

## Author



# A Novel Approach: Pauline Hopkins and the Emerging New Woman of Color

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*History*

While taking an American History class, Carole Autori became interested in tracing racial issues in turn-of-the-century Boston. In this process, she found that her analysis of Pauline Hopkins' oeuvre differed from that of other scholars, which led her to pursue research on the topic. Through her studies of Hopkins' novels, Carole affirmed her passion for immigrant and minority social history. Next fall she will enter the History Ph.D. program at UCI with the eventual goal of becoming a community college professor. When not reading nineteenth-century novels, Carole has served on the board of directors for a homeless shelter and taught gardening and nutrition classes to low-income families.

## Abstract

The life and work of Pauline Hopkins, the most prolific black woman writer at the turn of the last century, were examined for potential evidence of her role in influencing African-American women to emerge from the Victorian age and enter the modern era as 'New Women of Color.' Hopkins' life was a testament to her belief in the benefits that modernity offered to women. This paper finds that Hopkins' romantic and best-known novel, *Contending Forces*, addresses two distinct groups of African-American women. The first group descended from free Northern blacks; the second, the freed Southern mulatta women, descended from slaves and migrated to Boston. This paper investigates Hopkins' strategies for validating the lives of Southern women as they were integrated into a free society controlled by middle- and upper-class Northern black women at the start of the twentieth century.

## Faculty Mentor



A superb and innovative researcher, Carole Autori has, in this ambitious essay, uncovered the multiple contexts within which the writer Pauline Hopkins' life and work were shaped. The challenges Autori faced were considerable: little direct evidence of Pauline Hopkins' life has survived; but her novels and a few of her magazine articles do exist. Like Martha Hodes or Laurel Ulrich, historians who have carefully built worlds around subjects who have left few traces, Carole used extensive research of Hopkins' world, in conjunction with the themes, settings, and characters of her novels, as the basis of her paper. All of this was essentially self-guided; she had the born researcher's gift of knowing where next to go, and pursued every possible lead with passion. I am delighted that I will have the chance to continue working with Carole in the Ph.D. program in History beginning in the fall of 2005.

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## Key Terms

- ◆ Freedman
- ◆ Language of Speculation
- ◆ New Woman of Color
- ◆ Race
- ◆ Talented Tenth
- ◆ True Womanhood

“Of kings and gentlemen we have the record ad nauseam [sic] and in stupid detail [but of the] common run of things, and particularly of the half or wholly submerged working group, the world has saved all too little of authentic record, and tried to forget or ignore even the little saved” (Du Bois, 1969).

“Fiction is of great value to any people as a preserver of manners and customs—religious, political and social. It is a record of growth and development from generation to generation. No one will do this for us: we must develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history” (Hopkins, 1900).

## Introduction

The culmination of Pauline Hopkins’ personal dreams of being a self-supporting author probably occurred in September, 1900, when she published her first novel, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*. But Hopkins had much larger dreams for African Americans in general and African-American women in particular at the turn of the century. She was the quintessential, self-described “race woman.” As such, she “considered the advancement of the race as her chief priority” (Allen 11).

“Racial uplift” and the “advancement of the race” were phrases used by numerous middle-class African-American women who wished to achieve a higher status for the black population at large as the best protest against racism.<sup>1</sup> Among these women were numerous writers such as Alice Dunbar Nelson, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Pauline Hopkins. Pauline Hopkins deserves attention because she demonstrates a strong sense of responsibility for uniting her own society of free-born Northern black women with the freed southern mulatto women who were outcasts among black society in Boston.

Hopkins “publicly exposed the facts concerning race-based discrimination” while documenting “the progress made by black individuals” (Allen 11). As with most “race women,” this philosophy was of overriding importance, but Hopkins, and a few of her contemporaries, had an additional agenda. In the process of bringing her race forward through her

writings and lectures, she focused on elevating the status of black women and ushering them into the modern era. She presented them with new paradigms to consider in relation to self-esteem, work, and personal relationships to advance the quality of their lives in the coming century.

