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African American Cultural Products and Social Uplift, the End of the 19th Century - the Early of the 20th Century

Juan Zheng
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL PRODUCTS AND SOCIAL UPLIFT,

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Juan Zheng
2004
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Juan Zheng

Approved by the Committee, May 2004

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I. Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II. Slavery and Negative Stereotypes</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III. Written Texts and Visual Images in African American</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Products</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV. Cultural Products and the Reality of African American</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “Gold Dust Twins Washing Power Ad,” May 1906.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “Playin’ The Banjo,” circa 1890</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “Chef and Mammy Potholder Wall Hangers.”</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “Cook’s Delight,”</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “Nursemaid With Her Charge,” ca. 1855</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “Toothpick Holders from the Coon Chicken Inn.”</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “Hagar,” 1875.</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. “Asleep,” 1871</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. “Awake,” 1872</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. “Poor Cupid,” modeled ca. 1872/carved 1876</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

In American studies, scholars often choose to study either written texts or material culture. While some scholars think that written texts are the focus, others argue that the material world plays an important role in American Studies as well. The author thinks that the study of text and visual images should be combined.

This study explores the equally important roles of written texts and visual images and the ways in which African American elites use both to combat negative stereotypes of blacks and uplift their social position. Thus, written text and visual images are weapons to mitigate these negative stereotypes, which helps them take charge of their own identity.

The first part of this study addresses the importance of slavery in creating negative stereotypes of blacks. Personal records and archaeological recoveries are among the evidence of how negative stereotypes forced blacks to deal with a fixed pattern of representation, which reinforced prejudices and claims of racial and social inferiority by whites.

The second part of this study addresses the ways in which African American writers use written texts, including dramas and novels, and visual images to fight against negative stereotypes. The evidence for this section includes an examination of dramas, novels and visual images by African Americans in the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century. This literature is distinctive for its criticism of negative stereotypes of blacks through the portrayals of miserable freed blacks. The evidence for this section includes both visual images with negative portrayals and material examples with positive messages.

The last part of the study explores the effectiveness of African American elites’ written texts and visual images as weapons in the struggle for equality. These cultural contributions have helped African Americans break negative stereotypes, and improve their social and economic positions in society.
AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL PRODUCTS AND SOCIAL UPLIFT,
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In American studies, scholars often choose to study either texts or material culture. Some think that written texts, such as literature, are the focus. Other scholars argue that aspects of the material world, such as objects and visual images, play an important role in American Studies as well. In my opinion, these two would shed the most light on studies when combined. To foreigners, America is an alien world, but using common knowledge can help them to understand its differences. Ethnographers further confirm that universal behaviors, including birth, eating, sleep, and death can help human beings understand each other’s differences and similarities. Therefore, I think that the role of material culture is just as important as that of texts in the understanding of a different culture. In China, American Studies scholars have been focusing merely on the study of written texts while ignoring another important part of American studies, material culture studies. However, during my study, I have found that material culture studies can be just as informative as written texts.

One common way to understand the world is to divide it roughly into two parts, text, including ideas, thinking, or literary works, and material culture including objects, artifacts and many other material things. Material culture study is the study of all things that people leave behind including farm tools, ceramics, furniture and roads. Both texts and visual images are written or created by human beings and reflect human thoughts and behaviors. However, as literature has been part of academic curricula for a longer time than material culture, its importance has been better understood. Compared with literary studies, material culture study is relatively new\(^1\). Scholars of material culture

\(^1\) It first started as the subject of college and university courses in 1977 at Yale University.
believe that because they are passed down from one generation to another, material objects not only reflect life and behaviors of people over time, but also give a more concrete and vivid demonstration of human behavior and living conditions than text alone. Thus, these two parts are complementary to each other.

Just as visual images supplement and illustrate texts, material culture study arises in the broader strata of academics as a supplementation and at the same time extension and reinforcement of literary studies. Material culture study and literary studies are under the same roof in the academic world; and just as literary studies are oriented towards texts, and as material culture study is related from the very start to human subjectivity, so both are conjoined in understanding and studying a culture that is “alien” to the investigator, as America is to Chinese researchers in the American Studies field.

Material culture study has been defined as, “the study through artifacts (and other pertinent historical evidence) of the belief system—the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society.” Most material culture researchers strongly believe that “material data has a potential to contribute fundamentally to the understanding of human behavior” because material culture is not merely “a reflection of human behavior;” it is “a part of human behavior” (Schlereth, 2-3). In order to further illustrate this point of view, I will explore a case in point: how African American elites effectively used both written texts and material images to combat negative stereotypes of African Americans propagated by slavery during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
CHAPTER II

SLAVERY AND NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES

Jamie Wacks notes in *Reading Race, Rhetoric, and the Female Body* that in the 1920s, some blacks were trying to break into the white-dominated world by being financially and socially successful. Alice Beatrice Jones, a light-skinned mulatto who succeeded in marrying Leonard, “son of Philip Rhinelander, a member of the extremely wealthy white, old Huguenot, high-society New York Rhinelander clan” on October 24, 1924, is one who succeeded (Wacks, 164). However, six weeks later, Alice was accused of deceiving Leonard about her black ancestry in a divorce court in the *Rhinelander* Case. In order to show that Leonard should know about her black ancestry because her body was darker than her face and they had sex before marriage, she was asked to tear off most of her clothes in front of the “all-white, all-male, all married jury” to prove it (Wacks, 164). Her tragic story made people aware that even after emancipation blacks were still faced with racial stereotypes and prejudice. Black, far from being only a color, was associated with slavery and racial, social and cultural inferiority. The powerful effect of the stubborn black stereotypes left over from slavery amazed me. The story of Alice’s failure to pass for a white and many other similar stories recorded by black elites at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century have a strong connection with the history of slavery in North America.

Negative stereotypes of blacks helped to support and justify slavery. Elizabeth Frazier recorded in *Some Afro-American Women of Mark* that it was in 1620 in Virginia that slavery was first introduced² (Frazier, 373). The transatlantic slave trade then

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² There is a different recording of when first slaves came to U.S. Reverend Joseph D. Brokhage records in *Francis Patrick Kenrick’s Opinion on Slavery* that “The first Negroes reached our shores [America] in 1619 when twenty Negroes were transported” (Brokhage, 11).
began to grow by continued shipping of blacks from Africa by white Europeans and Euro-Americans. In 1761, slavery reached its zenith in America. Brought from Africa, slaves were said to be “uneducated” or “primitive.” As slaves, they had no freedom, no rights, and thus often a life of suffering. “Considered as cattle, and discussed as coons, mules, or monkeys,” they were placed in the lowest stratum of society (Abrahams, 34).

Recordings of the wretched life of the slaves can be located in “personal records,” and “archaeological recoveries” (Katz-Hyman, 1-2). For example, travelers to America often described the lives of slaves. Julian Niemcewicz, a close friend of Polish general and patriot Tadeusz Kosciuszko, wrote the following during a visit to Mount Vernon in 1798:

We entered one of the huts of the Blacks, for one can not call them by the name of houses. They are more miserable than the most miserable of the cottages of our peasants. The husband and wife sleep on a mean pallet, the children on the ground; a very bad fireplace, some utensils for cooking, but in the middle of this poverty some cups and a teapot. ... A very small garden planted with vegetables was close by, with 5 or 6 hens, each one leading ten to fifteen chickens. It is the only comfort that is permitted them: for they may not keep ducks, geese, or pigs. They sell the poultry in Alexandria and procure for themselves a few amenities. (Katz-Hyman, 1-2)

My personal visit to Berkeley Plantation, a historic plantation on the James River in Virginia, also made me painfully aware of the pitiable situations of the blacks. Berkeley plantation is the ancestral seat of the Harrison family, which includes two presidents of the United States and a signer of The Declaration of Independence. Archaeologists have been doing research and preserving this historical site. Upon my entrance to the basement of the main building, a sign written “Whistling Walk along the
Passages” aroused my curiosity. The interpreter there explained that in order to prevent the slaves from stealing food from the plates, they had to whistle all the way through the passages from the kitchen to the master’s dining room. In the basement of the main building, there is a small museum that preserved and displayed archeological findings, including tools and chains. These recoveries show the miserable working conditions of these slaves. Both the sign and chains made the tragedy of slavery even more real to me: slaves were not treated as human beings with equal rights and freedom.

