

## **Reading Mobility, Motherhood and Domesticity in Four African American Women's Texts**

In the chapter titled “Mobility, Embodiment and Resistance: Black Women’s writing in the U.S.” in *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* Carole Boyce Davies considers questions of Black women, maternity, mobility and literature. Arguing that the contemporary tendency to read geographical movement as a masculine trope and interior movement as “feminine” is artificial and unsatisfactory, Davies instead attempts to create a space for reading “movement” as complicated, and *always* present in a variety of overlapping configurations. She writes:

The question of journeying in Black women’s writing in the United States offers a variety of possible understandings of internal migrations, historical displacement, captivity and agency. The specific conditions of U.S. slavery and the (im)possibility of escape, including the mythical meanings of the North and freedom, embedded movement in the consciousness of a variety of narratives and cultural products. (1994: 130)

Intrinsic to any understanding of the possibilities of women’s movement is motherhood. Continues Davies: “Since one of the impediments to women having the ability to travel is their children and/or societal constructions of motherhood, then it is important to examine how some of these conventions are either supported or rejected in [these] texts” (1994: 135). While Davies is interested in reading contemporary “re-memberings” of slavery for how mobility and motherhood are represented—notably Morrison’s *Beloved* and Williams’ *Dessa Rose*—I would like to utilize her observations as a “jumping off” point for the examination of four period texts which examine how the “cult of true

womanhood” had at different historical moments both liberating and limiting consequences for those African American women able to access it and the social mobility it promised. Maternity is, of course, central to the secular but spiritualized domestic realm and the elevated role ascribed to African American mothers via both the ideology of true womanhood and the doctrine of racial uplift. Through reading two texts from the early 1890s and two published in the late Harlem Renaissance for their representation of mobility and maternity, as well as the domestic/familial realm and women’s relation to labour within that realm, I hope to begin to map how African American female novelists represented the bourgeois domestic world over a 50-year period.

The earliest genre in which Black women published in any significant number was the slave narrative, where their status under slavery as laboring objects was exposed. Within their narratives many women emphasized the debilitating and often crippling drudgery they often endured, including Sojourner Truth and Mary Prince.<sup>1</sup> Narrators like Harriet Jacobs were well aware of how much the status of their white “mistresses” as “ladies” was dependent upon the labour performed by Black slaves. Harriet Beecher Stowe parodied this dependency in her novel of Black revolution, *Dred*, when discussing John Cripps:

He was the son of a small farmer of North Carolina. His father having been so unfortunate as to obtain possession of a few negroes the whole family became ever after inspired with an intense disgust for all kinds of labor; and John, the oldest son, adopted for himself the ancient and honorable profession of a loafer. (1999: 130)

“Labour” was therefore “raced” as well as “classed” in American culture. “Ladies” did not labour, or if they did, were not to appear to have laboured, according to the domestic ideology of the “cult of true womanhood” which defined (white) women as domestic angels, and mothers of superior moral quality. Narrators like Jacobs, Prince, Truth and others undermined this image of white women as angelic beings through their recounting of temperamental outbursts, petty jealousies, and outrageous cruelties. Furthermore, slave mistresses’ maternal instincts were revealed as racially limited in scope. (When Ellen Craft had to leave her sick infant alone to wait upon her mistress’s dinner party, her child died.<sup>2</sup>) Nevertheless most female narrators often—though not always—attributed these instances and deficiencies to the institution of slavery, which, they argued perverted all with whom it came into contact. In turn, the narrators attempted to argue for their own worthiness for inclusion in the cult of true womanhood, and to claim its benefits and protections for themselves and their children. However, the inclusion of formerly enslaved women was problematic. Harriet Jacobs’ argument for her inclusion accounts for the impossibility of meeting many of the criteria of “true womanhood” under slavery.<sup>3</sup> However compelling—and correct—her argument might be, it points

to a central deficiency in nineteenth-century white American discourse: the categories of “lady” and “slave” were understood to be mutually exclusive. Women “marked” as slaves—in any number of ways—could not easily shed this status, or reconcile their legal servitude with “ladyhood.”