The figure of Pauline Hopkins offers a challenge to the historian because, as is true of many marginalized women, few of her papers survive in archives. Possibly the majority of her papers, letters and/or diaries were destroyed in the 1930 fire that ended her life. As a result we have little direct evidence of her thoughts.<sup>2</sup> And yet, her novels offer the historian rich opportunities for analysis if they are carefully contextualized. To compensate for the dearth of personal memorabilia related to Hopkins’ life, I have researched the surrounding contexts of her novels through the writings of historians, sociologists, scientists, and literary authors to enrich my analysis of her published works. I offer a careful use of historical imagination in order to provide a critical exploration of Hopkins’ motivations. Historian Martha Hodes has written eloquently of the need to use such words as “perhaps” and “possibly” in *White Women, Black Men* (1997), her study of proscribed sexual relationships in the antebellum South. Hodes affirms the importance of informed speculation. Here I draw on Hodes’ methodology to build a fuller picture of Hopkins’ world and her own motivations.

Moving between her novels and this wide variety of non-fiction sources, I argue that Hopkins’ life experiences helped her develop a new perspective on the roles and opportunities available to a woman of color in the years of transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although her audience was primarily native-born, Northern, middle-class black women and their white counterparts, she focused on the freed women and their daughters who were but one or two generations removed from slavery. Through her writing, she offered a vision of a woman who would use her education, intelligence and courage to move beyond the physical, emotional and mental confines of the Victorian ideal of womanhood. However, she was well aware that each woman would move toward the idea of a more modern and independent womanhood at her own pace. Equally important to the idea of movement was the woman’s starting point, which would necessarily be different for middle-class, free-born blacks than for Southern mulatto migrants.

<sup>1</sup> As historian Gail Bederman observed, “[l]ike gender, race is a way to metonymically link bodies, identity, and power. Race, however, is a purely cultural sign. Most anthropologists deny that any pure racial differences or strains can even be identified. Thus race, like gender, is a way to naturalize arrangements of power in order to depict them as unchangeable when, in fact, these arrangements of power are actually socially constructed and thus historically mutable. In short, this study’s assumption is that race does not exist in nature but only as a cultural construct” (246).

<sup>2</sup> Aside from her published work, the few surviving papers housed in the Fisk Library were the basis of an article written by Fisk curator, Ann Allen Shockley, who rediscovered her work. Shockley shares her research in the article “Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins: A Biographical Excursion into Obscurity” (Phylon, 1972). Shockley has been quoted extensively by others, and excerpts are included where appropriate.

This inclusive vision led Hopkins to create characters both of their time and ahead of it. While some critics, such as Mary Helen Washington, have argued that Hopkins elevated her characters only to re-submerge them in the cult of domesticity, I argue that she was much more strategic in her writing. While many of her characters eventually married after having engaged in work, they are not portrayed as contented housewives, but instead as women who will continue to work outside the sphere of domesticity to uplift their people and fight racism. In other words, Hopkins made deliberate choices to reach a wider audience that could identify with her characters, and not, as Washington argues, because of Hopkins' personal acceptance of the "cult of true womanhood" (21).

True Womanhood was an artificial construct meant to keep a middle-class black (or white) woman shackled to an inferior position that placed virtue, domesticity and family above the needs of the woman, herself. Hopkins' writings and actions encouraged women of color—in all their various hues—to step outside the restrictions imposed by race and gender discrimination and create their own space in the world. While her novels were focused on women of color, the recurrent themes would have spoken to all Victorian women by demonstrating ways in which freedom could be as much a mental and emotional condition as it was a physical one. Her characters modeled a new skill for women—choosing their own places in the world—and her life experience provided her with the conviction that they could gain it.

### Hopkins' Life

Hopkins was graced by the circumstances of her birth. As a daughter of New England, she was born a free black in 1859 to Northrup and Sarah A. Allen Hopkins of Portland, Maine. Sarah was an Exeter, New Hampshire native whose family went back several generations in that state. Northrup was a Virginian who had found his way North. It is not known whether he was an escaped slave or a freedman, but in either case, he most likely witnessed the brutality of Southern slavery. Pauline is directly related, through her mother, to the New Hampshire poet James Whitefield, also an early nineteenth century political black activist who died in 1871. Her extended family relations included black abolitionists Nathaniel and Thomas Paul, whose activism flourished alongside their roles as educators and founders of the first Baptist church for blacks in Boston (McKay 2). Given her parents' history, politically-active family friends, and her presumed sensitivity to her surrounding social conditions, it is likely that Pauline absorbed the issues that confronted blacks in the North and South from an early age.