Through reading personal records and visiting archeological and historical sites in Virginia, I began to understand the huge gap between slaves and whites, and the subsequent stereotypes and discrimination white people had towards blacks even after Emancipation. A stereotype is “a standardized conception or image of a specific group of people or objects” (Nachbar and Lause, 236). Social psychologists, Craig McGarty, Vincent Y. Yzerbyt and Russell Spears introduce three guiding principles to understand stereotypes, “(a) stereotypes are aids to explanation, (b) stereotypes are energy-saving devices, and (c) stereotypes are shared group beliefs” (2). The first principle implies that stereotypes are formed because they can help the perceiver better understand a certain issue. The second principle means that it saves the perceiver’s time and energy and the third suggests that stereotypes are assigned by a group of people who share the same understanding. Thus, stereotypes are taken as shortcuts to explanations for a group of people, or simplification of possible complex issues and thus inaccuracy.

According to Penelope Oakes, Alexander Haslam and John Turner, stereotyping has been characterized as “a process of simplification which serves to make reality manageable and, at worst, pathological vehicle for prejudice and ill-treatment” (Oakes, Haslam and Turner, 2). By accepting stereotypes, people essentially take shortcuts and avoid the trouble of addressing specific issues or individuals. By ignoring unique
characteristics of individual members, stereotypes simplify the true identity of African Americans. By ascribing characteristics to black people based on categorization, stereotypes lead to misrepresentations of Afro-American’s true identity. Because stereotypes are shared beliefs among groups of perceivers, a black is unfortunately born into “this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (Du Bois, 3). “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, 3).

Developed during the history of slavery, stereotypes continued to exist in the media and in people’s minds. Popular stereotypes include being “toothy, and grinning,” (Hudson, 141) “in service roles,” and “in advertisements to sell soap (see fig 1), clothing, and everything else, from grits to gin” are portrayed in newspapers, and advertisements (Hudson, 146). “Playin’ The Banjo” (see fig. 2) depicts the simple and stupid smiles of the “toothy, and grinning blacks.” “Chef and Mammy Potholder Wall Hangers” (see fig. 3), “Cook’s Delight” (see fig. 4), and “Nursemaid with Her Charge” (see fig. 5) portray blacks in service roles as mammy, chef, or nursemaid. Black children were traditionally depicted as “‘sambos,’ ‘coons,’ and ‘pickanninies’” such as “Smiling Sambo,” and “Toothpick Holders from the Coon Chicken Inn” (see fig. 6 & 7), which “conveyed overt messages of subhuman status, and denied the sociopolitical reality of Blacks during that era [nineteenth century]” (Hudson, 141).

3 “Indolent, faithful, humorous, loyal, dishonest, superstitious, improvident, and musical, Sambo was inevitably a clown and congenially docile” (Geist and Nelson, 265).
Fig. 2. Anonymous. “Playin’ the Banjo,” circa 1890. Painting from Collection of the Amistad Foundation, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.
Fig. 6. Anonymous. “Smiling Sambo,” early 19th century. Tambourine from Collection of the Amistad Foundation, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.

Fig. 7. Vogt, Donald. “Toothpick Holders from the Coon Chicken Inn.” The one on the right has been repainted. Courtesy of Jan Thalberg (Reno, 7)
Because some slaves might “have indeed ‘shuffled,’ acted ignorantly and moved slowly as a ruse to fool their masters,” blacks are popularly depicted as Sambos: “Indolent, faithful, humorous, loyal, dishonest, superstitious, improvident, and musical... inevitably a clown and congenially docile” (Geist and Nelson, 265). In a word, these “mental cookie cutters” were developed from and related to American slavery as “there is ample evidence to suggest that various stereotypes grew out of the American slavery experience itself (Nachbar and Lause, 236).

Furthermore, these stereotypes of blacks endured because these images appealed to slave owners and other whites:

Sambo’s mindless frolicking, his intense loyalty to his master, and his childlike need for protection and guidance were just the proper traits the planters needed to justify the institutionalization of slavery. Sambo was basically a happy child. Given freedom of choice he would not work a single minute of his life. He would dance, fiddle, and spend his hours in wanton idleness. Sambo needed his master as much as his master needed him (Geist and Nelson, 265).

Therefore, negative stereotypes of African Americans gave white Americans satisfaction, self-fulfillment and superiority, which in return made stereotypes difficult to change. Thus, these enduring stereotypes force a fixed pattern upon blacks, which created prejudices.

In the end of the 19th century and the early of the 20th century, black people were considered as part of an inferior race by many whites. According to Gosset, American thought from 1880 to 1920:

“generally lacks any perception of the Negro as a human being with potentialities for improvement. Most of the people who wrote about
Negroes were firmly in the grip of the idea that intelligence and temperament are racially determined and unalterable.” In 1928 an eminent sociologist wrote that: “perfect agreement of all these tests: the historic-cultural, the mental, the absence of geniuses...seems to indicate strongly... that the cause of such a difference in the Negro is due not only, and possibly not so much to environment, as to heredity.” (Lieberman, 145)

Considered as hereditarily inferior, African Americans were believed to be incapable of writing or painting art works. In American mainstream culture especially, before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, some white people doubted the ability of African Americans to master artistic forms. Many white Americans held the view that “artists of African descent are circumscribed primitives and exotics with limited skills in communicating more thoughtful and grand artistic ideals” (Hudson, 135). Laura Wexler records in Tender Violence that “the ability of slaves to express themselves through photography was severely restricted in the most basic of ways” (Wexler, 1).

In addition, after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, African Americans were still struggling for votes and full citizenship. Lynching and racial violence were normal from the 1870s to the start of World War I. According to Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918, 3,224 people were lynched in the thirty-year period. Of these, 2,522 were black. Among the justifications given for the lynchings were petty offenses such as “using offensive language, refusal to give up land, illicit distilling” (African American Odyssey). Furthermore, after Reconstruction ended in 1877, the federal government virtually turned a deaf ear to the voice of the African American populace. These situations compelled African American elites⁴ to use either

⁴ By the turn of the twentieth century, the majority of African Americans were literate.
their pens or brushes to break negative stereotypes and change this situation. W. E. B.
Du Bois writes in his famous *Souls of Black Folk* that:

> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, -- this longing
to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and
truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He
would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world
and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white
Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world.
He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an
American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without
having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (Du Bois, 4)

In order to have the “doors of opportunity” open, black writers expressed their
thoughts in written texts oriented to fight against injustice in the white-dominant
society. For example, African American novelist, Charles Waddell Chesnutt⁵ ironically
portrayed the success, difficulties and dilemmas of blacks’ passing for white in his
novels *The House behind the Cedars*, *The Marrow of Tradition* and *Paul Marchand*, to
ridicule the idea of black inferiority. African American writers such as Angelina Weld
Grimke and Langston Hughes used their literary works to describe the methods
rebellious black youth used in order to escape negative stereotypes and discrimination.
Grimke’s *Rachel* is said to be “the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in
order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of the ten
million of colored citizens in this free Republic” (Hull 117). Set against a backdrop of
overt racism and pervasive housing discrimination in the 1950s, Hansberry’s *A Raisin

⁵In 1928, Chesnutt was awarded the Spingarn Medal for “pioneer work as a literary artist depicting the
life and struggles of Americans of Negro descent, and for his long and useful career as scholar, worker,
and freeman.”
*in the Sun* manages to expose racial injustice and Afro-Americans’ struggle for decency in America. In visual images, African American artists Mary Edmonia Lewis, Meta Warrick Fuller, Henry O. Tanner, Laura Wheeler Waring, Allan Rohan Crite, Aaron Douglas, and Gordon Parks depicted what they thought of as true African Americans through their sculptures, paintings, and photographs.