This is perhaps why, in her 1891 novel, *Iola Leroy*, Frances Harper creates a character who is only briefly enslaved, and altogether unaware of her mixed race background during her formative years. Iola is the daughter of a white slave owner, and a light-skinned former slave, whom he has educated, freed, and married. Educated in the North, Iola and her siblings only learn of their maternal heritage when their father dies and his unscrupulous cousin has his marriage declared invalid, and Iola, her mother and siblings declared property. Kidnapped from the North by men who continually remark on her gracious manner and ladylike posture—usually in conjunction with an estimation of her dollar value (1992: 77-8)—Iola is sold to a series of men who try unsuccessfully to make her their concubine. Saved quite literally from being whipped (and therefore being irrevocably marked as “property”) by the outbreak of the Civil War and the intervention of a Union general, Iola becomes a nurse in a Union Hospital. There her racial status is concealed<sup>5</sup> and a white Northern doctor falls in love with her and proposes marriage. Iola refuses his offer and instead sets out to reunite her family, eventually marrying a light skinned doctor and establishing a family, which she presides over as a vision of ladylike virtue. Legally “enslaved” Iola nevertheless avoids being marked as such due to her complexion, education and history. It is therefore possible according to the conventions of the day for Iola to be a conventional literary heroine—a lady—according to the “cult of true womanhood.”

In contrast, *Megda* by Emma Dunham Kelley is set in post-Reconstruction America. Megda and her family inhabit a racially exclusive middle-class community. The novel follows her high school graduation class as one by one they commit to the church, and eventually to marriage and motherhood. Troubled Megda is reserved about religious conversion and the limits to her independence that it inevitably poses. Her conversion, when it does happen, is met with joy by her friends and a sense of relief on Megda’s part. Her marriage to a Reverend is followed by two children and the adoption of a wayward friend’s child, and the novel closes with Megda, who once dreamed of being an elocutionist, instead presiding over an idyllic domestic sphere. Throughout the novel Megda is not confronted with any challenges to her status as “lady”; she is not only post-slavery, but her world also lacks the presence of whites who might impose racial stereotypes or indignities on her as a Black woman. Even a train trip to the resort Cottage City (a thinly disguised Oak Bluffs) is free from inter-racial interaction, or the mention of Jim Crow segregation.

Both *Iola Leroy* and *Megda* have been criticized for their fair-skinned heroines and privileging of genteel manners. Later authors and critics have dismissed them as bourgeois, but it is that bourgeois impulse that provides the most interesting point of entry, as their engagement of the “cult of true

womanhood” has potentially liberating consequences for these heroines, particularly in relation to earlier images of black woman as dehumanized labouring bodies. In *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* Claudia Tate suggests that the Black novels of “genteel domestic fiction” that blossomed in the 1890s reflect the viewpoint that full citizenship would come as much or more from adopting the “genteel standard of Victorian sexual conduct” as protesting racial injustice (1992: 4). She furthermore identifies the “idealized domesticity in these novels as a fundamental cultural symbol of the Victorian era, for representing civil ambition and prosperity as a nineteenth century metonym for proper social order” (1992: 5). Therefore, according to Tate’s reading, the domestic is an allegory for the national, whose house needs order restored through the progress of committed Christianity and devotion on the part of its inhabitants, a fitting solution to the fracturing of slavery and the Civil War. As Abraham Lincoln noted, “A house divided cannot stand.” Tate’s reading is astute, explaining the unrealistic plots and romanticized tone of these novels, and locating their value in the ways in which they accessed assumptions about racial advancement and the family, crafting collective fantasies which African Americans could share (1992: 7).<sup>6</sup> These idealized narratives speak more to the role of African American women than African American men, however, and can therefore be read as allegories primarily in relation to the former’s lives. They open up a space in which to discuss the subjectivity of Black women’s lives *not* in relation to the physicality by which white America most often defined them, but rather in relation to family, motherhood, and domestic space, a space radically different and potentially more liberating than the public sphere. However temporary this liberation may be.