The family moved when Pauline was a young child. She grew up in the urban and more sophisticated environment of Boston, which offered more opportunity for the family and for Pauline. She attended Boston public schools and graduated from Girls' High School, which was integrated on September 3, 1855, without incident (Levesque 217). Her first taste of public recognition was as a fifteen-year-old essay contestant. Her entry on "The Evils of Intemperance and Their Remedy," which admonished "parents to take responsibility for their children's behavior by living clean and industrious lives," won the ten-dollar first prize. The financial sponsor of the essay contest was William Wells Brown, who, after escaping the bonds of slavery, had become a noted novelist, dramatist, and abolitionist lecturer. He is thought by Jane Campbell to have had a lasting effect on the youthful Pauline, who early on possessed the strong moral and social code reflected in her writing (galenet.galegroup.com). Therefore, her early success as an essayist brought her more valuable prizes than a ten-dollar reward—it brought her into contact with an author she admired and taught her that her talent with words carried the ability to influence people. In addition to writing, Pauline's singing and acting talents were utilized in the family's professional theatrical ensemble, the Hopkins Colored Troubadours, who produced and performed her first play, *Peculiar Sam; or The Underground Railroad*.

She was only 21 years old when she starred in this drama at Boston's Oakland Garden to mostly good reviews. She remained in the entertainment world for the next decade, traveling and performing with her family, giving recitals and concerts, and occasionally being referred to as "Boston's Favorite Soprano." Hopkins also lectured on black history, an interest that led her to write two series for *The Colored American Magazine*, "Famous Men of the Negro Race," and its companion, "Famous Women of the Negro Race" (Campbell 3). She was an accomplished woman by any standard, but as a black woman, even a Northern black intellectual, she was exceptional.

Through this unique blend of psychological, emotional, and intellectual influences, Pauline Hopkins, the author and editor of *The Colored American Magazine*, was forged. She translated her distinctive perceptions on the major issues of race, class, gender, and equality within the framework of "a simple, homely tale, unassumingly told," and then offered her stories for the benefit of the thousands of women who read her work (Carby 128). The romance novel would be an effective vehicle to implement her social and political ideas for change, because she would portray marriage as a choice, not as an economic necessity, and women as men's equal

partners. She documented this departure from her previous writing in her preface to *Contending Forces*, stating that she made “no apology for [her] somewhat abrupt and daring venture within the wide field of romantic literature.” At the same time, Hopkins noted that the novel was meant to be “of value to the Negro race and to the world at large” (Hopkins 13). A didactic novel disguised as a romance could successfully intervene precisely because of its entertainment value, whereas a less subtle structure might not capture so wide an audience. Drawing on her status as a minor celebrity and her insight into the value of entertainment, gained from her stage experience, she guided her sisters into a future of new possibilities.

The writing of Pauline Hopkins reflected both her own life experiences and a new vision of freedom for native-born Northern middle-class black women as well as the more recently-arrived freed slaves who migrated from the South. Hopkins was loosening the bonds of domesticity and dependence for middle-class black women with plots that imagined new social worlds for women. At the same time, she validated domesticity for recently-arrived freed slaves until they gained a stronger foothold in the North. In the preface to *Contending Forces*, Hopkins acknowledged the “hard struggles here in the North to obtain a respectable living and a partial education” (13).

### Black Boston

A year after *Contending Forces* was published in Boston and *The Colored American Magazine* began, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote a series of five articles for *The New York Times*, titled “The Black North in 1901: A Social Study.” The series compared living and working conditions for blacks in the “three chief cities of the Northeast, New York, Philadelphia, and Boston” (Du Bois vii). This series is vital to understanding the historical conditions and rapid changes that underlay Hopkins’ fiction. Hopkins’ black Boston had increased in population tenfold between 1800 and 1900, with larger numbers coming in 1850, followed by rapid growth after 1880. The 12,000 blacks inhabiting Boston were “largely immigrants since the war, as the excess of adults shows” and fairly evenly divided between women and men (Du Bois 30-31). They also enjoyed a high literacy rate, 86.5%, a credit to the fully-integrated Boston school system, which was on par with schools in England and France. The “extent and accuracy with which [Massachusetts] presse[d] statistical investigation” was singled out for praise by the U.S. Census as early as 1850 (Levesque 53). Historian Elizabeth Pleck notes that the census reports of 1880 and 1900 detailed the “literacy, skin color (mulatto or black), household composi-

tion, and birthplace” of Boston’s African-American population and was the basis for most of her conclusions in “Black Migration and Poverty: Boston 1865-1900” (Pleck 13).