As Jurgen Habermas, author of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, argues, cultural products in the private sphere are oriented towards specific audiences. When they are displayed or published for an audience, these cultural products in the private sphere are oriented to break negative stereotypes and improve social and economic positions of African Americans. The enlightenment from reading and interpreting of these cultural products has a “specific subjectivity” from the very beginning (Habermas, 43). Because these cultural products are constructed with a particular audience in mind, the enlightenment or education derived from reading and interpreting is hoped to result in a “specific subjectivity”—breaking of negative stereotypes and uplift in their social position.
CHAPTER III
WRITTEN TEXTS AND VISUAL IMAGES
IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL PRODUCTS

3.1 WRITTEN TEXTS

As cultural products including written texts and visual images are oriented to specific audiences, it is important to investigate how these texts and material images are presented by writers and artists. Charles Chesnutt wrote many novels investigating the life of slaves and the dilemma they faced because of negative stereotypes and inferior social positions. The successful passing of John described in *The House behind the Cedars* breaks the stereotypes of black inferiority. Major Carteret’s and Olivia’s begging for medical assistance of a black doctor, Dr. Miller, at the end of *The Marrow of Tradition* suggests that whites need the help of black doctors no matter how much they have been previously despised. In *Paul Marchand*, Paul’s change of identity overnight makes us aware of social and legal fabrication. Through these characters, Chesnutt declares that though these ivory-white skinned blacks are not pure white, they have the same potential and capacity to live and act as a white person. Black blood does not make them inferior.

In *The House behind the Cedars*, John Walden, the mulatto son of Mis’ Molly, has a successful life in the north passing as a white man, with the name of John Warwick. He even succeeds in getting married to a white girl. After his wife’s and father-in-law’s deaths, he enjoys the full rights of a white man. He has a big plantation, with a prospering career as a lawyer. Though he cannot openly go back to his home in Pattesville to be united with his mother, Mis’ Molly and sister, Rena, his success compels him to bring his sister to South Carolina, so that she can enjoy all the privileges
of a white lady. At the beginning, Rena succeeds. Her physical beauty wins the heart of
a suitor, George Tryon, a handsome Knight, who crowns her as Queen of Love and
Beauty. George is so obsessed with Rena that he wants to marry her. Though Rena is
hesitant because of her true mulatto background, she finally accepts Tryon’s proposal.
However, because Mis’ Molly misses her daughter so much, she gets sick and writes to
Rena. As George Tryon is away for business and not supposed to come back soon, Rena
ventures to go back to Pattesville after writing him a letter. Coincidentally, Tryon
finishes his business earlier and his mother asks him to go to Patesville to settle
something else. In Patesville, the bottom falls out and Tryon discovers Rena’s true
identity as a light-skinned mulatto.

In this story, Chesnutt makes it clear that there is no essential difference between
people classified as black or white. Though John and Rena are black according to the
“one-drop-rule” that divides Americans into two groups without gradations, they can
pass for white and live successfully as whites. However, Chesnutt also makes it clear
that the unequal social customs and laws treat these two and many other blacks unfairly.
The law forbade black-white intermarriages. According to “The Virginia ‘Act to
Preserve Racial Integrity’ of 1924”, “[i]t shall thereafter be unlawful for any white
person in this state to marry any save a white person, or a person with no other
admixture of blood than white and American Indian” (Sollors, 24). If a light-skinned
mulatto was discovered, he/she would sink down to the lowest stratum of the society
again. Therefore, when George Tryon and Rena saw each other in Patesville, Rena
fainted and fell: “the color faded from her cheek, the light from her eye, and she fell
fainting to the ground” (Chesnutt, 360). Rena did not actually change when Tryon
learned of her mulatto identity. However, stereotypes and conventions in society
changed both of them. Rena did not have the confidence to live a life as a white lady
again. For Tryon, being a mulatto was worse than being an illegitimate child or from a lower class:

If Rena had been white, pure white (for in his creed there was no compromise), he would have braved any danger for her sake. Had she been merely of illegitimate birth, he would have overlooked the bar sinister. Had her people been simply poor and of low estate, he would have brushed aside mere worldly considerations, and would have bravely sacrificed convention for love; for his liberality was not a mere form of words.

(Chesnutt, 362)

However, no matter how light skinned she was, she was still categorized as a black. This simplification implies that Rena is no different from other black women, who belong in service roles as cooks, nursemaids or mammies. The social mindset that black women are property of white masters makes Tryon unable to accept Rena as his wife. Thus, negative stereotypes derived from slavery made people of color unable to marry the person they wanted to or live the life they should have.

In *The Marrow of Tradition*, Major Carteret and his wife, Olivia Merkell, have been childless for a long time. When Olivia eventually conceives a baby, she endures great pains and dangers to have it. In addition, as the baby, Dodie, is the last one Olivia can conceive, Major Carteret and Olivia treasure it as a precious jewel. Olivia Merkell has a half sister, Janet, who is a light-skinned mulatto. After their father’s death, Janet and her colored mother are kicked out of their father’s house although Janet’s mother is legally married to their father. Olivia and Janet look so alike that people sometimes take Janet for Olivia. Nevertheless, Olivia never considers Janet as her sister. Janet and her husband, Dr. Miller, a colored but skilled doctor, who is “a graduate of the Vienna hospitals, and a surgeon of unusual skill,” live a sorrowful life as Negroes (Chesnutt,
Their life is made worse because of *The Morning Chronicle*, “the most influential paper in the State,” founded and led by Major Carteret (Chesnutt, 467). Carteret is against the freedom of slaves and dislikes the changes brought by freed blacks:

> “...the old times have vanished; the old ties have been ruptured. The old relations of dependence and loyal obedience on the part of the colored people, the responsibility of protection and kindness upon that of the whites, have passed away forever. The young Negroes are too self-assertive. Education is spoiling them ... they have been badly taught. They are not content with their station in life. Sometime they will overstep the mark. The white people are patient, but there is a limit to their endurance.” (Chesnutt, 498).

Major Carteret dislikes colored people so much that he does not allow Dr. Miller to participate in Dodie’s operation when a little piece off the handle of an ivory rattle is swallowed and lodged in his throat: “in the South we do not call negro doctors to attend white patients. I could not permit a negro to enter my house upon such an errand” (Chesnutt, 520).

Furthermore, Major Carteret’s “inflammatory comment” in the Chronicle has a great effect and slowly sparks the anger of the white people (Chesnutt, 657). A storm breaks and the streets are filled with armed white men, who investigate, search, and kill blacks. During this storm, Janet’s child is killed. Coincidentally, Major Carteret’s and Olivia’s child is suddenly ill. No capable doctors can be found except Dr. Miller at that time. However, because Dr. Miller has been previously rejected by Major Carteret to participate in Dodie’s last operation, and his child has been killed in the violence instigated by Major Carteret as well, Dr. Miller is not willing to treat the baby. As Dodie is the only child Olivia can have, she finally discards all her pride and prejudice to beg
Janet and Dr. Miller for help. For the first time in her life, she calls Janet her sister. "'Listen, sister!' she says, ‘I have a confession to make. You are my lawful sister. My father was married to your mother. You are entitled to his name, and to half his estate.'" (Chesnutt, 717). This story ends with Dr. Miller’s decision to cure Major Cateret’s baby, Dodie. Though a colored doctor, Dr. Miller is as worthy of respect as every other white one. It is inaccurate to think that all blacks were in service roles and that they were incapable of being surgeons. The ubiquitous understanding of all blacks in service roles was a simplification of black people’s careers. The stereotypes of blacks in service roles wipe out the possibility that some blacks are intelligent enough to have more decent jobs. Therefore, stereotypes held towards the black were unjust and inaccurate.

