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Mississippi
Quarterly
The Journal
Of Southern Cultures

Essays on Dargan, Warren, Welty,
Morrison, O'Connor, Gay, Ransom,
Faulkner, and J. McHenry Jones

Vol. 66, No. 2 Spring 2013

Mississippi Quarterly, Volume 66, Number 2, Spring 2013, pp. 179-196 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2013.0026*

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Deftly Mixed: Liminal Identity and the Problem of Knowing in J. McHenry Jones's *Hearts of Gold*

IN *PARTLY COLORED: ASIAN AMERICANS AND RACIAL ANOMALY IN THE Segregated South*, Leslie Bow describes the gap between "white" and "black" on the imagined Southern spectrum of identity as a racial "interstitial," a liminal space where proximity to whiteness can be approximated and proximity to blackness attends questions of classed performance. Bow uses the interstitial concept to focus on non-white, non-black ethnicities (specifically Asian and Native American communities) and their experiences in the Jim Crow-era South. However, Bow's concept of troubled racial epistemology is equally helpful in understanding Southern literary concerns of provisional whiteness and blackness. While Bow uses the sliding scale of race to examine Asian, Latino, and Native American proximity to the artificially stable poles of black and white, interstitiality can also apply to depictions of mixed-race (partially white and black) figures.

A salient example of this Southern-literary liminality is found in the mixed-race character of Regenia Underwood in J. McHenry Jones's 1896 novel *Hearts of Gold*, a work heretofore almost entirely ignored in American literary studies. While issues of racial performance and proximity are hardly unheard of in Southern (and American) literature, Jones's novel is starkly unique in that his racial-regional formulations create a world in which Regenia Underwood, despite her unchanging performance, expression, and appearance, can be placed at the zenith of American aristocracy or in the confines of the Jim Crow car. Regenia "passes," into the moneyed upper-class no less, without trying to pass and is deemed "black" without ever fully understanding the situational rules she has broken by moving through the border between North and South. The extremeness of Regenia's Northern and Southern experiences, combined with her inability to determine the forces at work in these external redefinitions, tells a story different from the codified "tragic mulatta" or passing narratives, making serious study of Jones's novel all the more essential. Regenia's novel-long conflict, a set of constant

reevaluations of racial, regional, and socioeconomic identity, exists on a sliding scale of interstitiality, in which her race, like that of Bow's subjects, is constantly subject to terms of proximity and performance, terms that Regenia is never able to master. In addition, the very era and region of the work's genesis, the turn-of-the-century borderlands of West Virginia, provide an added layer of liminality, indivisible from that of Jones's heroine. Regenia becomes a symbol for a three-decade struggle for national knowability that would only grow more vexed in the modernist twentieth century. The paucity of critical work on Jones's novel is especially odd considering the richly complex racial and regional configurations that surround Regenia, a woman who seemingly manages to do the impossible in Reconstruction-era America: to exist simultaneously as both "white" and "black," before seemingly becoming neither.

Regenia's interstiality and the ways in which her identity resists any form of perceived racial categorization or essentialness constitute two concepts vital to and interrogative of hierarchical senses of self in the post-Reconstruction era. Attendant to these issues of self-understanding and the multiplicity of identity are the modernist questions of epistemology at work in Jones's novel, and how the seemingly unsettled nature of Regenia's racial identity (and broader self-identity) reflect a modernist problem of knowing. Indeed, as Mark M. Smith has noted, racial identification became even more important to conservative white hegemony in the post-slavery era, just as "sight became ever less reliable as an authenticator of racial identity" (7), directly contributing to a defining facet of American modernist unsurety.

While an equation of racial indeterminacy with American modernism is familiar in contemporary literary studies, the key difference in *Hearts of Gold* is that Regenia's "problem of knowing" proves maddeningly *regional*; the volley of outside classifications hurled at Regenia serve as a corrective to any essentialized knowability of the American nation-state itself, as well as of the subjects existing within it. Indeed, Regenia's race seems to change as she moves from abolitionist northern Ohio, through the borderlands, and into the Tidewater South, before arriving in the Deep South. Such mobility, in what Smith calls "a modernizing, geographically fluid South" (7), played into white obsessions with racial identification, highlighting in the minds of nervous whites a need to conclusively define racial identities and, simultaneously, a realization that increased movement throughout the

New South rendered that very knowability impossible. The process by which Regenia becomes definitely "black" upon entering the South is almost wholly exterior; those who surround her seem to come to a (relatively) comfortable definition of Regenia's racial identity that she herself doesn't share; at novel's end it is entirely unclear how Regenia identifies herself in racial terms, as questions of socioeconomic inheritance take over all questions of Regenia's essence. Regenia's location in a liminal space of self-identity matches the book's own liminal nature, caught between the romantic-realist combination of Victorian comfort and social unrest[1], and modernist concepts of troubled epistemology and unknowability.