Du Bois noted that only 62% of “negroes [were] in gainful occupations, a smaller proportion than in other cities.” He attributed this to a “larger number of children in school and a larger number of mothers and daughters making and keeping homes” (Du Bois 37). Of those women who worked outside the home, however, three-fourths were employed as servants while the other fourth worked as teachers, dress-makers, stenographers, and catering cooks among other occupations open to black women (Du Bois 33, 37).<sup>3</sup>

Boston’s geographical complexion changed as residency restrictions were lifted in the 1880s. Upper- and middle-class blacks moved outside of the traditional city center. In particular, middle-class blacks gradually moved to the “newer tenement houses of the South End,” and in 1901, “4,000 or 5,000 negroes” lived out beyond the Common (Du Bois 31). “Thousands of the better class of negroes” purchased suburban homes worth \$2,000 to \$10,000 in the surrounding towns and lived “scattered” among the whites (Du Bois 32). This background information, drawn from Du Bois’ *New York Times* series, is the historical basis on which Hopkins’ novel rests.

In *Contending Forces*, Hopkins, as narrator, described this period through the character of a black man who, in the early years of his married life, lived in a two-room tenement:

But twenty years make a difference in all our lives. It brought many changes to the colored people of New England—social and business changes. Politics had become the open sesame for the ambitious Negro. He grasped his opportunity; grew richer, more polished, less social, and the family broadened out and overflowed from old familiar ‘West End’ environments across the River Charles into the aristocratic suburbs of Cambridge (Hopkins 146).

Hopkins, too, eventually made her home across the River Charles, which by 1920 was 4.9% black (Schneider 4).

The “Black Brahmins,” the most elite, were renowned for their exclusiveness and refined lifestyle, employing “white servants, vacation[ing] on Martha’s Vineyard,” and belonging to clubs for the distinctly privileged (Du Bois 8). They

<sup>3</sup> This is an extrapolation from Du Bois’ list, as he does not specifically identify which occupations, other than servants, were held by women.

owned “half a dozen estates of \$25,000 or more [and] ten or fifteen from \$10,000 to \$25,000.” Du Bois, taking into consideration Bostonians’ “less eager rush for wealth” (32), estimated that “their total wealth [was] probably between two and three million” (37).

As “New England ideals of home and society [had] plainly influenced the negroes,” it is not impossible to imagine Hopkins energized by the inherent possibility of all Boston’s black women emerging as New Women of Color (Du Bois 33).<sup>4</sup>

Hopkins’ experience would not have been the same had she lived in New York or Philadelphia, where the influx of Southern blacks periodically overwhelmed and set back the advancement of the black community. Each new wave of migrants had to be assimilated within the black population before the whole could move forward again. In general, “the white north greeted its African-American migrants with paternalism at best and violence at worst” (Schneider ix), and Du Bois’ study indicated that Boston “present[ed] the most favorable situation” (vii). This is not to suggest that Boston did not participate in the racial discrimination that blocked economic opportunities for her black citizens, but rather “where the average negro to-day knows the white world only from afar,” contact between blacks and whites is “broadest in Boston” (Du Bois 40). Here, contact is not limited to streetcars and employers but “extends to restaurants, theatres...churches” and some neighborhoods (40). Boston blacks, feeling themselves freer than other African Americans, were not as concerned about white racist attacks, and moved about the city unchallenged.

Migrant Southerners represented 53% of Boston’s black population in 1900. Elizabeth Pleck, in *Black Migration and Poverty: Boston 1865-1900*, determined that these were generally Tidewater cities people. Historian Mark Schneider notes Pleck’s characterization of them as a “select group who were well prepared for northern urban life,” as they were “more urban, literate, mulatto and Upper South in origin than most southern blacks” (9). They had chosen Boston because of family ties to the area, but, more importantly, they bypassed other coastal cities for the distinct purpose of taking advantage of the unique educational opportunities available to them and their children (Schneider 9-10).

<sup>4</sup> Historians such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Joanne Meyerowitz have documented the emergence of white “New Women” at the turn of the century. More recently, Glenda Gilmore has also turned to the emergence of the black “New Women.”