The nineteenth century move to industrialization marked the severance of the home and family from the realm of economic production and had definite consequences for the understanding of family, motherhood, and the individual, particularly for the middle and upper classes. (While this was obviously not as pronounced in the pre-Emancipation South, or other rural areas, they were not immune to the ideological implications, particularly post-Emancipation.) According to Gillian Brown, in *Domestic Individualism: Imaging Self in Nineteenth Century America*, the rise of domestic ideology means that the “self is defined as an entity distinct from economic activity, articulated through the organizations of private life. Furthermore, “within these organizations—home, the family, religion, sexuality, health—selfhood depends upon its severance from the world of work, a severance reflected in the individual’s difference from her body” (1990: 63). Self is therefore defined entirely through the private realm, which provides a safe haven from “the market exchanges which depersonalize and dehumanize bodies” (1990: 64). Brown’s explanation of domestic ideology as physically alienating and “private” renders transparent its appeal to the heroines of *Iola Leroy*, *Megda*, and others, as African American women have been historically too often defined solely in relation to their bodies, their labour, and their perceived or actual lack of privacy. “Privacy” of course,

also includes the private territory of the body, which cannot be interpreted as a commodity if it is removed from the public sphere to the domestic realm.

For Iola and Megda then, the process of creating and maintaining their own private space is fundamental to establishing their own subjectivity and interiority. However, that Iola and Megda are able to successfully “move” from the public realm into the private is a result of the financial security that both cement through their marriages. They also embody the movement of racial uplift in their establishment of prosperous African American homes and families where children can be nurtured by their mothers, and succeed accordingly. Alienation from their physical labour is not a concern, as nineteenth-century literature is full of heroines whose fingers dance while arranging their hair, who whip up new dresses with great ease, or create a meal from “nothing” with tremendous energy and grace. What is notable in African American women’s literature, in the 1890s, is that it is Black women doing these things in their *own* homes and kitchens. The transition from slavery to freedom is the transition from the disorganized and laboured kitchen run by Aunt Dinah in Stowe’s (1981) *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, to Megda’s own ordered household.<sup>7</sup>

Ordering the domestic is crucial to both books, but more so to *Iola Leroy*, where the title character’s mission is to re-order her family, which has been separated by slavery. As a freed black woman Iola has great mobility which she employs in her search, but it is always apparent that her end goal is establishing a secure domestic world. Crucial to establishing this domestic order is the process of reuniting mothers with children—not only is Iola reunited with her mother, but her grandmother is also restored to the family. Maternity is what binds African American families the text argues, as characters refuse inheritances if it means denying their mother’s race (Harper, 1992: 179, 198), condemn slavery for the cruelty it inflicts upon mothers (1992: 148), and articulate their commitment to Blacks in America through the figures of Black mothers (1992: 152). It is therefore not surprising that the “move” to the domestic that Iola makes, is most particularly a move to Black mothering, and the private domestic realm of the Black family. Iola is constantly misrepresented by others, as a free white child, as a slave, as a white Southern woman (in the Civil War hospital where she works), in Northern stores, and is asked by the white Northern doctor to misrepresent herself for the purposes of marriage. The Black family and its domestic realm, however, are the only safe spaces where she can represent herself “naturally” without fear of betrayal. Betrayed already by one white family, she cannot enter another, as maternity and its possibility of birthing a child who showed colour might reveal her as one who “laboured” to be white. For Iola, to “pass” for white—this time consciously—invites a second exposure and expulsion, and the denial of family, factors which for Iola outweigh any privileges she might accrue.<sup>8</sup> Instead Iola devotes herself to her maternal race, and commits herself to racial uplift activities directly concerned with practices of “good” mothering. Racial uplift ideologies in fact marry nicely with the discourses of domesticity and true