Unlike characters in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, who purposely assume different racial guises, or Joe Christmas in William Faulkner's *Light in August*, who is tortured by indefinite lineage, Regenia never attempts to pass. Regenia knows full well her racial lineage, but she seems incapable of arriving at a complete sense of her self or what it means to be partially black or white in the post-Reconstruction era. This interrupted sense of self extends to her attempts at affiliation with any Southern community, similarly thwarted and ultimately ending with her return to the North. While Regenia claims joy from teaching at a poor black school and satisfaction from boarding with a humble preacher, she nonetheless approaches a completeness only when her wealth and estate are restored, and all questions of difficult racial affiliation, somehow irrelevant in the utopia of Mt. Clare, are deferred.

Hearts of Gold follows the struggles of two mixed-race, middle-class men, Lotus Stone and Clement St. John, a doctor and reporter respectively, as they move from a fairly liberal, abolitionist North (unidentified but likely Ohio or Pennsylvania) to the Deep South, where Lotus is falsely accused and convicted of medical malpractice and sentenced to toil in a plantation-like mining prison until he is worked nearly to death. Lotus is eventually exonerated after not abandoning the prison during a riot, his story widely publicized by Clement. Running mostly parallel to this story is that of Regenia Underwood, the daughter of a white, aristocratic Northern mother and a runaway "mulatto" slave.

[1]The novel's shuttling back and forth of a young woman of mysterious heritage between economic comfort and miserable squalor echoes Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, perhaps the masterwork of the uneasy conflation of social realism and romantic sentimentalism.

They fell in love while he was being harbored by Regenia's grandparents and then absconded together to Canada. After both of Regenia's parents die, her grandmother, the wealthy Mrs. Underwood, adopts her and essentially raises her as "white." Dr. Frank Leighton, Regenia's villainous, Southern-born cousin, who detests and desires her in equal measure, illegally diverts Regenia's inheritance of the opulent Elms estate, in the fictional Northern town of Mt. Clare, to himself. Regenia, homeless and penniless, opts to teach poor African American youth in the South while conducting an intermittent relationship with Lotus Stone that eventually leads to their marriage at the novel's conclusion.[2] Leighton's deception is revealed and the Elms is restored, along with Regenia's monetary inheritance and her aristocratic position, and the novel ends with Regenia positioned once again as an upper-class woman whose wealth seemingly precludes all questions of racial identity.

Regenia's portion of the novel loosely echoes the form of the "race travel" plot. M. Giulia Fabi, in discussing Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*, describes the race travel plot as a process by which

> the voluntary passer frees himself from the cultural hegemony of white America, develops greater pride in his black heritage, acquires the ability to read the signs of this powerful heritage . . . and ultimately arrives at a new understanding of the inextricable connections between blacks and whites. (47)

Much of this plot proves important to the goals of *Hearts of Gold*, but it is especially important to note that Jones does in fact position Regenia's story as a movement toward racial consciousness, one that works parallel with a movement toward the South.

J. McHenry Jones, born in the Ohio-West Virginia borderlands, made his name as an educator and social activist in West Virginia, most often likened to Booker T. Washington, although his focus on liberal arts, literature, and the black intelligentsia arguably place him somewhere between Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois in their famed debate over "practical" vocational training and education in the humanities for blacks. *Hearts of Gold* was obviously written with political intent, as

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[2]The constant delays and diversions that characterize Regenia and Lotus's early flirtations might be explained by Regenia's slow and seemingly reticent self-identification with the black community. Since Jones gives the reader very little information about the years between Regenia's early childhood, when she is adopted by her grandmother and told of her racial lineage, and her acquaintance with Lotus, it is quite difficult to get a sense of what community, if any, Regenia associates herself with.

John Ernest and Eric Gardner put it: Jones "hoped that the novel could extend his efforts to gather an African American readership into an increasingly focused social and political force" (18). However, the travel seen in this novel eventually arrives at racial formations for Regenia that are remarkably complex, unsettled, and resistant to easy political slogans, especially in Jones's milieu of activist fiction. In fact, even though we can view Regenia's marriage to Lotus Stone as a sort of embrace of an African American identity, it is unclear whether this is the sort of proxy identity of her mother, essentially banished as "black" when she marries an ex-slave, or a more active investment in her own racial lineage.

