

*PART ONE*

*HISTORY, CITIZENSHIP, AND THE  
AMERICAN WAY*

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Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century.

– W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903a)

We must . . . remember that . . . the local community must always be the most permanent, and that the concept of the nation is by no means fixed and invariable. It is, so to speak, only one fluctuating circle of loyalties between the centre of the family and the local community, and the periphery of humanity entire. . . . It is only a law of nature, that local patriotism, when it represents a distinct tradition and culture, takes precedence over a more abstract national patriotism.

– T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (1934)

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Excerpt

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## 1

*RACE PROGRESS AND  
EXEMPLARY BIOGRAPHY**PAULINE HOPKINS AT THE  
COLORED AMERICAN MAGAZINE*


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We know that there are able publications already in the field, but the pang that has set our active world a-borning is the knowledge that the colored man has lost the rights already won because he was persuaded and then bullied into lying down and ceasing his fight for civil liberty. . . .

– “Editorial and Publishers Announcements”  
*New Era Magazine* 1 (February 1916): 60

We are sparing neither time nor money to make this Magazine the most authentic historian of the race’s progress.

– “Editorial and Publishers Announcements”  
*New Era Magazine* 1 (March 1916): 124

More than a decade after her severance from Boston’s *Colored American Magazine* (CAM), Pauline Hopkins retained a politically charged philosophy of African-American arts and letters, as evidenced by her pronouncements heralding the publication of *New Era Magazine*. Colleagues from the *Colored American* might have been surprised by the stridency of her call to action, but none would have been shocked by its militancy or insistence upon community-based, collective action.

By the time of this final acknowledgment of the collaborative nature and resultant power of the periodical press, Hopkins had resolved the earlier problematic issue of the relationship between the public self and history. For black America the periodical press could not afford to be ephemeral; it had consciously to shape and nurture its nascent history. In her culminating effacement of self as historian, Hopkins ceded authority to the magazine and, by extension, to the African-American

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periodical press at large. The move from author of individual significance (a concern of her transcendentalist forebears) to author as a community force serving a larger historical project began for Hopkins during her formative years as editor of the *Colored American Magazine*.

Throughout her tenure at the *Colored American* (1900–4), Hopkins acknowledged her obligation not simply to cultivate but to create an audience for her revisionist race history. She assumed the authority of race historian and mediated between the issues of race and gender to incite a readership to pride and action (on the race and gender split, see Stansell 1992). Even the *Colored American's* title page claimed agency and responsibility by appealing to that segment of the population whom Du Bois would soon call the “Talented Tenth” (Meier 1988: 207–47; Bruce 1989: esp. chap. 5). This monthly (not unlike such nineteenth-century bourgeois cousins as the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Putnam's Monthly*) schooled its readers in arts and manners, hoping to provide that facade of success expected in the emerging middle class. But it also advanced a political and cultural agenda in its challenge to the status quo and its commitment to the discovery and conservation of African-American history. The shadow of compromised citizenship cast by *Plessy v. Ferguson* necessitated an urgent commitment to the recovery and perpetuation of race history.

Hopkins transcended the journal's arts context by writing for “those who never read history or biography.”<sup>1</sup> She hoped that, through the imitative commodified culture of the magazine, ideas of the marketplace could become a marketplace of ideas. Visually sharing qualities associated with weekly newspapers in advertisements for products ranging from Frederick Douglass watches to cosmetics, the *Colored American* offered a product-intense, textual world in which even biography and history might become marketable commodities. Thoroughly attuned to the intertextual power of the emulative matrix of the press, Hopkins knew that her historical portraits could gain power when read through the animated and often competing texts of each issue. She wrote in the certainty that her biographical texts would inform her fiction and social notes, even as they were informed by the larger textual whole. In this way, she wrote in that grander nineteenth-century tradition identified by Edmund Wilson as one in which “criticism . . . was closely allied to history and novel writing, and was also the vehicle for all sorts of ideas about the purpose and destiny of human life in general” (1969: 122–3).