In *Paul Marchand*, Chesnutt portrays the illegitimate child of a white father, Paul Marchand, to be a free man of color living in New Orleans in the 1820s. Paul Marchand receives a good education and has an honorable and successful life with his quadroon wife and children. Everything satisfies him except his black ancestry, which undermines his success and civil and social equality. For example, a quadroon ball is for white gentlemen only: “No amount of wealth or education could qualify a male quadroon for this gathering of the cream of his own womanhood” (Chesnutt, 50). However, in order to get his sister-in-law out of a quadroon ball and thus save her from shame, he takes the risk and attends such a ball. The discovery that he is not a white man results in a beating and puts him in prison. The stay in jail makes the well-educated and well-off mulatto suffer even more. Paul’s education in France makes him aware of the genuine equality that America cannot offer. The knowledge of a possible place for true equality makes it harder for him to bear the unspeakable shame and suffering. He dislikes New Orleans and the white people, and has a desire to move his whole family to France: “The air of New Orleans stifles me. I am a man—a free man and not a
slave—and I must breathe the air of a free country. I hate these sacre whites!” (Chesnutt, 69).

However, the will of Pierre Beaurepas, the wealthiest man in New Orleans, declares Paul Marchand to be not only a white man, but also the heir to his estate. All of a sudden, he rises from hell to heaven. He becomes a white and rich man. He now has access to every privilege he previously could not have. Nevertheless, Paul’s change of status makes his marriage with a colored woman void and his quadroon children bastards. “A quadroon wife... whom neither the law nor the church recognizes” (Chesnutt, 119). He can even marry the most beautiful girl, Josephine, whose father has a greedy heart. However, Paul Marchand, who has had a taste of both the white and black world, decides to decline both. He does not want to discard his black wife and children because he had a life as one of them. He instead chooses to go to France with them, “where men are judged by their worth and not by their color” (Chesnutt, 139).

Though Paul Marchand is interpreted to be pure white at the end of the novel, he has suffered from the simplification of being categorized as a colored person. The negative meaning associated with slavery and stereotypes have been following him as long as he has been classified as a member of the black community. His group-based interactions hide his true characteristics as an intelligent and educated individual. By changing his color overnight, Chesnutt ironically pokes fun at the misrepresentation of negative stereotypes held towards colored people.

Habermas writes, “The psychological novel fashioned for the first time the kind of realism that allowed anyone to enter into the literary action as a substitute for reality. The contemporary drama too became fiction no differently than the novel...” (Habermas, 50). Like novels, dramas written by black writers in the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century are also distinctive for their criticism of negative
stereotypes through the portrayals of pitiable freed blacks. In *Take a Giant Step* (1953), Louis Peterson depicts a black boy, Spence, who turns to illegal drinking in the bar and involves himself with prostitutes after arguing with his teacher about a race issue and being kicked out of school. The race issue is raised by his white teacher, Miss Crowley, who says that the Negroes in the South were so stupid that they waited for the Northerners to come down to help them. Spence strongly disagrees with this viewpoint and thus argues with Miss Crowley. The following is Spence’s recollection of his conversation with Miss Crowley:

> Then I [Spence] says, “And they didn’t teach you nothing about the uprising of the slaves during the Civil War—or Frederick Douglass?” she [Miss Crowley] says, “No—they didn’t.” “In that case,” I said, “I don’t want to be in your crummy history class.” And I walked out of the room. I’m shaking, I’m so mad ...I went into the Men’s Room and smoked the cigar. (Peterson, 72)

Other African American dramatists also depict rebellious black youth to show the difficulty and impatience blacks have with the stereotypes whites have of them. In *Rachel*, Angelina Grimke portrays Rachel Loving, an educated young black girl, who loses hope for society and decides to be childless. In *Mulatto: a Tragedy of the Deep South*, Langston Hughes describes Robert Lewis who murders his biological father when he does not admit their blood ties. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry depicts Beneatha Younger who rejects assimilation and looks back to Africa to solve her problems. These three young and educated black individuals are representative of many character sketches made by African American dramatists who suffered from negative stereotypes in this so-called “equal” society.

In Grimke’s *Rachel*, Rachel is a well-educated black female, “a graduate in
Domestic Science,” and “high in her class,” who previously has great hope for her life as a mother (Grimke, 149). Single, she has great motherly love towards Jimmy, a little colored boy. “Oh, I wish he [Jimmy] were all mine, every bit of him!” (Grimke, 137). She thinks that it is the happiest thing in the world to be a mother:

I think the loveliest thing of all the lovely things in this world is just (almost in a whisper) being a mother! ... And, Ma dear, if I believed that I should grow up and not be a mother, I’d pray to die now.... And once I dreamed, and a voice said to me—oh! It was so real—“Rachel, you are to be a mother to little children.” Wasn’t that beautiful? ... I know now why I just can’t resist any child. I have to love it—it calls me—it—draws me. I want to take care of it, wash it, dress it, live for it. I want the feel of its warm body against me, its breath on my neck, its hands against my face. I love the little black and brown babies best of all. ... I feel that I must protect them. They’re in danger, but from what? I don’t know. I’ve tried so hard to understand, but I can’t... because I love them best, I pray God every night to give me, when I grow up, little black and brown babies—to protect and guard. (Grimke, 139)

Her love for children makes her want to protect them and do the best for them. Through her stories of the dream land, which she shares with Jimmy, she dreams of a life in an equal and happy place, “the Land of Laughter” (Grimke, 159).

However, Grimke goes on to describe the visit of a black woman, Mrs. Lane and her little daughter, Ethel, which shatters Rachel’s dream completely. Ethel’s answer to why her puppy is blind is an ironic but thought-provoking reflection of how she is mistreated in school. The seven-year-old girl is afraid of being disliked when the puppy sees that she is black: “If he saw me, he might not love me any more” (Grimke, 155). Innocent as she is, Ethel knows that she is different in color from her fellow classmates.
and thus not liked by them. Being judged by color only, she suffers from the harshest stereotypes and mistreatment of both her teacher and classmates. Ethel’s story makes Rachel worry about the school life of her adopted son, Jimmy, which makes her suffer greatly. She is afraid that Jimmy might have the same misfortune at school. Her desire to protect Jimmy and black children like him is so intense that she is afraid she may not have the capability to do it. The pain of not having the capacity to protect black children would be greater than the pain of than having them. Thus, Rachel decides to be childless in order that her offspring might not have to suffer so much from the stereotypes and hostility white people have towards them because of their race.

Grimke’s portrayal of Rachel’s brother, Tom, and her suitor, Strong, leads readers further into the pain of negative stereotypes. Previously, Strong, Tom and Rachel, representatives of educated black people, strove to eliminate the differences of race by finding decent jobs with their college educations. When they try to find jobs that college graduates expect to get, it is impossible for them. Strong becomes a waiter because he and his mother have to live and eat. It seems that his college education does his family no good because he is colored. Just as Mrs. Loving says, “You see … the tremendous handicap of being colored” (Grimke, 138). Likewise, Tom, an electrical engineer, after searching for jobs for several months, realizes that, “… our educations aren’t of much use to us; we aren’t allowed to make good—because our skins are dark” (Grimke, 149). Strong’s and Tom’s situations make Rachel realize that “There’s no more chance for me than there is for Tom, --or than there was for you—or for any of us with dark skins” (Grimke, 152).

By saying so, Rachel is criticizing the stereotypes of blacks in service roles brought on by slavery. They are still suffering from these stereotypes and not at all distinguished from more slaves who once held service roles, they are rejected from
decent jobs. In order to make ends meet, they have to take up jobs as waiters, conveniently placing them back in the social category of “servants”. By portraying the hardship these educated youth suffered, Grimke challenges the insurmountable stereotypes society had imposed upon blacks.

In *Mulatto: a Tragedy of the Deep South* (1935), Hughes depicts how Robert Lewis handled his serious predicament. Robert Lewis is the son of Colonel Norwood, a white plantation owner, and Cora Lewis, black housekeeper and mistress to Colonel Norwood. Robert has very light, ivory-yellow skin and bears a strong physical resemblance to his biological father. He is “as tall as the Colonel, with the same gray-blue eyes” (Hughes, 6). He receives a good education with the support of Colonel Norwood, which makes him think differently from other black people:

I’ve been away from here for six years. I’ve learned something, seen people in Atlanta, and Richmond, and Washington where the football team went—real colored people who don’t have to take off their hats to white folks or let ‘em go to bed with their sisters. … (Hughes, 13)

Because of his white blood, he is consciously aware of his white heritage and wants to claim it and all the rights and privileges that it entails. First of all, in order to affirm his right, he acts boldly, driving the Ford of his biological father after being told to work in the cotton field. To be like the other whites, he always enters through the front door instead of the side door. “I’m gonna act like my white half, not my Black half” (Hughes, 13). “I’m old man Norwood’s son…. See these gray eyes? I got the right to everything everybody else has” (Hughes, 13). He is not willing to bow down to white men, “… no more bowing down to white folks for me—not Robert Norwood” (Hughes, 13).