In *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy of Race*, Charles W. Mills posits a grid of what he calls "problem cases," in which "racial ontology is not immediately or maybe not even indefinitely clear" (54). While Mills posits this set of cases for a late twentieth-century context, most of the problematics he lists have existed for centuries. Mills's first "problem case" is that of "conscious episodic passing," in which someone of at least partial African lineage chooses to pass for "the purpose of taking advantage of differential economic opportunities . . . or for whatever reason but continuing to think of himself as black and maintaining contact (cautiously, if necessary) with the black community" (55-56). This tends to be the case for most passing narratives, including Larsen's novel. Mills also details "conscious permanent passing" (56), in which a racially-mixed but presumed-white person severs all contact with any black community, and "Problem Case III," in which a presumed-white person is unaware of passing and of possessing an African lineage (57). In this case, the subject is fully convinced of a purely white-European heritage that he or she does not in fact possess.

Through ten problem cases, Mills attempts to cover the conceivable instances of "racial transgression" (50), situations in which persons trouble, either intentionally or not, social expectations for certain ontological racial identities. Regenia's situation, however, is notably absent from Mills's list. This absence is understandable, since Mills can hardly expect any American citizen to be as profoundly unaware of the significance of racial identity as Regenia seems to be, especially in the first half of *Hearts of Gold*. Regenia most resembles "Problem Case III," "a case of unconscious passing" (57-58), but unlike the subject of Case III, Regenia *is* aware of her mixed racial heritage. What Regenia is unaware of is either the ambiguity of her appearance or that there even exists a

deep significance attached to skin color. Mt. Clare never presents Regenia with the racial conflict she faces as she moves southward.

Regenia's seemingly effortless passing is revealed with her first appearance, as the novel's two middle-class, mixed-race protagonists, Clement St. John and Lotus Stone, find her serving water to Knights of the Red Cross parade-marchers in the fictional northern town of Mt. Clare:

> Regenia Underwood, for this was the young girl's name, was the very embodiment of vivacious budding womanhood.
>
> Dressed in some kind of soft white goods, draped loosely and clasped at the waist with a rosette of cream ribbon, she made a picture seldom seen among the women of our country.
>
> Too fair for a brunette, she was a shade too dark for a blonde. Her complexion was a cream, into which some fairy's hand had deftly mixed the first rays of the morning's sun. . . . Her face, of classic mold, was almost severe in its hauteur, yet about the well curved red lips and large brown eyes, swimming in their liquid depths, played constantly the faint suspicion of a smile. (70)

Regenia's complexion is light enough for its faint color to be explained away as suntan, her loosely draped white dress and "classic" face calling to mind W. J. Cash's rendering of the Southern White Woman: "the shield-bearing Athena gleaming whitely" (86). It is not simply that Regenia's skin is apparently "white," but that her very posture and self-presentation are that of an *archetypal* classical-American female. In this way, *Hearts of Gold* both recalls and departs from Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), which anticipates Jones's novel in initially establishing a mixed-raced woman, Iola, as an iconic Southern woman, while not fully committing to the epistemological unsettledness that Jones draws from this (supposed) juxtaposition of gyneolatry and genealogy. Indeed, while Iola's revealed mixed-race heritage subsequently inculcates her in a (somewhat) stereotyped "tragic mulatta" plot, Jones uses a similar mixed-race Southern Athena to more fully destabilize these very categories. In this way *Hearts of Gold* also anticipates later novels like Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), which makes more explicit black women's rightful claim to community authority in the South by juxtaposing images of white Southerners' failures to exhibit proper responsibility for that community.

Regenia's passing is not only racial but also class-based; she is not simply a white woman, but *the* white woman, graceful, Grecian, and living in the beautiful Elms estate. In Jones's novel the trappings of class,

especially the materialism of class, become constitutive of race. Regenia's placement in the finest estate in the city underwrites her whiteness and denies her blackness, even to fellow middle-class African American observers. Thus, for Lotus at least, the racial tiebreaker becomes her sociocultural, economic identity, which he instantly races as white. What remains unclear, perhaps for the novel's entirety, is whether or not Regenia realizes that her own mixed-race heritage (supposedly) precludes this kind of classed performance (as it would in the minds of most Americans, black or white, at the time). While there were undoubtedly middle- and upper-class African American communities throughout the nation at the time, even the middle-class Lotus takes the signs surrounding Regenia as exceptionally "white."