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Although Hopkins the novelist has recently earned deserved attention, Hopkins the biographer has attracted only passing interest. And, curiously, despite a commitment from scholars to African-American autobiography that includes the restoration of “the black slave’s narrative to its complex status as history and as literature” (Davis and Gates 1985: iii), the significant role of biography as a means of shaping race history through public lives has received comparatively little attention.<sup>2</sup> Intertextual reading of Hopkins’s historical counternarratives (fictional and biographical) in the *Colored American* suggests how she constructs history and challenges conventional generic distinctions by conflating discourses of history, biography, fictional narrative, race, and gender in order to shape a rhetorical self to counter the absence of a reliable race history.<sup>3</sup>

The validation of Hopkins as an authentic historian through her role as biographer demands exploration of her reliance on and divergence from the New England regional tradition of biography as the spiritually or ideologically informed presentation of exemplary lives. Comfortable with the tradition she seeks to challenge, she advances the cultural and racial history of slavery into present-tense instruction applicable to this era of imperiled citizenship. In so doing, her biographies and fictions find authentication through life stories that derive their significance from the ability to inspire in the individual reader what Emerson calls the “unattained but attainable self” (1841: 239). Her Emersonian emphasis that “all history is . . . but biography”<sup>4</sup> stems from the belief that in order to translate, as William Andrews says, “word into act” (1986: 71) readers must sense the historical possibilities of daily life. Hopkins’s belief that history is firmly embedded in individual narratives would seem to accord with Hayden White’s definition of narrative as “a solution of how to translate *knowing* into *telling*, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture-specific” (1981: 1; Goody 1991). But while such “fashioning” into universals might have some appeal to a fiction writer in search of a broad audience, such grandiose universalizing would be anathema to Hopkins as race historian.

Far more ambitious than the familiar quest for totalizing fictions (whether we call them fiction or history), her portraits, like Emerson’s, share the didactic ends of that distant rhetorical ancestor from the Puritan great migration: exemplary biography.<sup>5</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, in

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discussing exemplary biography and its “organizing metaphors,” argues that this kind of biography “transmutes history itself into a drama of the soul” (1975: 8). Not unlike the Cotton Mather of *Magnalia Christi Americana* – who saw “*Biography*, provoking the *whole World*, with vertuous Objects of Emulation” (1702: 89) – Hopkins sought a biographical form that would incarnate history; and not unlike the W. E. B. Du Bois of *The Souls of Black Folk*, who was aware that “the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness” (1903a: 365), she pursued a history that would secure and preserve the significance of these exemplary Americans. Her preoccupation with the translation of representative lives into authentic history begins with two series of biographical sketches written for the *Colored American*. Appearing monthly from November 1900 to January 1903, “Famous Men of the Negro Race” and “Famous Women of the Negro Race” constitute her own experiments in historiography and biography in harnessing this once sacred impulse for secular service. Attending to the spirit of this world, she composes history from exemplary lives in the hope of (in Deborah McDowell’s words) “elevat[ing] the image of the entire race” (1990: 95).

The formulaic inheritance of the representative biographical sketch, which denies the literary or historical uniqueness of these lives, reiterates and extends the grander, antebellum historical context of slavery so that it may inform the citizenship crisis of the day.<sup>6</sup> Like Lydia Maria Child, whose *Freedmen’s Book* (1865) had isolated “the power of character over circumstances” as the core didactic purpose of such insistent representative lives, Hopkins transformed race icons into players in a history requiring authentication through participation (Child 1865: 218).<sup>7</sup> She translated the familiar lives of Toussaint-Louverture, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman into participatory, exemplary texts, and in so doing relaxed into the conventions of the established genre and the obligations of essential biography, wherein the life described becomes an extended allegory (on social versus essential biography, see Bercovitch 1975: 149). Her challenges to this rhetorical inheritance would include figures about whom Hopkins felt ambivalent (e.g., Booker T. Washington), less famous and more local personages better served by a social biography (wherein the life is but a microcosm of its historical context of great events), and professional women whom she saw as

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embodiments of a community rather than as individual heroes. The personalized flexible organization of these sketches allows Hopkins to accommodate the aesthetic dimension of emplotment (employing vignette and dialogue to animate the life) as well as the cognitive historical obligation to argument (exposing the greater moral imperatives of history).<sup>8</sup> Drawing upon what Hazel Carby has called “an idealized concept of her New England past” (1987: 121), Hopkins sought to enlighten and inspire readers to a kindred abolitionist fervor by using social and cultural exemplars to nullify competing racist ideologies. But, unlike her transcendentalist models, she sought not to privilege the individual but rather to celebrate an evolving sense of historical integrity and community. This chapter explores Hopkins’s move from the inherited rhetoric of the representative biographical sketch to a culturally defined, intertextually enriched vision of the way in which all history *is* biography.