In Du Bois’ estimation, Boston, with its relatively small black population, was the only major city where the native-born “retained considerable influence in the leadership of the [African-American community at large]” (40). Du Bois charged them with the responsibility to “try to make the deserving and fit among them as numerous as possible” (45). The Tidewater cities migrants, literate and urban, could certainly have fit Du Bois’ profile of “deserving” the native-born blacks’ ministrations, even if they were not part of his Talented Tenth. Hopkins’ attitude in *Contending Forces* developed along similar lines, but her focus was on the migrant mulatta women of Boston. She first validated the lives and experiences of Southern freed women, so unlike free-born Massachusetts blacks, and then proceeded to offer them the possibility of advancement toward modernity through sympathetic characters.

Hopkins probably identified with Du Bois as a fellow New England intellectual, as well as a person actively promoting progressive black welfare. Her admiration for him carried over into her work. In *Contending Forces* she created a Du Boisean character, Will Smith, a native-born and college-educated Massachusetts black man, as the love interest for her southern mulatta heroine, Sappho Clark. To further the connection, Sappho duplicated Du Bois’ image of the exceptional black woman who is “deserving and fit.” Hopkins made Sappho in her own image as an independent, intelligent, and somewhat mysterious woman. She gave Sappho her own fall-back profession of stenographer, but not her dark-skinned physical appearance.

“Tall and fair, with hair of a golden cast, aquiline nose, rosebud mouth, soft brown eyes veiled by long, dark lashes” is how Hopkins visualized Sappho (Hopkins 107). Richard Yarborough’s introduction to the Schomburg Edition of *Contending Forces* describes Sappho as an “accurate representation of the plight of the turn-of-the-century Afro-American women” who, although she surpasses “every criterion for chastity and self-control, remains guilt-ridden because of some unspeakable secret in her background” (xxxiii). The “unspeakable secret” in many cases involved white rape and an illegitimate child, as it did for Sappho.

### Mulatta Women and Racism

Mulatta women were resented and maligned in many quarters by whites as well as darker-skinned African Americans. In the late nineteenth-century South, as Glenda Gilmore noted, “the mixed-race progeny” of Southern white men glaringly exposed their lack of sexual self-control, weakened their political power, and defied social control (Gilmore 71).

Mulatta women were evidence of the white men's sexual proclivity for black women and probably gave Southern white women an excuse to displace their anger and humiliation on the victim and the mixed-race child. The black mother, however, carried the heavier burden of degradation and its effect on herself and her mulatto child. A number of these women and their daughters, Pleck noted, constituted a part of the migrant population of Boston (Schneider 9).

The Northern reaction to mulatta women ranged from acceptance to rejection. The Methodist bishop of Massachusetts, Gilbert Haven, "openly advocated amalgamation and praised the mulatto as a superior human type," although, needless to say, Bishop Haven was a singular voice even among Boston's more extreme liberals (Berzon 26). A more commonly-held belief about race mixture was initially put forth by the highly-respected biologist Louis Agassiz. His "hybrid racial degeneration" theory, based on nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific principles, alleged that the mulatto inherited "none of the good qualities of either" parent and would either be sterile or "die off in several generations" (24).

Hopkins challenged this particularly insidious theory in Chapter 8, "The Sewing Circle." She slyly undermined Reverend Thomas' credibility by deftly suggesting that his logic was "almost impossible to follow" as he preached from the pulpit to Boston's black middle class.

[A]nd with impressive gesture and lowered voice [Rev. Thomas] thanked God that the mulatto race was dying out, because it was a mongrel mixture which combined the worst elements of the two races. Lo, the poor mulatto! despised by the blacks of his own race, scorned by the whites! Let [her] go out and hang [herself]! (150).

She delivered the coup de grâce in one sentence, denigrating both his intellectual capacity and his position. "What an unhappy example of the frailty of all human intellects," Hopkins wrote, "when such a man and scholar as Doctor Thomas could so far allow his prejudices to dominate his better judgment to add one straw to the burden which is popularly supposed to rest upon the unhappy mulattoes of a despised race" (151-152).