Clement and Lotus carry on with the parade and soon begin debating Regenia's racial make-up:

> "Beautiful she certainly is, but from such beauty you and I are forever disqualified," [Lotus] sneeringly replied.
>
> "I am not half so hopeless as I was a few days since," remarked Clement. "There is compensation for all of us while the race has such women as that one. Why one look into her eyes would banish the 'blues' for a century."
>
> "The more you talk the more I am mystified. What possible consolation to me did those eyes you are raving over contain?"
>
> "I can't say what influence they exercised over you," replied Clement, indifferently, "but the Lord knows His own and so does your unworthy servant. That girl belongs to the unnamed race or I never wrote an editorial."
>
> "What new wild goose chase are you on now? It is preposterous. She has not a grain of African pigment beneath her pretty cuticle." (71)

Clement claims his experience as a journalist as qualification for his ability to identify Regenia's "hidden" lineage. However, it is entirely unclear from the above passage how Clement arrives as this discovery, especially considering Lotus's total inability to sense even a "grain of African pigment" in Regenia. Clement does not challenge Lotus's assertion, nor does he explain how he senses Regenia's lineage, leaving the possibility that Clement's accuracy is a coincidence.

Lotus's reaction, on the other hand, clearly develops from a sense of race as tied to the context of class performance; Regenia's debut, in a thoroughly aristocratic milieu, races her as white in Lotus's eyes. As Catherine Rottenberg argues, subjects are "interpellated into the symbolic order as gendered and raced beings and are recognizable only in reference to the existing grid of intelligibility" (437). Thus, even

though Lotus and Clement are both solidly middle-class, they cannot interpolate anything other than a white figure into the role of gracious upper-class host of the Elms estate, regardless of the obvious presence of middle- and upper-class African Americans who surround them for the weekend's events. Rottenberg calls this phenomenon an "assumption of whiteness" (439), an assumption made all the more convincing to Lotus given Regenia's obvious socioeconomic status.

In accidentally passing and performing an upper-class role without anxiety (or even the suspicion that such a role could cause anxiety), Regenia Underwood seemingly defies all of Mills's criteria. Her history is later described by the narrator as "a mystery, as impenetrable as Egyptian darkness, to the curious, but perfectly clear to those who knew the history of Judge Underwood's family" (83). Regenia is aware of her background, but her actual sense of the significance of her mixed racial heritage proves difficult to determine. Even after apparently revealing her biracial lineage to Lotus and Clement, she is surprised to hear Lotus refer to themselves as racially linked, as both part of "our people": "Regenia noted his emphasis on 'our' people. The expression was new to her" (95). Again, it is unclear whether what is "new" to Regenia is the idea of a collective African American consciousness and affiliation or the idea that she shares any sort of membership with more actively self-identified black persons like Lotus Stone.

Here Regenia seems to either resist or at least show genuine unfamiliarity with the idea of racial essentialism. While aware that she has African lineage, she fails to comfortably envision herself as classed with Lotus, as part of the same "people." It is only later, as she moves south to teach, that she seems to embrace more fully the idea of "her people," although, as I will argue, she never fully reaches a comfortable sense of essentialized racial membership. It is also unclear how Lotus becomes convinced enough of Regenia's mixed heritage to identify her as part of "our race," since we never see Regenia actually reveal her lineage, which is confirmed for the reader by the narrator. The potential for confirmation comes in Regenia's friendship with Lucy, a woman obliquely referred to as "colored," who eventually marries Clement. But while the narrative reveals that they went to school together, it never makes clear whether the schools are in fact segregated in Mt. Clare.

Ultimately, we are left to assume Regenia reveals her origin story to Lotus, although no textual evidence exists to evince this. Here Jones gestures towards an increasing unknowability of race, with barely

twenty pages separating Lotus's complete denial of any racial mixture for Regenia and his assertion of their shared racial heritage. Regenia seemingly "becomes black" based on someone's say-so, or perhaps based purely on the plausibility of Clement's assertion, a dubious one considering Clement's considerable ego and pride in his own intellect and powers of detection. Jones troubles racial membership, allowing Regenia to be both an Athenian white beauty, later likened to Venus, and a fellow sufferer of anti-Black sentiment, never allowing the reader to settle on one version of his heroine, just as Regenia never seems fully able to settle on a version of her self.