Secondly, Robert attempts to get public recognition of his white background by
demanding equal treatment in society. After picking up his package in the post office, he sees that the radio tubes he had ordered had been smashed in the mail. He boldly asks for his money back, explaining that he could send the broken tubes back. Nevertheless, the lady in the post office does not want to hear his “educated nigger talk” and yells at him because two or three white people are waiting behind him to get service (Hughes, 14). Robert will not give up his right to receive full and equal attention, and insists on showing her the tubes, which irritates the lady so much that she throws him out. Though unsuccessful, he is not intimidated by the harsh treatment of the white people in the post office because he believes in claming his own just rights. “They had no right to throw me out. I asked for my money back when I saw the broken tubes” (Hughes, 17). By a small act of asking for the money back, he demands equal treatment, hoping that people will recognize his white half. At the same time, when he proclaims his white heritage, he denies his black identity, “And I’m not Black either. Look at me, mama. Don’t I look like my father? Ain’t I as light as he is? Ain’t my eyes gray like his eyes are? Ain’t this our house?” (Hughes, 15). However, his own father still denounces him, refusing the blood ties with him by pointing out his black half. He is not willing to recognize Robert as his son. By denying the blood relations, he also denies Robert’s social position. He remarks that Robert is the same as other niggers. “He’s no more than any other Black buck on this plantation—due to work like the rest of ’em”(Hughes, 7). Colonel Norwood also does not expect Robert to talk to him as a white boy would. He wants Robert to respect him as other “niggers” do:

NORWOOD: I mean talk like a nigger should do to a white man.

ROBERT: OH! But I am not a nigger, Colonel Tom. I am your son.

NORWOOD: (Testily) You’re Cora’s boy.

ROBERT: Women don’t have children by themselves.
NORWOOD: Nigger women don’t know the fathers. You’re a bastard.…

ROBERT: …You’re talking about my mother.

NORWOOD: I am talking about Cora, yes. Her children are bastards.

ROBERT: *(Quickly)* And you’re their father. *(Angrily)* How come I look like you, if you’re not my father?

NORWOOD: Don’t shout at me, boy. I can hear you. *(Half smiling)* How come your skin is yellow and your elbows rusty? How come they threw you out of the post office today for talking to a white woman? …

ROBERT: They had no right to throw me out… Just as you had no right to raise that cane today when I was standing at the door of this house where you live, while I have to sleep in a shack down the road with the field hands. *(Slowly)* But my mother sleeps with you. *(Hughes, 17)*

When these two different voices clash, a solution must be found. Out of rage and disappointment, Robert determines that this solution is to kill his biological father. After killing his own father, he does not forget to show that he is indeed the “legitimate” inheritor of the house. He walks slowly out of the house from the front door instead of running outside the kitchen. “*[H]e exits slowly, tall and straight against the sun*” out of the front door *(Hughes, 18)*. Though he wants to escape, he is not willing to die elsewhere, but in “his father’s house.” “… if I see they gonna get me before I can reach the swamp, I’m coming back here, mama, and let them take me out of my father’s house—if they can. They’re not going to string me up to some roadside tree for the crackers to laugh at” *(Hughes, 18)*. He maintains these feelings and when tired of being chased, he runs back to the house and uses his last bullet to kill himself. Confronted by the denial of blood relations and a legitimate position in the house, Robert suffers from the stereotypes of mainstream society towards people like him.
No matter how light-skinned and educated Robert is, he is still seen as a slave. He is therefore expected to walk through the side door only and always speak and behave as a Negro. It would have pleased the lady and other white people in the post office if he had acted as a stupid toothy and grinning black or shuffled like a docile sambo instead of driving the Ford. These negative stereotypes imposed upon Robert make him no different than other slaves. This compelled him to boldly challenge such unjust treatment as if only in this way could he define his own identity with pride and dignity.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry depicts how Beneatha, daughter of the Youngers, an African-American family living on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s, wants to go back to Africa to look for her identity. By desiring to search for her identity in Africa, Beneatha is acting rebelliously and opposing assimilation. As Mama is a devoted Christian who demands that there is a God in her house, Beneatha also chooses to rebel by not believing in God:

> God hasn’t got a thing to do with it ... I get sick of hearing about God...I mean it! I’m just tired of hearing about God all the time. What has He got to do with anything? Does he pay tuition? ... It’s all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don’t accept. It’s not important. I am not going out and be immoral or commit crimes because I don’t believe in God. I don’t even think about it. It’s just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no blasted God—there is only man and it is he who makes miracles! (Hansberry, 116)

Furthermore, Beneatha’s opposition to assimilation is shown in her choice of boyfriends. She dates two very different men, Joseph Asagai and George Murchison. On the one hand, she is happy with Asagai, her Nigerian classmate and boyfriend, who
Asagai has nicknamed her "Alaiyo," meaning "One for Whom Bread—Food—Is Not Enough." By giving her this new name, Asagai is encouraging Beneatha into deep and philosophical thinking. He is helping her to find her true identity.

Though Asagai criticizes Beneatha a few times in the play, his criticism seems to be out of a desire to help her. He criticizes her straightened hair, which resembles Caucasian hair, and persuades her to cut it and keep a more natural, more African look. He criticizes her independent views, but seemingly only to give her new energy and strength. Near the end of the play, after Beneatha tells Asagai that the money her brother, Walter, has invested is gone, he criticizes that she is not as independent as she believes herself to be. Instead, her dream of attending medical school is bound up with the insurance money from her father's death and her reliance on Walter's investing schemes:

ASAGAI: Then isn't there something wrong in a house—in a world—where all dreams, good or bad, must depend on the death of a man?  
BENEATHA: And you cannot answer it!  
ASAGAI: I live the answer! In my village at home it is the exceptional man who can even read a newspaper ... or who ever sees a book at all. I will go home and much of what I will have to say will seem strange to the people of my village. But I will teach and work and things will happen, slowly and swiftly. At times it will seem that nothing changes at all ... and then again the sudden dramatic events, which make history, leap into the future. ...  
(Hansberry, 140)

In this description of his dream, Asagai declares that he wishes to return to Nigeria, bring back what he has learned, and share it with the people of his homeland so that their lives can be improved. In other words, proud of his African heritage, Asagai
does not give up hope for the prosperity of his home country. He believes in bringing modern advancements from Western society back to Africa to improve the quality of life there. He is optimistic about his dream even though he understands the difficulties that lie ahead. Through dialogues, he tries to teach Beneatha about her African heritage as well. This exchange also leads to Asagai asking Beneatha to marry him and return to Africa with him in a few years. He would teach and lead the people while she could practice medicine and help take care of people. Asagai and his dream enable Beneatha to discover the energy of new hope and reshape a new dream for herself, which helps open her eyes further to the necessity of probing her own existence and identity.

With this help and energy, she grows and explores to figure out her ideal profession. When the insurance money is cheated away and Mr. Linder, representative of the white community, refuses to receive their family into the white neighborhood, Beneatha recalls the incident which had initially given her the desire to be a doctor, the accident of Rufus hitting the sidewalk when sliding down the ice-covered stone steps. She remembers that his bloody, open face was healed and only a little line was left in the middle of his face. She had been amazed at the wonder of fixing up the sick and making them whole again. After the incident, however, she thinks these things do not “seem deep enough, close enough to the truth” (Hansberry, 140). She realizes that healing the body alone is not enough. Good and wise thinking are far more important than a healthy body. Thus, she tries to seek a better way to solve the problem of racism.

