dies', 'A New Home for Me'; at others the narrator distances herself from the narrative by adopting a third-person narrative voice, discussing the persona of 'Frado', nicknamed 'Nig'.

Life for 'Nig' in the North is little better than that of her enslaved sisters in the South. She too is subjected to overwork, physical and verbal abuse, 'all because I am black' (*Nig*, p. 75), although she makes no mention of being the victim of sexual abuse. The inequalities of a racist society are questioned in Frado's wondering why God has not made her white. Wilson describes how 'Nig', like the spiritual autobiographers, had sought solace in the church. Even this was touched by the cruelty of her mistress who, on discovering 'Nig' reading the Bible, echoed the white hostility already discussed towards black female preachers: 'I found her reading the Bible today, just as though she expected to turn pious nigger and preach to the white folks' (*Nig*, p. 88). Wilson allows Frado to be sceptical of a segregated religion - 'Her doubt was, is there a heaven for the black?' (*Nig*, p. 84), when her mistress emphasises constantly that it was not meant for 'niggers'. In this Wilson is holding up to examination the fabric of American religious practice and polemic, to reveal that both were shot through with inconsistency and bigotry. Eventually, Frado rebels against Mrs Bellmont's vicious tyranny and is turned out of the house with little confidence in her ability to survive. Her self-esteem at this time is at rock-bottom. Having been described as ugly by Mrs Bellmont, she feared that 'everyone thought her so. Then no-one would take her. She was black, no-one could love her' (*Nig*, p. 108). Like Morrison's Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's Celie in *The Color Purple* the black woman-child had been persuaded that her unworthiness and her ugliness were mutually inescapable. 'Nig's' childhood had been blighted by her rejection by her white mother, who, having 'ruined' her chances of marriage to a white man, had accepted a marriage proposal from a black one. This in itself was an unusual miscegenation, for the most common alliance

was between a white master and his black slave. In 'Nig's' account, her mother remarried following the death of her black husband, and promptly decided to give away her children, her 'black devils', with no thought of the bitter hardships this would cause them. This is an ironic reversal of the lot of black slave mothers who were made desolate by the separation from a child, even if it was half-white. By dint of her innate good nature, and some friendly assistance, Fredo/Nig finds work and later marries, only to be deserted by her husband who leaves her to bring up and support their sick child.

Gates' research verifies Wilson's existence and marriage, and the possible death of the child for whose benefit *Our Nig* had been penned. He also suggests that the interracial marriage of Nig's parents might have caused the novel to have remained in obscurity for over a century. Undoubtedly *Our Nig* raises questions about racism, sexism and religious experience which become dominant preoccupations in the literature of black American women writers in the twentieth century. Wilson's text may be primitive, shaky in execution and contradictory in impulse, but it is clearly important for the tradition it established. Harriet Wilson's penning of *Our Nig* was a desperate measure to raise money, and shows an entrepreneurial impulse uncharacteristic of her early life, which had been structured simply on survival. Her effort can be compared with that of another woman of colour, Mrs Seacole, whose *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands*¹⁷ had been published in 1858, one year before *Our Nig*, and was similarly written to raise much-needed money. Mrs Seacole was attempting to make good financial losses sustained in the Crimean War, for unlike Wilson she had devoted a life to commercial enterprise. She, like Wilson, was of mixed blood, having a Creole mother and a Scottish father. Born 'free' in 1805 into a Jamaica that supported an estimated population of 300,000 African slaves, as well as 60,000 free and enslaved 'coloured' people and between 20,000 and 30,000 Europeans, her mixed parentage limited the opportunities open to her. The Jamaican mulatto community was barred from voting, entering professions or inheriting large fortunes. Because the white ruling class feared the consequences of a possible alliance between the free coloured and the African slaves, as had happened when Haiti had struggled for their independence (gained in 1803), they jealously guarded the curbs placed on coloured advancement. As a result Jamaica evolved a strict class system with whites at the top, Africans at the bottom and the coloureds sandwiched in between.

This social organisation differs from that of the newly independent American colonies where any drop of black blood denoted black status. The strategy of the British colonisers in Jamaica, desirous of ensuring their safety from foreign attack or slave insurrection, was to form segregated militia units comprising coloureds and free blacks which served as an arm of the British army. In this manner the British were able to encourage an identification with the British colonial power as members of the British Empire. It is interesting to note, however, that when the 2nd West India regiment volunteered for service in the Crimean War their offer was rejected, just as was Mrs Seacole's offer to serve as a nurse, which tells us much about British racism.

It was into this West Indian society that Mrs Seacole was born and this explains her undoubted sense of being British. She followed her mother's occupation as hotelier, and learned from her the skills of tropical medicine, much of which had been brought to the Caribbean by African slaves. I think that Mrs Seacole's memoirs are important in that her adventures as root healer and entrepreneur establish her as the literary forebear of the enterprising capitalist adventurers from the Caribbean acknowledged by Paule Marshall as her West Indian ancestors. Like Silla Boyce in Marshall's *Browniegirl*, *Brownstones*, Mrs Seacole kept a boarding house, having imbibed the self-help ethic considered essential for material success: 'Indeed, my experience of the world . . . leads me to the conclusion that it is by no means the hard, bad world which some selfish people would have us believe it' (Seacole, p. 60).