The unsettled nature of Regenia's sense of self may hinge on the tropes of mixed-race characters and racial identity formation in the early African American novel. As Fabi asserts, "in early African American fiction many all-but-white characters eventually choose their mothers' race and, so to speak, pass for blacks" (5). But this equation presumes that the mother in question is African American, which is of course not the case for Regenia, whose mother is an upper-class white woman. Here Jones further troubles what Fabi calls the "constrictiveness" (5) of reductionist racial definitions: American cultural tradition generally assigned race maternally, but Jones forces readers to face the uncomfortable question of which racial construct to follow, the "one drop" rule (which would render Regenia black) or the concept of maternally-transmitted racial identity (which would render her white). *Hearts of Gold* is most convincingly an early modernist project in such moments, when it troubles not only the supposedly absolute ideas of racial belonging, but also the quandaries of persons caught between two seemingly mutually exclusive criteria for racial identity.

My use of the term "modernism" most specifically centers on the epistemological issues of Regenia's racial and class membership. While novels of the Victorian era generically placed in romantic-sentimental, naturalist, and realist camps dealt with "tragic mulattos and mulattas," Jones emphasizes the *unsettledness* of mixed racial heritage. Where past novels would focus on a mixed-race character's inability to transcend ostensible blackness, Jones reverses this equation, not allowing an ostensibly white character to access her supposed blackness, certainly a radical change in strategy in the post-Reconstruction era. Jones also partakes in the modernist technique of stylized, changing perspective. In moments when the audience should be privy to Regenia's thoughts on her racial heritage or her own shifting sense of belonging, Jones

withholds his heroine's inner monologue. For instance, considering that there is no textual evidence of Regenia ever revealing her mixed racial lineage, the question remains as to whether Regenia ever considers her racial identity in contrast to Lotus's. Regenia's inner monologue contains no solid rendering of her feelings on their obvious differences of racial appearance; where her skin is like "cream" (70), Lotus is described as visibly multiracial, possessing "that peculiar complexion seen in no land but our own, and among no other people but Afro-Americans" (62). At the novel's end it still remains unclear what race Regenia considers herself, an opacity unthinkable a generation earlier, in which novels concerned with race in America more often than not depended on the essentialized view taken by writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe. This racial opacity, linked to Regenia's ability to defer racial self-identity, is closely linked with the oddity of Regenia's hometown, Mt. Clare, itself a withheld mystery left largely undefined by Jones.

With the town of Mt. Clare, Jones seems to be toying with the idea of the Black Utopia, a community seemingly devoid of not only racial discord, but also of any real sense of racial difference. J. Lee Greene positions Mt. Clare as a town with its share of racial discord, but it is only Dr. Leighton, notably a Southerner by birth, who seems to express any serious racial antipathy. For outsiders like Lotus and Clement, the town becomes an oasis, a space that offers them full autonomy, where even the idea of flirting with a potentially white woman is, at least for Clement, not entirely *verboten*, as it would be nearly anywhere else in the country. When informed of Lotus's desire to practice medicine in the South, Regenia replies: "Why do you prefer the south with its discriminations and difficulties to the north?" (95). "The North" for the novel seems entirely located within Mt. Clare, and the only moment of trouble comes on the river, the only form of physical connection between this far northern town and the troubling South to which Regenia alludes.

After her mother's death and the denial of her inheritance by Dr. Leighton, Regenia opts to move south to teach grade school. On her way south a second time, accompanied by a more visibly African American teacher from Minton, Regenia is introduced to the "discriminations and difficulties" that she refers to in vague terms while in Mt. Clare:

> As the two girls left the coach at Colerain and essayed to enter the ladies' waiting room, a blear-eyed attendant in the employ of the railroad, stopped them.

> "Is that girl your servant?" he curtly asked.
> "No," said Regenia, "she is my friend."
> "Walk right in the other door," he said, pointing toward an adjoining waiting room.
> "Is that the place for ladies?" she asked in surprise.
> "No. That's the place for 'niggahs,'" he said, gruffly. "So go along and don't make any trouble," he continued, taking Regenia by the shoulders and starting her sharply in the direction indicated.
> The girls, thoroughly frightened, did not wait a second command, but meekly obeyed orders. Regenia's friend, although perhaps her superior in acquisitiveness, her equal in grace and refinement, was unmistakably an Afro-American. (200)

The pair spends the rest of their ride in the horribly overpopulated "colored" car, "with their faces out of the windows, trying in vain to get a pure breath of air" (201). The attendant's assumption that the "unmistakably . . . Afro-American" woman accompanying Regenia must be her servant indicates that Regenia clearly passes, that she is "mistakably white."