It is important to understand the context in which Hopkins was writing: racism was virulent and Social Darwinism had found a footing among many educated people as they sought a scientific basis for perceived racial differences. Although Darwin acknowledged, in his book *Descent of Man*

(1871), that the hypothesis of sterility in mulattos was scientifically invalid, Thomas Dixon incorporated the "degeneration" theory in his 1905 racist propaganda novel, *The Clansman*, as well as in his earlier 1903 work, *The Leopard's Spots* (Berzon 27). Dixon's novels, according to Glenda Gilmore, were highly influential among Northern readers, who believed his fiction was thinly-disguised insider's knowledge about Southern blacks. The late nineteenth century "enjoyed wide and receptive audiences" for the racist ideology of black inferiority among whites (Gilmore 28).

Additionally, the mulatta woman contended with the forces of "fear [of] non-acceptance by blacks because of her light-colored skin. Many darker-skinned Negroes have felt resentment toward, and envy of, those with lighter-colored skin and Caucasian features," the former seeing the latter as having greater, though possibly unearned, acceptance and access to opportunity (Berzon 14). There may also have been a belief that these mulatta women voluntarily denied their own race in favor of white men, and in doing so, became fair sexual game for either race. Hopkins addresses this point when she allows Sappho to misconstrue a proposal of concubinage for a marriage proposal by a black male character. "Marriage!" exclaimed John, "who spoke of marriage? Ambitious men do not marry women with stories like yours!" (Hopkins 320). This exchange exemplifies the fact that mulatta women were subjected to undeserved ridicule and humiliation for circumstances beyond their control by black men as well as white.

An additional source of rejection emanated from the native-born, middle-class black women, who were particularly anxious to distinguish themselves from the migrant women whose lives had been more recently touched by slavery than their own. Hopkins' passion to struggle against disunion, a theme reiterated throughout her novel, was focused on the behavior of all classes, but particularly aimed at the middle and upper classes, which were aghast at the thought of being even remotely connected to a mulatto. As the narrator says, "Out of a hundred apparently pure black [women] not one will be able to trace an unmixed flow of African blood since landing upon these shores!" (151). Hopkins thus realigns them with their true, if preferably forgotten, origins. "Some have lost the memory of servitude in the dim past; a greater number by far were recruited from the energetic slaves of the South, who toiled, when they should have slept, for the money that purchased their freedom, or else they boldly took the rights that men denied" (45). In Hopkins' reality, the free-born Northern black and the freed mulatto were more alike than different.

“Did you never think that today the black race on this continent has developed into a race of mulattoes?” (151). With this question, Hopkins attempted to bind African Americans together against ignorance masquerading as “science” at a time when, Hopkins felt, the fortunes of the race were not secure enough to be internally divided. She admonished them to remember that “the fate of the mulatto will be the fate of the entire race” (151). *Contending Forces* was deceptive because it was seen as a romantic novel, but it served Hopkins’ purpose of drawing middle-class readers’ attention to issues that undoubtedly distressed her and could defeat them all, including their inverted racism that appeared to threaten the purity of blacks.

Hopkins’ strong moral sense also was distressed by what she deemed as shrewd insincerity motivating a “certain class among colored women of New England” (Hopkins 144). These women held exclusive sewing circles in their homes for young, educated black women and gave talks with titles such as “[t]he place which the virtuous woman occupies in upbuilding a race” (148). These ambitious, occasionally pretentious, and seemingly well-off black women had been developing since the close of the Civil War and the opening of new opportunity for blacks. These were the self-declared, iron-willed social arbiters of Black Boston.

Hopkins recognized in them, as she mimicked so clearly via her character of Mrs. Willis, an overwhelming desire to further their own social and financial fortunes under the guise of being dedicated race women. Historian Richard Yarborough has noted that Mrs. Willis may have been modeled after Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, a leader in the women’s club movement and one of the most influential black women in the Boston community of the late nineteenth century. Mrs. Willis “had loved her husband with a love ambitious for his advancement, and boast[ed] that she had made the fortunes of her family and settled her children well in life” (145, 147). Now a widow without means, she seized upon the opportunity presented by “the great cause of the evolution of true womanhood in the work of the ‘Woman Question’ as embodied in marriage and suffrage” (146). Yet there was no underlying altruism in her choice of cause. Rather, she saw the “advancement of the colored woman” as “the new problem in the woman question that should float her upon its tide into the prosperity she desired” (147). Presumably, Hopkins felt compelled to expose the Mrs. Willises as she believed the issues surrounding the status of women were too serious to be left in the grasping hands of women who “contrived to live in quiet elegance, even including the little journeys from place to place, so adroitly manag[ing] as to increase [their] influence at home and [their] fame abroad” (144).