womanhood, defining Black women's role as "domestic educator, Christianizer, and civilizer of the home" as a means of doing "lasting service for the race" (Tate, 1992: 98). External activities, therefore, always reflect back to the establishment of a private domestic realm where children are in turn nurtured and prepared to succeed, and then establish their own safe familial realm in which the process will repeat itself, spreading exponentially according to the rhetoric of racial uplift. To this end, Iola presents a paper on "The Education of Mothers" and praises her future sister-in-law's establishment of a school to train future wives and mothers. These are, of course, remarkably class-based activities, and these two women, both of whom are "ladies" but neither of whom are "mothers" are uniquely suited to their role of teaching other women to perform their duties decorously and gracefully without the appearance of coarseness or effort. The ability to do so will enable women to raise their class status, and "move forward" to matrimony and child rearing, their logical progression towards self-fulfillment, according to contemporary discourses.

Megda also "moves forward" in the novel towards marriage and motherhood, but it is notable that where Iola works to reunite her family, Megda's family—minus a deceased father—is intact. Instead Megda's quest or journey is spiritual in nature, though she is initially unaware of it, wanting to marry a wealthy husband and perform as an elocutionist. But the text demonstrates that she has to relinquish her dreams of the public in order to attain a successful private life and be the perfect lady—and by extension mother and wife—that she aspires to be (Kelley, 1988: 135). In the process, she must sever herself from her body and her physical impulses. Kelley provides us with a middle-class African American conversion narrative, however *Megda* differs from its predecessors in that it portrays the conversion of a young middle-class respectable girl. She does not face the difficulties of a Truth, Jarena Lee or Maria Stewart.<sup>9</sup> Nor does she have to overcome the prejudices that Iola does, inhabiting an apparently racially homogenous world, though both heroines are equally invested in the rhetorics of motherhood and racial uplift. Rather Megda has to overcome herself, not unlike Jo March in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*.<sup>10</sup> However, unlike Jo, Megda does not struggle with domestic tasks or femininity. Her "white" hands, often remarked on as a signifier of racial ambiguity in the text, also signify her uncompromising femininity. This evangelical heroine must nevertheless be converted to see the superiority of the domestic realm. Megda must learn to privilege her soul over her body, which responds rapturously to music, and is enchanted by dancing. (It is notable that the character who most successfully does this is rewarded with the ultimate separation of the soul from the body—death.) That Megda is able to subjugate her body is represented as the spiritual triumph of the novel, and she vows to never again leave the tight geographic domestic circle of family and school friends. That she does temporarily leave her community towards the end of the novel only serves to demonstrate the rightness of her decision. She answers the death bed request of a school acquaintance who has lived a "life of social pleasure

and excitement" (Kelley, 1988: 301, 367) and is now reaping the "reward." The coarseness and dissipation of the dying woman is contrasted with the "fair" Megda who, despite her modest life and maternity, retains her graceful charm and figure. Domesticity triumphs, and Megda's life as we witness it demonstrates her worthy progression towards motherhood.

Both *Iola Leroy* and *Megda* close with the idealized and valorized portraits of motherhood and domesticity common to African American women's literature in the late nineteenth century, offering both hope and escape to their readers in the face of a post-Reconstruction backlash. By the early twentieth century, however, African American literature was not as hopeful, and was significantly less idyllic. Langston Hughes captured this questioning age in his poignant question "What happens to a dream deferred?" (1987: 268). The self-sacrifice that women were encouraged to practice had in fact *not* been unilaterally liberating. As a result, literary representations of the domestic realm and women's roles as wives and mothers are not portrayed so uncritically. In Jessie Fauset's (1969) *Comedy American Style* and Dorothy West's (1982) *The Living is Easy* the domestic realm, one of the limited outlets available to its female inhabitants, is represented as claustrophobic and stifling.