In contrast to Beneatha’s response to Asagai’s positive influences, she is most depressed and angry with George, her pompous and affluent African-American suitor, who has succeeded in life by assimilating to the American mainstream society. As a result of his assimilation, he looks down upon his black heritage. He thinks that blacks who maintain their heritage are “nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and
some grass huts!” (126). Beneatha strongly disagrees with his opinion that one should give up his original cultural heritage in order to be completely assimilated into the dominant culture. Therefore, when her sister-in-law, Ruth asks if somebody will tell her what “assimila-whoevers” means, Beneatha answers that “It means someone who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case, oppressive culture!” (Hansberry, 126). By giving assimilation such a clear definition, she shows that she despises George’s acculturation to the mainstream society because, unlike George Murchison, who is ashamed of his own cultural heritage, she is proud of it. She criticizes George’s shallow thinking by saying:

you are standing there in your splendid ignorance talking about people who were the first to smelt iron on the face of the earth! The Ashanti were performing surgical operations when the English were still tattooing themselves with blue dragons…. (Hansberry, 126)

Therefore, though the other family members hope Beneatha will marry George Murchison, she rejects him, because she believes him to be shallow and blind to the problems of race. “… the Murchisons are honest-to-God-real-live-rich colored people, and the only people in the world who are more snobbish than rich white people are rich colored people” (Hansberry, 116). Subsequently, she receives a marriage proposal from her Nigerian boyfriend, Joseph Asagai, who wants Beneatha to get a medical degree and move to Africa with him. She identifies much more with Asagai’s interest in rediscovering her African roots than with George’s interest in assimilating into white culture.

Beneatha’s rejection of assimilation is further emphasized when she cuts her hair. At the beginning of the play, she has straightened hair. Midway through the play, after Asagai visits her and comments that her hair is “mutilated hair,” she cuts her
Caucasian-like hair. Her new, radical afro represents her embracing of her heritage. Beneatha's cutting of her hair is a very powerful social statement, as she symbolically declares that natural is beautiful, prefiguring the 1960s cultural credo that black is beautiful. Rather than forcing her hair to conform to the style society dictates, Beneatha opts for a style that enables her to more easily reconcile her identity and her culture. Beneatha's new hair is a symbol of her anti-assimilationist beliefs as well as her desire to shape her identity by rediscovering her roots in Africa. “To go to Africa, Mama—be a doctor in Africa...” (Hansberry, 146).

Suffering rejection from the white community, Beneatha and her family experience the results of stereotypes associated with slavery. As slaves had always been in service roles, they did not have an equal position in the society as whites. Thus they were expected to be poor and live in a poor neighborhood. When during Beneatha’s time blacks try to break the norm and move into white communities, they are not accepted because they are still considered as before: lower status people who should live in a poor community. The stubborn and uniform stereotypes caused African Americans to suffer greatly.

By describing the difficulties and problems African Americans have because of the simplified label on them, these African American writers, Chesnutt, Grimke, Hughes, and Hansberry challenge the misrepresentation of stereotypes. By addressing each individual difficulty, they try to break these oversimplified stereotypes and thus portray dignified African American images. In this way, they try to present accurate images of blacks and improve their social positions accordingly.

3.2 VISUAL IMAGES

“A painting on exhibition is like a printed book seeing the day, a play performed
Paintings have the same important function as novels or dramas that bring ideas into the public sphere (Habermas, 40). African American elites not only write literary works, but also use visual images, including sculptures, paintings and photographs portraying positive black images in material culture to combat the negative stereotypes whites have of them. The photographs, sculptures, and paintings made by African Americans help construct a proud and noble African-American identity. Since the legal Emancipation of enslaved blacks in the 1860s, black people have had great freedom to use cameras and other instruments to express themselves. Over many decades, more and more black artists have published their works as whites do. As a result, artistic works have become great tools for exposing intolerance. African American artists, Mary Edmonia Lewis, Meta Warrick Fuller, Henry O. Tanner, Laura Wheeler Waring, Allan Rohan Crite, Aaron Douglas, and Gordon Parks depict what they consider to be accurate, positive images of African Americans through their visual works, such as sculptures, paintings, and photographs.

Mary Edmonia Lewis was an expatriate American sculptor with black and American Indian blood. On September 6th, 1890, she was described by the Cleveland Gazette as a young sculptress who “furnishes a remarkable instance of perseverance not only against the disadvantages of sex, but the still greater obstacles of race and color.” Born of mixed blood, “[s]he shrewdly utilized both aspects of her heritage to skillfully navigate the maze of racism and sexism that defined her reception as a woman sculptor of mixed ancestry” (Holland, 46). Though called a black sculptress, she did not want people to overlook her Indian ancestry. Lewis’s bust of Minnehaha, illustrating Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s epic poem The Song of Hiawatha, is “the natural outgrowth of her sophisticated reading of American prejudices and the presumptions held about Native American people, as well as her awareness of the narrow boundaries within

on the stage.”
which she could succeed at her career” (Hudson, 53). By not becoming a passive victim of stereotypes, she “reshaped the limitations of those stereotypes into a remarkable act of empowerment” (Hudson, 53).

One of Lewis' early works, “Forever Free” (1867), portrays a black man who had broken the manacles of slavery and a kneeling black woman prayerfully celebrating the news of emancipation. This sculpture shows the painful history of slavery and the promising hope of freedom and equal rights. By recalling past history and looking forward to the future, Lewis has much to tell in this sculpture. Slavery has

Fig. 8. Mary Edmonia Lewis. “Hagar,” 1875. Carved marble from National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Washington, D. C. Gift of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.
been stifling their freedom and equal rights for so long that African Americans need to
learn to cherish hard-earned freedom and try all means to protect and guard against
losing it. By overcoming obstacles and embracing new hope, they are no longer slaves
and humble servants. They are instead, taking charge of their own life and identity.

Lewis also created several versions of “Hagar,” one of which is now at National
Museum of American Art (see fig. 8). The biblical Egyptian maidservant of Abraham’s
wife, Sarah, Hagar was cast out into the wilderness along with her child, Abraham’s son.
Her brow is furrowed and her hands are clasped in despair. To 19th-century eyes, this
sculpture of an outcast symbolized the plight of oppressed African-Americans and their
“inner will and determination” (Hudson, 141). Lewis also produced small, playful
“fancy pieces,” such as “Asleep” (see fig.9), “Awake” (see fig. 10), and “Poor Cupid”
(see fig. 11). The cherubic infants portrayed in “Asleep,” and “Awake” symbolize the
rebirth of African Americans by awakening from sleep in slavery. They have been
recumbent in slavery for too long but now they awaken into brand new lives as infants.
“Poor Cupid” portrays the pains of Cupid in chains, which symbolize the manacles of
slavery. Though one of his hands is chained, he has arrows, which may be used to
protect him after he is free. By portraying African Americans in both biblical and fancy
pieces, Lewis breaks the stereotypical portrayal of African Americans in service roles
and other menial tasks, such as selling soaps or clothing.

“The Awakening of Ethiopia” by Meta Warrick Fuller (1877-1968), depicts a
woman of African ancestry dressed in the classical headdress and apparel of an ancient
Egyptian pharaoh, turning, and gesturing from the mummy-like bandages that wrap the
lower part of her body (see fig. 12). Her legs and feet are restricted, which symbolize
the popular chained African American figures. Hudson sees this sculpture as “a
statement about the cultural and artistic awakening of Africa and Black Americans”
Physically restrained yet emotional and visually rich, “The Awakening of Ethiopia” served the representational needs not only of a disillusioned but hopeful black elite in the years 1914-17, but also of successive generations of “race” men and women. By not portraying this Ethiopian woman simply as a cook, nursemaid or mammy, Fuller presents an alternative image of a black woman. This reformation of black images successfully breaks the negative stereotypes and improves the social positions of African Americans, portraying them instead as dignified individuals.