## Enlarging the Concept of the Virtuous Woman

The fictional heroine of *Contending Forces*, Sappho is a composite character. She represents the many southern mulatta women who inhabited Boston during the late nineteenth century, a number of whom were, as she was, sexually abused by white Southerners and held in “concubinage,” a form of sexual slavery enforced by threat (15). Hopkins would have known, or known of, these women through her political and professional activities. It appears she drew on their experiences to create a character who would publicly personify their collective status as shamed black women who were bereft of moral standards and “grow to loathe themselves” (154). Reading between the lines of *Contending Forces*, it seems Hopkins seized this opportunity to validate these women and improve their self-images by employing sophisticated psychological techniques.

Hopkins, understanding the need to speak to these feelings of degradation which motivate self-hatred, used Sappho to question “whether Negro women will be held responsible” for the lack of virtue with which they are charged (149). She addressed the issue by having her most authoritative female character explain that people’s “ideas of virtue are too narrow. We confine them to that conduct which is ruled by our animal passions alone. It goes deeper than that—general excellence in every duty of life is what we may call virtue” (149). Virtue, or the lack of virtue, at the turn of the century was a serious matter for a freed mulatta woman, who could not dispute the miscegenation within her family. With her paler skin and European facial features, Sappho was easily recognized and assumed to be among the most morally lax of black women. Hopkins uses Sappho’s character not just as an expression of an ideal, but also to make certain points about discrimination against mulattoes in the black community.

*Contending Forces* was meant to inspire and encourage mulatta women to re-examine their own self-criticism in light of Sappho’s epiphany. In her epiphany, Sappho questions, “[w]hy should I always walk in the shadow of a crime for which I am in no way to blame?” (205). As the narrator comments, “[t]he more [Sappho] thought the stronger became her resolve not to fight against fate, but to accept the goods the gods provided without question” (205). By enlarging the concept of virtue to include their special circumstances, Hopkins permitted mulatta women to redeem their mutilated sense of self-esteem. She fostered self-forgiveness through her fictional character’s understanding of their lives and concerns: “I believe that we shall not be held

responsible for wrongs which we have unconsciously committed, or which we have committed under compulsion. We are virtuous or non-virtuous only when we have a choice under temptation” (150). Hopkins reconstructed the difference between how a woman judges her actions as a freed woman and how she should judge her actions as a slave who is “under pressure of circumstances which [she] cannot control” (154). As historian Paula Giddings described it, the black nineteenth-century novelist had to redefine “the criteria of true womanhood” (85). Hopkins removed “[t]he sin and its punishment” from the shoulders of the mulatta women and placed it squarely at the feet of the “person consciously false to his knowledge of right” (Hopkins 150).

### Tapping Into Strong Religious Beliefs to Save the Children

On the brink of the twentieth century, Mary Church Terrell, a highly-respected educator and civil rights champion, concluded that “[t]he real solution to the race problem rested” with the future of the children (Lowenberg 23). Hopkins, whom Yarbrough acknowledged as possessing an “extraordinary degree” of empathy for her characters, tackled the emotionally-charged question of the illegitimate mulatto child. Sappho, who had presented herself as an unencumbered single woman, was, in fact, the mother of such a child. The painful circumstances surrounding her conception by rape had led her to deny the child, and “[s]he felt nothing for the poor waif but repugnance” (Hopkins 342). Although she supported the child financially, her aunt raised her son without his knowing that Sappho was his mother. Hopkins’ deep sympathy for Sappho’s situation may have come from her knowledge of similar feelings shared by real Boston mothers of children born under these circumstances.

Hopkins bridges this chasm of unhappiness by reuniting the mulatta mother with her unwanted child. Hopkins, who was childless, showed a marked sensitivity for these women and used her gift of words to persuade them to replace repugnance with love. She used Sappho, who “possessed a brilliant mind and resolute character” as well as the “strength of will enough for a dozen women,” to articulate how this reunification could be accomplished (341).