Bow traces a similar process of racial identification in theorizing the binary of segregated "white" and "colored" water fountains during the Jim Crow era:

> the drinking fountain binary makes obvious what Judith Butler has theorized regarding gender, that all subjects are essentially failed approximations of an idealized norm. . . . The oscillation between two unstable categories reveals not only the individual processes of racial and class subject formation, but community self-conception and political visibility as well. (9)

Until Regenia claims her companion as a "friend," the attendant not only assumes she is white, but wealthy enough to afford a paid servant as well. But her assertion of a non-economic connection to her visibly African American companion shifts Regenia from white and upper-class to essentially black, and thus her "natural" place becomes the "colored" waiting room and traveling car.

What must also be noted, besides Regenia's accidental passing, which occurs in the more racially liberal North, is her unfamiliarity with the segregation at work in the scene, despite her vague reference to the "unpleasantness" of the South earlier in the novel. If social placement of an individual in one of two categories supposedly affects the individual process of self-identification, what result does this oscillation provide for Regenia, whose identity seems always provisional? Regenia clearly shows no familiarity with the "colored" waiting room, mistaking it as "the place

for ladies." Once again, Jones keeps Regenia quarantined from any working sense of racial hierarchy or expectation, and her situational blackness in this scene comes not from any detection of her mixed racial heritage, but rather from her physical and emotional proximity to her fellow teacher.

Again, it is unclear what, if anything, Regenia comes to understand about the situation into which she is thrust at the train depot. Jones resists the more easily digested racial initiation plot, refusing to give us any interiority from Regenia in these moments and leaving it troublingly unclear how the young woman comes to see herself after each of these shocks. This moment calls to mind Trudier Harris's assertion that "Navigating the territory of the South is a visceral experience that begins, for travelers from the North who entered the territory during the days of segregation . . . with trains that converted carriages to Jim Crow cars as they crossed into southern territory" (3). The important difference for Jones's heroine is that this "visceral experience" occurs only the second time Regenia enters the South, with her blackness (again, only situational in this scene) assigned by proxy through the more visibly African American woman she travels with. In this way, Regenia is still separate from the initiation that Harris outlines, since it is only Regenia's framing of her fellow teacher as "friend" rather than "servant" that lands both of them in the Jim Crow car. Regenia finds herself in a spatial interstitial, in which her racial identity isn't based on performance, but rather on abstract affiliation; her closeness to her companion can either be a sign of wealth and class (if she is a servant) or race betrayal (if she is a friend); a single word is capable of pushing Regenia to either pole of the racial spectrum. A disruptive figure whose ambiguous race can be determined only through proximity, Regenia remains otherwise indefinable in post- Reconstruction terms. Also notable is the fact that this new necessity of choice, between having black friends or being allowed to travel in the cars and lounges which she has come to expect, arrives with regional movement southward. Not only is Regenia's identity liminal in general, but the rules for what that identity means for her autonomy are also spatially liminal, and Jones chooses the seeming paradox of the unchanging interior of the train, acted upon by the

outside change in regions, to render this change of social contexts in which race is embedded.[3]

The trope of the train and its changing regional significance, antithetical to its unchanging physicality (the same car on the same track), would go on to become a modernist fixture. Jones uses the train for both nineteenth-century realist and twentieth-century modernist purposes, a blending appropriate for such a liminal novel. The train becomes not only a modernist site for disoriented and defamiliarized concepts of travel and space, but also a Victorian symbol of the industrial threat of encroaching mechanization in conflict with a romantic sensibility. This proto-modernist notion of mechanical threat is exemplified, for example, in a passing train that accidentally runs down the novel's villain, Dr. Leighton, as he flees after attempting to shoot Lotus Stone. To Regenia, the train and its depots serve as additional sites for her own interstitiality, denying her any solid racial identity—even a consistent mixed-race identity after her first stint in the South, where she stays with black families and teaches at a black school, seemingly identifying herself as unequivocally African American. Despite this earnest affiliation, Lotus remarks: "If you had not been accompanied on your return, the second trip South would have been as barren of annoyance as the first" (203).