*The Living is Easy* is the tale of Cleo, who journeys North, as a domestic in the Great Migration, in order to secure greater opportunity for herself. She marries into middle-class Boston, and manipulates and schemes to secure greater social opportunity and security for her daughter, Judy. Her outward appearance is that of a woman engaged in racial uplift through the domestic realm; she has most definitely "risen." And yet this proscribed path proves unsatisfactory to Cleo. Her domestic realm is represented as a prison, and she continually journeys inward to her childhood and sisters in the South, whom she has left behind. Central to her remembering is her mother, from whom this journey upward (both in geography and class) has alienated her. Cleo plots and reunites her sisters and their children—minus husbands—in her Northern home, as a means of re-living her childhood. The children become insurance for Cleo—they are expected to memorialize and testify to her success. Yet Cleo has destroyed their homes, and the children are not appropriately grateful for the opportunities proffered. These opportunities are not achieved without great labour on Cleo's part, and this is where West's novel differs from the two others discussed previously. Unlike Megda and Iola, Cleo obviously labours to achieve her goals, and perceives of it as such. This dismissal of the domestic as a magical realm where tasks are performed effortlessly is a radical departure from the world of earlier romanticized African American heroines.

Likewise, Jessie Fauset's (1969) *Comedy American Style* also breaks with romanticized heroines, some of whom populated Fauset's earlier fiction. Olivia Blanchard Cary also exerts great efforts to control and define her domestic realm. The light-skinned Olivia marries a light-skinned doctor as a means of "raising" her unborn children—all the way to white. Her household becomes a place where she attempts to teach her children the value of "living white."

Betrayed by her own body into bearing a child who “shows colour,” Olivia passes Oliver off as the Mexican butler to her unsuspecting white friends. Eventually Oliver commits suicide when the truth becomes apparent to him, and her husband suffers a breakdown. Olivia separates another daughter from the man she loves, marrying her to a white man in France, severing familial ties due to the deception. Her remaining son and his wife take in Olivia and her husband, as Dr. Cary’s breakdown financially ruins him. Olivia’s efforts to transform her “black” domestic realm into a white one fail, and at the close of the novel she is exiled from the familial altogether, isolated in France. Her efforts to enact a perverse form of racial uplift fail, but moreover her desires testify to the failure of racial uplift to facilitate equality between the races, and the vulnerability of the domestic realm to pressures of the outside world.

That the domestic *is* vulnerable is key to reading these two later texts. Megda valorized the domestic as a projection of the wife and mother’s interior life, and therefore demanded that the mother not be “of the world” as she might in fact “contaminate” her family and home. However, both Fauset and West’s texts uphold the same tenant, while arguing that as the mother *can’t help* but be of the world, the domestic is necessarily not a secure and contained place. Furthermore, the domestic has the possibility to reflect the mother’s dissatisfaction, and in fact, the way in which the mother’s role is categorized within is a possible cause of that same dissatisfaction. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the way the women’s work is both valorized and devalued by the cult of true womanhood, which views women’s roles as “natural” and therefore “effortless” and lacking in labour. But it is obvious that the more dissatisfied these characters are, the more their efforts are represented as laborious. That both Cleo and Olivia are depicted as labouring mothers—whether labouring on behalf of good or evil—is in fact an explicit revision of the fiction of the 1890s. Furthermore, the laboured efforts of these women to also deny their bodies (which evolves into Olivia’s denial of her son) calls into question the value of this practice. Devalued as occupiers of the domestic realm, but limited in their options for acceptable forms of escape, Cleo and Olivia desire an unarticulated “more.” As their desires exceed what the domestic realm can offer, the domestic itself becomes uncontainable, “acting out” in unacceptable ways: Oliver’s suicide at home, Dr. Cary’s breakdown, Cleo’s loss of control of her extended family, the attempted lynching of her brother-in-law, and the need to take in boarders to support the family she has manipulated into joining her in the North.