Clearly Wilson's and Seacole's perceptions of the world were very different. Seacole suggests that fortune favours the brave and hard-working and had no time for 'weakness'. Mrs Seacole diminishes her black blood in favour of the white. She condemns the slave system of America, yet gives no weight to the fact that British colonialists had held slaves in the West Indies. She attempts to distance herself from the slaves as 'niggers' at the same time as castigating white Americans who considered themselves 'superior' to herself. Mrs Seacole is in fact a perfect example of the contradictory impulses which are at war in the mulatta.

Mrs Seacole expresses pride in the West Indians who had rebelled against colonial rule to establish a republic. A century later Audre Lorde, another American descendant of West Indian ancestors who had migrated to the North American States, speaks of her own intense

pride in her Grenadian forebears for the same reason. Indeed in her travels to New Grenada Mrs Seacole was full of admiration for the self-freed blacks of that island, who had been joined in their successful bid for independence by fugitive slaves from America, saying that, 'as they were generally superior men – evinced perhaps by their hatred of their old condition and their successful flight' (p. 100), they soon rose to positions of eminence. Those who ran for freedom were, in her eyes, 'superior' to those who did not. Presumably she considered that in her own ancestry there was the blood of African slaves of this 'superior' kind, for she is at pains to minimise the consequence of miscegenation. She avoids any reference to herself as negroid, preferring to describe herself as 'a little yellow' or 'brown'. When in London, seeking to join Nightingale's nurses, she is rejected in spite of her proven nursing skill, she yet refuses to believe that her colour could have been a factor in this decision. Nevertheless she could not have been unaware of British racism as she recounts how street urchins mocked herself and a friend in a London street. This, she explains, was because her friend had a darker complexion and so was 'a fair subject for their rude wit'. This expression of colorism is ridiculed by Hurston in the character of Mrs Turner in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as it is in Morrison's depiction of Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*, yet clearly it is the inevitable result of an inscription of black inferiority upon which enslavement depended. The schizophrenic result of colorism is seen in Mrs Seacole, who rails against American women onboard ship in the Panama for refusing to share accommodation with her because of her colour, yet still seeks identification with them in her efforts to present herself as a Victorian Englishwoman.

Mrs Seacole is the product of the colonial impulse to exploit, an impulse that is strong in her and her family. Although barred from nursing in an official capacity in the Crimea, she sets up a business, 'Seacole and Day', to act as provisioner and hotel-keeper for officers at the front. She became a well-known figure in that war, reported by *The Times* war correspondent for her fearless ministering to soldiers wounded on the battlefield. However, peace left her business bankrupt, and Mrs Seacole's memoirs – addressed to British wives and mothers whose menfolk in the Crimea had known her as 'Mother Seacole' – are an attempt to cash in on her undoubted service as medical comforter to the British soldiers. Like Wilson, Mrs Seacole tried to sell her story; unlike Wilson, she succeeded. This perhaps

illustrates the different backgrounds of the two women. Wilson's mixed parentage meant she would be forever deemed and treated as black in American society, whereas Seacole's was less disadvantageous to her in the West Indies. Seacole saw nothing wrong in claiming to be, as Hurston would have said, 'a rooster's egg'. She identifies herself as 'a Creole' with 'good Scottish blood coursing in my veins. My father was a soldier of an old Scotch family' (p. 55). To Mrs Seacole the adjectives of 'good' and 'old' mean 'superior'. Nevertheless she was an intrepid and enterprising woman, and Paule Marshall's depiction of the entrepreneurial skills of West Indian emigrants in Brooklyn can be identified with the same courageous spirit that informed Mrs Seacole. What Marshall warns against in her writing, is Mrs Seacole's denial of her blackness in order to live 'white'. Seacole, the 'Crimean heroine', spent the last twenty years of her life commuting between London and Jamaica, and died in modest luxury. A plaque can now be seen on the house in which she lived in George Street, Marylebone, bearing the legend 'Mary Seacole Crimean Nurse'. Her book cannot be seen as part of the anti-slavery tradition which fed the literary imagination of writers like Walker, Morrison and Angelou, but I suggest it is a useful introduction to the writing of black Americans of West Indian descent.

Our Nig and Mrs Seacole's text deal with the problem of the mulatta child, as does Frederick Douglass's autobiography, and all three emphasise that the very existence of the mulatta/o throws into question the notion of race itself. The 'tragic' mulatta who was the recurring subject of so much fiction, including Nella Larsen's *Passing* and *Quicksand* in the late 1920s, is the embodiment of the absurdity of racial construction. Such a protagonist was the vehicle chosen by the redoubtable campaigner for Abolition and later women's rights, Ellen Harper, in her novel *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted*,¹⁸ first published in 1893. So many years after Abolition Harper still resorts to the treatment of the mulatta as an indication of American attitudes to race. In her 'sentimental' novel Harper deconstructs the image of the black woman as someone less capable of delicate refinement than the white, in the figure of her heroine the mulatta Iola Leroy. Although brought up as a rich and privileged white woman, Iola is the daughter of a beautiful octoroon and former slave who was loved, freed and married by her white owner. On the death of Iola's father the legality of his wife's manumission is denied by his distant cousin who had disapproved of the match, and the widow and children are