Despite the conditional racial distinction that Regenia is initially given, her journeys to the South do eventually provide the young woman with what appears to be a more affirmative sense of her own partially African American identity. As Jennifer Rae Greeson points out, traveling to the South had become, by the post-Reconstruction era, a journey into a highly Africanist space: "In the decade immediately after the war, writers explicitly envisioned their Reconstruction South as a 'new Africa'" (14). While Greeson focuses this thesis on local color writings largely dominated by white, middle-class authors, the same seems to hold true for Jones's novel.

While Regenia does seem to come to a more workable mixed-race identity, one that allows her to marry Lotus and teach at an African

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[3]The moments of doubt and anxiety created for Regenia by the trains and train depots in *Hearts of Gold* are also reminiscent of Anna's anxiety about whether her train is moving forward or backward in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, a book of which Jones was almost certainly aware. Both Regenia and Anna are bothered by the paradox of stable surroundings (the train) juxtaposed with uncertain movement and even more uncertain destination.

American school before the couple returns to the Elms, her time in the South is ultimately unsettled. Regenia first rooms with Mrs. Landers:

> The woman that Regenia saw standing before her was a thin, wiry individual, neither black nor brown, but a soft shading off between the two, a color not unknown among Afro-Americans, raven black hair, little sparkling watery black eyes, and an obsequious, overweening manner that was intended to inspire confidence, but had exactly the opposite effect upon our young heroine. (170-71)

Regenia reacts not only to the woman's humble appearance but also to her manners and classed behavior. Reverend Ananias Foggs, who sponsors her teaching position in Grandville, is even more harshly rendered:

> In appearance he was rather striking. Dressed always in full clerical attire, his vest buttoned to the throat, a white cravat, that reminded you that perhaps there had been a time when it was immaculate, but that time was in the grim and dizzy long ago; a shining black hat, sleek in spots, looking for all the world as if it had been treated with beeswax and tallow; black trousers, ornamented with tobacco juice and bulging slightly at the knees; rattling grey and white celluloid cuffs and collar; smoothly shaven saddle colored face, large gray eyes; of medium height, inclined to stoutness and a self-conscious, self-important air. (170)

Foggs registers as ridiculous, and later hypocritical as he drunkenly propositions Regenia, leading to her ouster from the house after she forcefully denies him. At this point, Regenia's class-based antipathy (she recoils from the "unbecoming" behavior of Mrs. Landers and the slovenly dress of Mr. Foggs) becomes hardest to extract from what reads as regional antipathy on the part of Jones. Though raised in the borderlands of West Virginia (and thus arguably "Southern"), Jones follows the lead of many non-Southern post- Reconstruction writers in painting the South as a dark and sinister Other land.

Regenia's reaction to Mrs. Landers and Reverend Foggs is perhaps best understood as a reaction against their pretensions to class and sophistication, a reaction borne out in the narration, which pokes fun at Foggs's dilettante's education in the classics and Hebrew. Troublingly, while the book offers a forceful assault on concepts of racial essentialism, its critique does not extend to class and caste essentialism. Regenia begins the novel as a paragon of classical beauty and aristocratic refinery, and the novel returns her to that standing, restoring to her inheritance the Elms estate and the money attached to it. Regenia's Grecian profile

(Leighton describes her as "beautiful as Venus" [184]) stands in contrast to Foggs's Grecian pretensions, and the narrative unambiguously sides with the natural eminence of Regenia, as Foggs's "want of modesty" fills her with "nameless dread" (175). Indeed, those whom Regenia comes to accept in the South are the citizens most willing to accept their caste. Regenia seeks out Reverend Simon Thomas after the unwanted advances of Foggs. The narrator dwells on Thomas's humility:

> Rev. Simon Thomas was one of the minsters who lived and labored among the people surrounding the steel plant, because he saw in administering to the poor an exemplification of his humble Master. With him, sacrifice for the Master was a labor of love. In the midst of temptations and crime, he led the life of a saint. His sermons were as simple and free from ostentation as his life was pure and humble. (207-08)

While Jones's (and Regenia's) endorsement of Thomas could be read as a Booker T. Washington-like call for populist utilitarianism, the novel's description of the Thomas household is unambiguously focused on the materialism of the middle class:

> As Rev. Simon Thomas was an ideal minister so his home was an ideal home. His house, the only two-story frame about the steel plant, had been the dwelling of the original owner of the land from whom the syndicate had purchased the site for their new enterprise. In time, Regenia was thoroughly domesticated, not as a boarder, but as a member of the family. (208)

Regenia's willingness to join the Thomas household appears to result directly from the couple's working-class humility, which is devoid of the grotesque pretensions of Foggs and Mrs. Landers. Once again, it becomes difficult for Regenia to understand what is or is not constitutive of race, and the various other essentialized formations of region, class, education, and economic status all compete as she attempts to secure an identity outside of the classroom, the only zone where she seems able to confidently identify herself.