Committed to the “wonderful deeds and brilliant achievements which have been accomplished by men of color throughout the world,” “Famous Men of the Negro Race” declares its historical project by delineating an audience “denied its history and distinguished only as the former slave[s] of the country” (*CAM* advertisement, November 1900).<sup>9</sup> This project is one of recovery as well as commemoration, and offers the “truth” that will give African Americans “the history of a patriot, a brave soldier, the defender of the country from foreign invaders, and God fearing producer of the nation’s wealth” (*CAM*, November 1900). The role call of local heroes insists upon emulative public life and active citizenship as a prerequisite to mentorship as well as historical significance.

While ostensibly “preserving the fascinating individual personality of each man,” Hopkins subverts the unique in favor of the cumulative contribution to a public genealogy and restorative kinship in order to invent history. Reading real events (i.e., the strict chronology of the men’s lives) as paradigms for the larger cultural narrative, Hopkins, like any post-Hegelian historian, accepts her role as interlocutor, using anecdote (see Fineman 1989) and narrative emphasis to lend structure to lives and events as she mediates between the individual heroic soul and the grander racial and cultural tapestry.

Of the dozen portraits composing “Famous Negro Men,” three representative men constitute the larger cultural matrix and inheri-

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tance of the series: Toussaint-Louverture, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington. These exemplary cultural heroes invest the series as a whole with a vaguely Emersonian stature, while the less defined and more local exemplary lives derive their historical coherence and resonance within the larger context of these three historically centered, slavery-defined cultural heroes. Readers familiar with Emerson's *Representative Men* (1850) and Child's *The Freedmen's Book* would see these lives as obligatory cultural markers as well as history. Appearing individually in the *Colored American*, these lives predicate a revisionary sense of how the representative biography might embody the political agenda of the magazine itself. The force of the collective cultural sweep – from the distant and unrecorded (other than by the enemy) trials of Toussaint-Louverture, to the meticulously historicized and self-fashioned lives of Douglass, and the contemporary and self-chronicled life of Washington – approximates Hopkins's personal commitment to the relationship of life's detritus to the embracing context of history. Each biography challenges her to exploit the exchange context of the magazine without sacrificing the integrity of her fashioned lives.

With "Toussaint L'Overture" (*CAM*, November 1900, 9–24),<sup>10</sup> Hopkins grounds her enterprise in a history of slave revolt while acknowledging the Emersonian rhetorical tradition she both inherits and modifies. A prefatory note displaces the expected invocation and announces a larger contextualizing project. The despoilment of a garden paradise mirrors the destruction of its inhabitants, as Hopkins reinvents the competing histories of old and new worlds in terms of the history of her race. She expands the power of descent discourse to include the recovery of Haiti's proper history.

Ever mindful of historical resonances, Hopkins displaces historical claims and certainties by calling attention to their arbitrary and transient natures. Authenticating historical documentation supplants received historical fact in a chain of calling and renaming, which loosely anchors the evidence of position or place. In order to emphasize the link between native servitude and American slavery, Hopkins resorts to fictional strategies and the literary, Christian discourse of the garden. Hispaniola becomes an Edenic place of temperate climate, "always laden with fruit and covered with flowers." To capture the precolonial and prelapsarian state of this virginal place, a place literally without commodities, she describes it as a land in which



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“Gold, silver, and copper mines abound,” although such metals have no exchange value there. The garden as trope yields to an accelerated Genesis tale of fall and expulsion in which African slaves replace the aborigines, who had been “driven into a cruel and barbarous servitude by the Spanish adventurers.” Slavery quickly turns into a “many-headed monster,” which not only casts the race into servitude but confuses the racial line: “from the mingling of the whites and blacks the mulattoes had sprung.” From this island issues what Hopkins calls the “voice of history . . . the point of interest for all Negroes” (Hopkins 1900–1: 10). The embodiment of that voice is Toussaint Louverture.