Fig. 9. Mary Edmonia Lewis. “Asleep” (1871). Carved marble from the first floor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Main library. March 9 2003 <http://womenshistory.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.sjpl.lib.ca.us/MLK/exhibits/lewis.htm>
Fig. 10. Mary Edmonia Lewis. “Awake” (1872). Carved marble from the first floor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Main library. March 9 2003 <http://womenshistory.about.com/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.sjpl.lib.ca.us/MLK/exhibits/lewis.htm
Fig. 13. Henry O. Tanner. “The Thankful Poor,” 1894. Oil on canvas from Collection of the Dr. and Mrs. William H. Cosby, Jr., Greenfield, Massachusetts. Photograph courtesy of Ms. Barbara A. Hudson
Henry O. Tanner was an expatriate African American painter who won the highest honor, the Legion of Honor, in France in 1923. He has a tremendous influence on blacks and is liked by them. “American colored people—his own people—interest and astound him [Henry O. Tanner]—‘they have made great progress and they are becoming a very attractive-looking folk’” (Fauset, 241). He is believed by African Americans to preach with his brush (Fauset, 241). His “The Thankful Poor” (see fig. 13), and “The Banjo Lesson” (see fig. 14) are “his reaction to [the] demeaning caricatures ... with their distortions and rejection of real Black physiognomy” (Hudson, 141). Their dedicated expressions of praying at dinner and devoted learning and teaching during the banjo lesson reveal both the domestic and spiritual life of African Americans. They are not the simple and stupid toothy blacks portrayed in “Strumming' On the Old Banjo,” or “Playin’ the Banjo.”

In addition to distinguishing themselves in the areas of sculpture and painting, American Americans have also distinguished themselves as photographers. Allan Sekula explores the function of photography in *The Body and the Archive*, “[p]hotography promises an enchanted mastery of nature, but photography also threatens conflagration and anarchy, an incendiary leveling of the existing cultural order” (Sekula, 343). Photographers record history and try to bring about social changes. Gordon Parks challenged negative stereotypes by exposing the everyday lives of black people through his photographs. He became well-known through his portrayal of a black “U.S. government charwoman, Ella Watson” (see fig. 15). His success did not come until he realized that he had to expose the needs of the black people of his time. Though Gordon Parks used to work both as a musician and a waiter on passenger trains in the northern United States, it was not until he made his way to the Farm Security Administration in Washington D. C. in 1942 that he finally encountered discrimination.
that was more than he could bear. There, he experienced the most severe racial discrimination: “Parks later recalled that ‘discrimination and bigotry were worse there [Washington, D.C.] than any place I have yet seen’” (Levine, 226).

Gordon Parks’s initial experience as an apprentice photographer in Roy Stryker’s section in the FSA was unpleasant. Roy Stryker did not want to take him into the FSA, so he sent Parks around Washington to visit stores, restaurants, and theaters. Such discrimination made Gordon Parks so furious that he made up his mind to “‘show the rest of the world what your great city of Washington, D.C., is really like’” (Levine, 227). It was this anger and dissatisfaction towards his unequal treatment that generated his great photographs, for he wanted to find ways to “expose intolerance with a camera” (Levine, 227).

He succeeded in doing so by following Ella Watson, the U. S. government charwoman, for nearly a month. Ella Watson led a miserable and pitiful life.

She struggled alone after her mother had died and her father had been killed in a lynch mob. She had gone through high school, married and become pregnant. Her husband was accidentally shot to death two days before their daughter was born. By the time the daughter was eighteen, she had given birth to two illegitimate children, dying two weeks after the second child’s birth. What’s more, the first child had been stricken with paralysis a year before its mother died. (Levine, 227)

As he became more and more familiar with her sad story, Gordon Parks found a way to reveal it by using the power of photography. He took about seventy pictures of her. One of Gordon Parks’ best-known pictures shows Ella Watson posing before a large American flag with a mop on her left side and a broom in her right hand.
All these images presented by African American artists defy the stereotypes of being “toothy, and grinning,” serving in roles as cooks, nursemaids or mammies, and “in advertisements to sell soap, clothing, and everything else, from grits to gin.” All these African Americans presented do not have big toothy mouths, nor do they grin; rather they look intelligent, smart and determined, and unrestrained by the lifestyle of service roles.

By portraying broader aspects of African American life, African American artists attempt to show that African Americans, like white people, have colorful lives and different roles in society. By challenging these negative stereotypes, these written texts and visual images produced by African Americans themselves expose the intolerance they feel towards society. By writing miserable stories about blacks, like Rena, Paul Marchand, Rachel, Robert, and Beneatha, African American writers expose their sufferings from racial inequality and challenge society to seriously solve racial problems. By painting decent images of black people, African American artists oppose previous distorted images of blacks and attempt to reconcile the rightful position of African Americans. In their orientation towards racial issues, these African American cultural products fight against negative stereotypes and uplift blacks’ social positions.
CHAPTER IV
CULTURAL PRODUCTS AND
THE REALITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN

Through the life story of Paul Marchand, Chesnutt exposed the issue of race as a social and political fabrication. By reading the novel *Paul Marchand*, readers can discover that race is arbitrary and mutable because it is only based on human definition. Race easily changes along with the interpretation of human beings and man-made institutions, such as the legal system. Paul Marchand, for example, was previously identified as a colored man, but changes into a white man overnight. The blood in Marchand had always been the same. He could not change his ancestry or his appearance, but society’s interpretation of the law allowed him to make such a change. The social and legal recognition of him as Pierre Beaurepas’ son and the subsequent large fortune he inherited made a huge difference.

Furthermore, according to Matthew Wilson, this kind of interpretation only benefited the light skinned privileged class. Also it was not accurate because after the Civil War, “since all colored people enjoy the same degree of freedom, and are subject to the same restrictions, there are no longer any legal or social distinctions between the descendants of the former free people of color and those of the former slaves” (Wilson, xxxviii). Wilson also argues that when social decree made these free colored people “Negroes,” it was “no doubt to the advancement of democracy among themselves, perhaps to the betterment of the public morals, but certainly at the expense of accuracy and the picturesque” (Wilson, xxxviii). By changing interpretations of social and legal systems, the privileged adopted whatever was favorable for them.

In *Paul Marchand*, Chesnutt tries to “resist America’s perennial binary thinking
about race: either one is white or black with nothing possible between” (Wilson, xxxi). By portraying characters that have family ties to both races, including John Warwick, Dr. Miller, and Paul Marchand, Chesnutt challenges the negative stereotypes of colored people as stupid, low, and uneducated. Chesnutt insists “the experiences of mixed-race people break us out of the trap of the American racial binary, and that to ignore those experiences is a damaging oversimplification of our collective history” (Wilson, xxxii).

When Rachel draws the conclusion that there is no realistic chance for educated black people to have respectable jobs, she refuses the marriage proposal of Strong and therefore decides to be childless. Rachel believes that by refusing to reproduce, she is also not providing the white community with black children to torment. By doing so, Rachel recognizes that race makes a big difference, that it is a major hindrance for colored people. By reading the drama, readers are led to ponder whether Rachel made a wise decision or not and to question American concepts of race.

Audrey Smedley, author of Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview, writes “...race is the major mode of social differentiation in American society; it cuts across and takes priority over social class, education, occupation, gender, age, religion, culture (ethnicity), and other differences” (Smedley, 20). Whether they were well educated or not, black people could not escape their inferior status, imposed on them by their race. They were subject to certain inequalities simply because of their skin color. They had to bear the fact that the white children could have:

a square deal handed out to them—college, position, wealth, and best of all, freedom, without galling restrictions, to work out their own salvations. With ability, they may become—anything; and all this will be true of their children’s children after them. (Grimke, 149)

They, on the other hand, were forced to accept the bitter reality that they were “destined
to failure” when competing with or comparing to white children and end “in despair” (Grimke, 149).