Regenia's upper-class background is exceedingly more accepting of a humble middle class than of a haughty prominence; upon Regina's introduction to Foggs, the narrator notes that "Reared in an atmosphere of ease and refinement, she was illy prepared for the uncouth side of life she was so soon to enter" (174). Importantly, neither Regenia nor the narrator ever note the physical appearance of the Thomases as they do so specifically with Rev. Foggs and Mrs. Landers; indeed, even the racial identity of the Thomases remains unclear. While Regenia embraces her

role as a teacher at a grossly overpopulated and underfunded African American school, and presumably embraces her identity as African American in the Southern community in which she finds herself, her concepts of class behavior remain consistent throughout the novel.

In fact, anxieties over Regenia's refined background and socioeconomic opportunity, underwritten by her light skin, throw Lotus's aspirations of a marriage proposal into constant doubt. His perception of her upper-class background is largely bonded to a sense of racial difference for most of the novel. Upon hearing of Regenia's relegation to the "colored" waiting room and train cars, Lotus notes: "If I had escorted you to the station in any other capacity than servant, you would have left Grandville in a smoking car. Under those circumstances you would not have returned. For ten minutes' pleasure I would have sacrificed many happy hours" (203). Lotus's self-doubt is twofold: he is aware of both his inability to pass in contrast to Regenia's ostensible whiteness and the material and economic comfort that Regenia would forfeit through proximity to him. Once again race is inextricably socioeconomic, and the unsettled significance of Regenia's light skin entitles her to comforts and beneficial cultural assumptions that Lotus realizes his presence will preclude.

Lotus's marriage proposal, coming at the novel's end after the restoration of Regenia's inheritance and his recent release from the prison plantation, is similarly marked by anxiety over class and caste difference: "It is all so different now. I am a convict and you an heiress. . . . My heart is the same, but what was admissible then, might be presumptuous now" (268). Regenia attempts to reassure Lotus, asking, "Do you think I would ever enjoy a penny of that money without you?" (268). However, her attempts at encouragement are belied by an assertion of the inherent "nobility" that is associated with Regenia throughout the novel: "You are a nobleman upon whom fortune for a little while frowned" (269). Ultimately, Regenia and Lotus leave the South, returning to the Elms estate and the seeming racelessness of Mt. Clare. While Regenia's marriage to Lotus would be an unequivocal assertion of her blackness in the South (as Lotus notes), the novel's resolution in a supposedly racially utopian North defers any ultimate decision as to who Regenia truly is. The final chapters of *Hearts of Gold* omit any reference to Regenia's race, once again leaving her ethnic identity provisional. Instead, the novel ends in the final years of the nineteenth century with Regenia's two inheritances restored—her

aristocratic estate and the ambiguous identity of a mixed-race marriage not unlike her mother's.

If Regenia's story ends with a sort of deferral of identity—in which the heroine, regardless of her aristocratic identity, is seemingly caught between two racial identities—then Jones' novel lands in a similar space. The fact that *Hearts of Gold* appeared in 1896, between Booker T. Washington's compromises at the Atlanta Exhibition and the publication W. E .B. Du Bois's more assertive *The Souls of Black Folk*, could well explain Jones's own liminal place in American literary and racial history. While Jones placed himself in the school of Washington and fought for the recognition enjoyed by his more famous contemporary, *Hearts of Gold*, and Jones's own background, serve as precursors to Du Bois. Both men were born in the North before making educational sojourns to the South at a young age. More importantly, both writers expressed the difficult arithmetic of region and race, focusing on movement in and out of the South as a process of identity formation for African Americans at the turn of the century. While Du Bois attempts to end his book affirmatively, making a strong claim on the South as a zone of black creativity and potential empowerment, despite racial violence and restriction, Jones's closing message is more cryptic. The characters of *Hearts of Gold* attempt to embrace the Southernness they view as inherent to their blackness, but are forced to retreat into a utopian, middle- and upper-class North, with seemingly little gained from their time below the Mason-Dixon line. The novel ends with individual dilemmas (seemingly) solved by a reassertion of social caste, with the questions of race and regional belonging in America left ominously unanswered. *Hearts of Gold* remains a book about the uncomfortable space between epochs, and its place in American literary history has been similarly unsure, still waiting to be settled.

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