Hopkins reinforced the idea that Sappho was a good person and struggled to do the right thing. As Sappho represented all mulatta mothers, it meant they too were good and could do the right thing. Because Sappho was vested with intelligence and a strong will, mulatta women who identified with her circumstances and reasoning could follow her lead. One of the major wounds inflicted on slave mothers had been

their inability to prevent their children from being taken away from them. Now, in a parallel sense, they could not control the aversion they felt for their unwanted children who had been fathered by force. There was cruel irony in this convoluted reenactment of that earlier tragedy with which Sappho had to come to terms—as the real mulatta mothers did.

Hopkins devised an inspired strategy to guide these lost mulatta mothers back to their children. Through Sappho, she reframed how they ought to think about their children by providing them with a religious prism through which to view and heal the relationship between them and their children. “[Sappho] felt God had sat in judgment of her willingness to forget her child” (342). Hopkins, as narrator, used Sappho’s thought process to suggest that it was God, and God alone, who wanted these children to come into the world, and Sappho did not possess the right to question Him: “Dost thou question the providences of God? Who art thou, to question the ways of Infinity? Who art thou, to question the wisdom of the Most High? Lo there is the field—the life of a child—work for a bounteous harvest” (342). Possessed by this alternate idea that it was God’s will for her to bear this child, “the desire of God in the child,” she was able to reclaim her son (350).

### Reframing Self-Perceptions

Hopkins offered these desperate mothers a seemingly simple solution through Sappho’s resolve. “She gazed on the innocent face with mingled feelings of sorrow and regret as she thought of the lonely, loveless life of the child. She had been so wicked to put him away from herself. But under it all was a feeling of relief now that she had made up her mind to a future which the child would share. Her shipwrecked life seemed about to find peace” (342).

Hopkins imparted peace to her fictional Sappho and used Sappho’s compassion and forgiveness to impart this peace to her own real-life counterparts. She appears to have been so psychologically attuned to these women that she was able to offer unconditional understanding of their motives and actions. Hopkins brought to light the deep “feelings of degradation [that] had made [Sappho] ashamed of the joys of motherhood, of pride of possession in her child” (350). With the open acknowledgment of the pain and guilt which accompanied these feelings of distaste for the child, Hopkins relieved the anguish which surrounded the births of these unwanted babies (345). She gave permission and encouragement to these mulatta mothers to take back what was rightfully theirs, because it had been God’s will that

brought the child into the world, not a white Southern rapist. She believed the mother needed the child as much as the child needed the mother.

### Conclusion

Pauline Hopkins devoted much of her life to the advancement of her people. In particular, she appeared to be deeply involved in the emotional rescue of the mulatta women who had been freed and migrated to Boston in large numbers in the decades between 1880 and 1900. They represented one-quarter of the African-American community and they dealt with problems beyond those of the native-born free blacks in Boston. Although literate and urban, they did not possess the social skills or attitudes that free blacks had been developing for generations in the North and, therefore, were not readily accepted. Hopkins recognized the need to reach out to these women, as women, and as members of the larger community.

From her own life experiences as a single, self-supporting, independent, and empathetic woman, she had developed a vision for the New Woman of Color. To Hopkins, the modern age (the twentieth century) meant a woman's education and talents would be utilized outside the home; marriage would be an option, not a necessity; and she would be on equal footing with a man at home, in the voting booth, and in the workplace.

Hopkins was a visionary who hoped that the whole community of black and mulatta women would one day emerge into the modern age—even if it was not on the same day—as a stronger, more resilient community of Women of Color.

However, before this ideal could become a real possibility for mulatta women, Hopkins had to formulate a strategy which would deal with their specific issues and, thereby, open a pathway for new ideas. She worked toward this interim goal by nurturing and respecting her mulatta women characters in *Contending Forces*. She used her fictional characters to face and resolve circumstances and situations that real mulatta women were facing in 1900. She addressed many of their major concerns: self-perceived immorality, children fathered by force, pseudo-scientific theories denigrating mulattos, and rejection by the free-born black community of Boston. She validated their lives by enlarging the concept of a virtuous woman, by employing cognitive techniques to re-frame their perceptions, and by tapping into their strong religious beliefs. These fictional characters served not only to help increase the mulatta woman's feelings of self-worth, but to help impress upon the Northern free-born black woman a sense of obligation and connection to her Southern sister.

Hopkins gave both Southern-born and Southern migrant black women an opportunity to re-examine their lives in light of the choices she presented for her New Women of Color in turn-of-the-century Boston.

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