Rachel’s dream of being in the land of laughter, where there are no worries and sorrows but happiness; Robert’s dream of being Colonel Norwood’s officially recognized son and thus attaining his legitimate social position in the society; and Beneatha’s dream of being a doctor are all hindered by negative stereotypes, because by being colored, blacks are a threat to whites. Linder in *A Raisin in the Sun* says:

> what do you think you are going to gain by moving into a neighborhood where you just aren’t wanted and where some elements—well—people can get awful worked up when they feel that their whole way of life and everything they’ve ever worked for is threatened. (Hansberry, 135)

Grimke depicts Rachel’s decision to be childless in order to mitigate the stereotypes white Americans hold towards black people. As a matter of fact, choosing not to bear children is not a solution taken by Rachel alone. Robert Boyd writes in *Minority Status and Childlessness* that “[a]n increase in childlessness accompanied the U. S. fertility decline of 1880-1930” (Boyd, 331). It is important to see whether the increase in childlessness is more common among blacks or whites. Thus, it is worthwhile for us to look into investigations made about the percentage of childlessness of educated whites and blacks:

Investigations that have compared whites and blacks found that at high levels of education and income, black women were more likely to be childless, controlling for age at marriage. Other studies find that upwardly mobile black couples remain childless to enhance their status. Moreover, as early as 1940 there was a positive relationship between childlessness and the educational attainment of married black women. (Boyd, 333)
Using census data, the results tend to support this hypothesis, suggesting that among college-educated, high-status couples, blacks delayed marriage longer and had higher rates of voluntary childlessness than did white couples during this period. (Boyd, 331)

The picture of Ella Watson standing before an American flag was taken in 1942, when the country was still divided over the issue of racial inequality. It is surprising that black soldiers were fighting in WWII defending that very flag. “A series of social forces began to exert pressure in the first half of the 20th century that focused on the question of the equality or inequality of races” (Lieberman, 145). In 1950s, blacks still were facing serious stereotypes and discrimination. Under such circumstances, Parks’ photograph exposes not only the present inequality, but also a craving for equality. Because no other objects are seen in this picture except the large American flag, the mop, the broom and Ella Watson, the observer’s attention is directed towards the relationship of these things and their meanings. The symbolism of these objects makes them seem almost alive. The American flag is the symbol of the country, a product of the American Revolution, when Americans tried to escape the oppression of the English and establish independence. Thus, it is also a symbol of freedom and liberty. Before this symbol of the country, Ella Watson has only a mop and a broom with her. As brooms and mops are tools for cleaning, they can symbolize tools for cleaning the “dirtiness” of the country, such as racial discrimination and inequality. In times of danger or emergency, brooms and mops can also be used as temporary weapons for fighting. Therefore, before the symbol of freedom and liberty, the broom and mop can be interpreted as Ella Watson’s weapons in her fight for freedom and equality. Staring straight into the camera, Ella Watson also seems to have something to say to the audience of her era. Another photograph of Parks that depicts a moment when Watson is cleaning after regular working hours also has a similar message of sweeping away the
dirtiness of America. It is especially symbolic that she is doing this in a U.S. government building, a place that is supposed to serve all people equally (see fig. 16).

Under the oppressive and suffocating environment of pre Civil-Rights-Era America, black people constantly and determinedly fought like Spence, Rachel, Robert and Beneatha. Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight champion of the world, demonstrated that white people were not necessarily superior. By beating Tommy Burns, the former white heavyweight champion, Johnston made it as humiliating as it was hurtful to the white. Though he subsequently defeated all opponents – including reigning middleweight champion Stanley Ketchel, his status as the champion was not recognized by the white boxing association. Because James J. Jeffries, the retired white heavyweight champion was undefeated, Jeffries was honored by the public as the rightful champion. When he defeated Jeffries, Johnston triumphantly declared to the world that black people were not hereditarily inferior. Johnston’s success showed the fallacy of white supremacy and pointed out that one way for the black to escape stereotypes and inferior status was to let whites understand that skin color was not connected to intelligence.

The idea of going back to Africa has also been adopted by some black elites. In 1898, Edward W. Blyden, the father of Black Nationalist ideology, wrote about the “marvelous movement called Zionism,” in his pamphlet, The Jewish Question. Deeply impressed by Theodor Herzl’s Der Judenstaat (The Jewish State, 1896), he wanted to have a movement similar to Zionism and build a Negro state in Liberia as the center of an African renaissance. Later, he emigrated to Liberia and became a significant leader in the country’s development. In the 1920s, after emancipation and reconstruction failed to bring equal citizenship to the blacks, Marcus Garvey’s “Back to Africa” movement discouraged the flickering uncertainties of going back to Africa and instead
flared up pride and hope in the mind of the American Negro. In the 1940s, W. E. B. Du Bois was influential in spreading respect for the African heritage in editing *The Crisis* and writing books. In 1947, he published *The World and Africa*, which “was entirely devoted to a massive marshalling of materials pointing to Africa as a source of world civilization from most ancient times” (Drachler, 7). By considering Africa to be their homeland and cultural heritage, some blacks were not in favor of acculturation and wanted to get out of America. They want to leave behind “the oppressed and miserable land” for their own ideals and dreams.

Looking at objects in material culture today, “The Awakening of Ethiopia,” “Building More Stately Mansions,” “Ella Watson,” and many other artistic works remind us how useful visual images are. Through sculptures, paintings, and photographs, African Americans try to “capture the essence of what it means to be an American in black skin” (Hudson, 171). Their positive messages about African American identities are weapons for breaking stereotypes about blacks, defining their own identity and gradually uplifting their social positions. By taking charge of their own identity, African American dramatists and writers use both written texts and visual images to challenge the old notion that America is “[t]he land of the free and the home of the brave,” and they are persistently “fishing for a dream, fishing near and far” (Grimke, 138). Their art has helped African Americans to seek and find their own identity by confronting popular yet negative stereotypes of African-Americans as inferior human beings. “It has been and continues to be a great challenge for artists of color to find recognition and validation in a society which persistently devalues them and continues to conjure up images to represent Blacks in ways which reinforce White racist notions of White superiority” (Hudson, 171). Their works have helped motivate African Americans to take the initiative to change their inferior positions, for through
these works more and more of them realize that “Blacks, and black alone, must take the initial and decisive steps toward developing an adequate social theory to destroy white racism” (Marable, 27).
CONCLUSION

Through the examination of the writings of African American writers, Louis Peterson, Angelina Weld Grimke, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, and Charles Waddell Chesnutt, and the artistic works of African American artists, Mary Edmonia Lewis, Meta Warrick Fuller, Henry O. Tanner, Eastman Johnson, Laura Wheeler Waring, Allan Rohan Crite, Aaron Douglas, and Gordon Parks, we find that African American elites used their works to combat negative stereotypes and uplift their social positions.

In such a way, African American elites succeeded in using both written texts and visual arts to change people’s and consequently, society’s viewpoint. They managed to “take the written text of their lives under Euro-American oppression and reform it, changing the butchered narratives and reconstructing it for themselves into a story of hope, determination, some ambivalence, but notably, success” (Pickens, 64). They questioned the positions of African Americans, changed their negative portrayals, and took charge of their own identity through their writings and artistic works and contributed to African American identity formation. Their works have allowed African Americans to move out of their seemingly permanent label of “ex-slave” into a new refined and dignified African American self. Their works have shown the world what African Americans truly are.


Crite, Allan Rohan. A Bit of Romance on Hubert Street. Collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.

---. A Dude Swell. The Amistad Foundation, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.


Happy Coon. The Amistad Foundation, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.


Level Brothers. Gold Dust. The Amistad Foundation, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.


Lewis, Mary Edmonia. Asleep. Martin Luther King, Jr. Main Library.

---. Awake. Martin Luther King, Jr. Main Library.


---. Poor Cupid. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.


*Playin’ the Banjo*. Collection of the Amistad Foundation, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.


**Smiling Sambo.** Collection of the Amistad Foundation, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.


**Strummin’ On the Ole Banjo.** Collection of the Amistad Foundation, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.


Tanner, Henry O. *The Banjo Lesson.* Hampton University Museum, Hampton, Virginia.

---. *The Thankful Poor.* Collection of the Dr. and Mrs. William H. Cosby, Jr., Greenfield, Massachusetts.


VITA

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