Signifying upon Emerson’s *Representative Men*, Hopkins extends her characterization to include the implications for race history as she envisions Toussaint as “Napoleon’s black shadow,” a man “who made and unmade kings and formed governments anew.” She exhorts her readers to accept that “races should be judged by the great men they produce, and by the average value of the masses” (1900–1: 11) and then supplies a historical narrative that constructs a Haitian perspective on the revolution. Throughout this new history, readers engage in alternative readings of race biography and history: “Such was the beginning of a revolt that ought to have a world-wide fame. It stands without a parallel in history, – the successful uprising of slaves against their masters, and the final establishment of their independence” (14). The authorial “ought” intensifies Hopkins’s claim to revisionary history. The effacement of what should have been “world-wide fame” prompts her reconstruction project. Yet as the collective history of the island is recalled, it “seems merged in the exploits of one man, L’Overture” (14). Securing the relationship between the collective “uprising of slaves” and the individual “exploits of one man,” Hopkins at once privileges the hero while suspending his deeds in a collective matrix. This larger cultural impress enables a historical narrative to blossom from the life of a “Negro [who] left hardly a line for history to feed upon” (14).

In the absence of autobiographical witness, Hopkins, suspicious of the “reluctant testimony of [Toussaint’s] enemies,” resorts to narration to depict this Senegalese “Negro of unmixed blood” (15). She acknowledges his slave origins while stressing his literacy and classical training, thus bridging origins and circumstance for contemporary readers. In a sharp role reversal, Hopkins’s heroic slave assumes

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mastery “at the head of the newly freed, leading them from victory to victory for France under Bonaparte” (15). He, conforming to what Claudia Tate has labeled the “gender conservatism” of the era (1992: 161), assumes the lineaments of regal patriarchy, and “under his paternal administration, laws, morals, religion, education, and industry were in full force, while commerce and agriculture flourished” (Hopkins 1900–1: 17).

A dialogic interface of history and biography, kindred to that of her openly historical fictions, draws authenticity from its intertextual relationship with excerpts from journals and letters of Toussaint’s “enemies.” Anxious for readers to appreciate the significance of this representative man, Hopkins plots the arc of his career parallel to that of his *bête noire*, Napoleon. The ideological rivalry inscribed in the figures of Toussaint and Napoleon corresponds to Emerson’s own sketch of Napoleon. When at last it becomes evident that Napoleon is determined to crush the spirit of liberty in the blacks of St. Domingo, Toussaint evolves into the intrepid leader who obeys to the letter the stern mandates of war.

In an unexpected inversion of the slave narrative, death rather than birth is “shrouded in mystery” (23). Under Napoleon’s hand, Toussaint dies off the record, at least in Hopkins’s hagiography. Hopkins, willing to compensate for that historical silence, interjects: “We know not the exact manner of his taking off, but that he was cruelly murdered *there is no doubt!*” (23; emphasis added). Clearly under the sway of Thomas Carlyle’s and William Wordsworth’s romantic projections of the hero when she insists upon Toussaint’s “grandeur of a great moral heroism” (19), Hopkins nonetheless relies upon a rhetoric of disengagement with her European models as she pinpoints that hero’s fatal flaw: “the ruin of Toussaint was due in great measure to his loyalty to France and his filial feeling for Bonaparte” (16).

Hopkins’s depiction both recovers a lost historical perspective and sustains an essential biography, placing Toussaint and Haiti in a historical continuum of race history for African Americans. Effecting closure with a historical sweep from Thermopylae to Fort Wagner, Hopkins as visionary historian sanctifies the record through an act of Pan-African revelation: “History recorded these deeds, and they shall be known; God intends it so! Therefore the history of the Island of St. Domingo is interesting to the Negroes of the United States; brothers in blood, though speaking different languages, we should clasp