Ironically, the promise at the end of each novel comes from a female character who attempts to balance both the domestic and the external world of wage earning. Their identities and self-esteem are represented as dependent upon this recognition of their value not only outside of the home, but also for what they can contribute to its maintenance as wage earners. The outside world is not without temptation, as *Comedy American Style* suggests when its female wage earner nearly succumbs to a sexual affair, but the secure domestic realm



is a source of strength and sustenance which lends its heroine the ability to resist. Likewise, in *The Living is Easy*, the outside world has the potential to reduce workers to their occupation, but they have the potential to choose to derive pride from their status as wage-earners which gives them power within the domestic realm.

These later novels do not romanticize the home and maternal in the same way as *Megda* or *Iola Leroy*, but nor do they romanticize the marketplace which select characters enter. If journeying is to be read as a complicated trope in African American women's literature—complicated by the reality of maternity and the demands of the domestic among other factors—then we need to pay close attention to the worlds this literature gives us, and how characters negotiate their roles within their worlds. In addition, we must consider how the domestic is not isolated from the operations of the outside world, but in fact highly invested in and reflective of those operations, both historical and contemporary. Only then can we begin to unpack these historically rich texts for what they have to tell us.

<sup>1</sup>Both authors are careful to link their physical problems to the physical abuse endured under slavery.

<sup>2</sup>While this piece of information was absent from the Crafts' narrative itself, it was public knowledge, suggesting that the Crafts may have shared it while touring on the Abolitionist circuit as speakers.

<sup>3</sup>When discussing her sexual history and illegitimate children conceived with one white man in order to attain his "protection" and avoid the advances of her owner, Jacobs writes "Pity me and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave." It is this knowledge, I would argue, that marks Jacobs ideologically as slave and keeps the category of "lady" out of her grasp, even after achieving freedom.

<sup>4</sup>It should be noted that it is not Iola who conceals her status, but the hospital commander, Col. Robinson (45).

<sup>5</sup>At the same time that *Iola Leroy* and *Megda* were published, Ida B. Wells produced her documentary critique of the practice of lynching. Wells work reads as a counter-narrative to the idealized domestic novel, disrupting the fantasy of a safe contained familial realm, and deserves to be read more closely in tandem with the domestic fiction of the era. Nevertheless, Wells' text certainly emphasizes the appeal of a form of fiction that provides its readers with escapist fantasies, no matter how temporary or transparent they are.

<sup>6</sup>In *Iola Leroy* Aunt Linda, freed by the Civil War sustains herself as an entrepreneur caterer, allowing her to produce effortless elaborate meals for her surrogate children. For more information on Aunt Dinah's kitchen as a metaphor for slavery, see Brown (13-38) and Wardley.

<sup>7</sup>Passing and the tragic mulatta heroine have a long history in African American fiction and literature. The heroine light enough to pass for white was used in

Abolitionist writings to evoke the sympathy of white women through the process of identification. In later fiction, passing often functioned to signal the arbitrariness of racial distinctions and to disrupt notions of essentialized racial differences. By demonstrating the fluidity of racial boundaries, passing also calls into question the legal attempts to contain and regulate racial difference. However in much of African American fiction passing is represented as exacting a psychological price from those who engage in it long term, as demonstrated in the classic *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson and *Passing* by Nella Larsen. For more on the phenomena on passing, see *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg.

<sup>8</sup>For a more extensive discussion of racial uplift ideology, see Gaines (1996: 19-46).

<sup>9</sup>Jarena Lee and Maria Stewart were both African American authors of spiritual narratives in the nineteenth century, and contemporaries of the better-known Sojourner Truth (Peterson 1995: 56-87)

<sup>10</sup>Recent readings of *Little Women* draw on the uncovered gothic tales of Alcott and find reason to read Jo's reformation as, in fact, a veiled gothic tale. This is not my suggestion in comparing the text to *Megda*. However, Harper was no doubt familiar with the text, and alludes to it as next door to *Megda*, called "Meg" throughout the text, lives an eventually orphaned "Laurie" who marries into *Megda's* family.

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