What the Dickens?: Intertextual Influence and the Inheritance of Virtue in Julia C. Collins’s "The Curse of Caste: or The Slave Bride"
Author(s): Colleen C. O’Brien
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: St. Louis University
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40033745
Accessed: 04/01/2012 17:01

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp
JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

St. Louis University is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to African American Review.
What the Dickens?: Intertextual Influence and the Inheritance of Virtue in Julia C. Collins's *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride*

Curses echo through the halls of ancestral homes, their sound amplified by the memory of an avenging spirit. Characters draped in darkness and shadow live secluded from the truth about their family history, their only evidence of ancestry carefully concealed in secret documents, a hidden portrait, or a haunted library. Light, warmth, or music only breeze through the beleaguered house when a young woman appears. Almost always an orphan and usually a governess, she comes from modest means. She knows little or nothing of her parentage but senses that a taint of caste, ignoble birth, or social transgression took them from her. Despite her lack of social status, the heroine is undeniably virtuous—hard working, self-sacrificing, and irresistibly good, particularly in comparison to her insufferable shrew of a guardian. In the process of the narrative, the stigma of her heritage falls away from her optimistic countenance; she marries happily and all ends well with the world.

Does this synopsis refer to Dickens's *Bleak House*, Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, or perhaps even Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables*? It certainly does. It also sums up the first novel written by an African American during Reconstruction—Julia C. Collins's *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride*. A cursory glance at Collins's novel might suggest that she was more interested in a gothic family mystery and individual search for identity, not to mention her own inclusion in a literary tradition, than in the political transformation that would affect African Americans in the aftermath of the Civil War.

Employing almost archetypal literary figures such as the virtuous orphan governess, the maternal "fallen woman," the socially transgressive parents, and absurdly pretentious members of the upper class, the novel has little to say, explicitly, about the freed people (with the important exception of Juno, Claire's guardian, an intelligent and gentle woman who has none of the obnoxious traits found in Esther's aunt or Pheobe's cousin Hepzibah). Add to the synopsis the abolitionist trope of the tragic mulatta, a beautiful woman remanded to slavery when her profligate father or common-law husband abandons her, and you have the miscegenated version of more than one classic British or American novel by an extremely popular white author.

And yet, by applying these familiar narrative tropes to the experience of black women during slavery and the controversial issue of miscegenation, Collins addresses key political issues; by recasting miscegenation and black female virtue, she enters the debate over black citizenship in 1865. Opponents of black citizenship could not separate the concepts of civic and sexual virtue; they argued that black men in particular would use political
enfranchisement to pursue white women. In turn, white men would be subject to the wiles of promiscuous black women, thus polluting the body politic with mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon children.

It would seem odd for Collins to write an apolitical novel in 1865, a year of tremendous potential and hope for political change among African Americans. As Collins made a place for herself in a literary tradition, her author/activist contemporaries volunteered in more direct efforts to prepare the freed people for citizenship. Harriet A. Jacobs and her daughter Louisa were providing education and medical care to the freed slaves of Savannah, Georgia. Frances E. W. Harper continued on the lecture circuit as she and Frederick Douglass participated in suffrage efforts for blacks and women. According to Robert Levine, Army major and Freedman's Bureau agent Martin Delany was “convinced that the possibilities for black elevation in the United States were never better than right after the Civil War” (227).

In this moment of Reconstruction optimism, Collins wrote The Curse of Caste, which I argue does reflect the hope among African Americans during Reconstruction for radical political change despite its investment in what might seem to be an irrelevant literary tradition. Particularly because Collins’s text resonates with Charles Dickens’s Bleak House, it demands to be read as social commentary. Within her literary and historical context, writing a novel that echoes Dickens suggests that Collins views the novel as an opportunity to indict social injustice and to create a script for social change. Abolitionists and reformers considered Dickens a champion of the underclass. Literate blacks knew very well that the final chapters of his American Notes (1842) criticized slavery and that his novels and journalistic work exposed the horrors of factory labor and led to the clearing of slums.

The newspaper in which Collins published many of her essays as well as her novel, the Christian Recorder (put out by the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, a bastion of antebellum free black community activism), reflected the view that Dickens was an important social commentator and artist despite its reservations about literature in general. An essay entitled “Dickens” describes useless literature in which “the whole hosts of fully, stupidity, and immorality, have encamped” (Anon., 25 Jan. 1868). The article argues that good novels can serve a moral function by creating “vivid representations, or idealizations of life, character, and manners,” that, like Pilgrim’s Progress—another highly esteemed work of literature among African Americans—are didactic and uplifting (Anon, 25 Jan. 1868). For the Christian Recorder’s editors to publish The Curse of Caste, they must have located a moral imperative and social lesson within its pages, one that measures up to their reading of Dickens.

Collins gestured toward Dickens’s oeuvre in her novel because she likely associated his work with accurate depictions of the moral character of the underclass, broadly conceived. The Recorder’s article on Dickens states that, “The peculiar power of DICKENS lies in this instinctive insight into individual character . . . he continually apprehends and interprets new forms of individual being. By this felicity of nature, this genial sympathy with the lowly, he makes us love our kind, in its exhibitions of moral beauty” (Anon, 25 Jan. 1868). It appears that “our kind,” also referred to as “the lowly,” are African Americans; their individuality is important because it distinguishes between the moral beauty of black Americans and the dominant racialized stereotypes that cast all African Americans as morally inferior. In contrast to the rugged individualism of Dickens’s white American characters, the term “individual” in this context denotes the capacity for a character to have a specific identity and sense of self, in some cases to be virtuous.
regardless of background or US social assumptions about race; it does not imply that individual rights and concerns supersede those of the community or champion the kind of liberal individualism that Dickens criticized within the capitalist world.

The Christian Recorder and its readers championed Dickens because they interpreted his work as situating moral and intellectual integrity among the poor and disenfranchised, often parodying the rampant individualism of a privileged elite sector of society. The Recorder’s essay on Dickens speaks specifically to those American characters who become engrossed in self-interest and greed, pointing out that “a great many sensitive and patriotic Americans have never forgiven him for his portraits of American humbugs and scoundrels” (15). Although some “sensitive and patriotic” readers might have taken issue with Dickens’s representation of the US, the author of the essay seems to observe with delight that “he gives these United States some pretty hard hits” (15). Clearly, the essay reveals in the idea that Dickens could shame America for extolling freedom while holding slaves.

In all likelihood, Collins saw Dickens as an authorial role model whose work engaged social concerns similar to her own and whose satirical representations of American slavery authorized her to critique the absurdity of the very idea that slaveholders could be gentlemen. He satirizes the profit-motivated southern gentry in Martin Chuzzlewit; in that novel, Dickens depicts a colonel who defines American aristocracy as comprised of “intelligence and virtue. And of their necessary consequence in this republic. Dollars, sir” (Ch. 16). His critique of American individualism resonates with Collins’s characterization of Colonel Tracy.

Upon closer examination of Collins’s novel, other evidence of a connection to Dickens appears. Like Dickens, Collins explores the plight of orphans, the discovery of long-lost relatives, and family mysteries that lead to highly coincidental reunions, issues that were very relevant to the freed people. Her plot structure, built upon a heroine’s search for her family identity, likewise spoke to the thousands of former slaves searching for their own family members as well as activists looking for their place in the American national family. Her family mystery, an allegory of the American republic, reads very much like a parody of the gothic novel. While Teresa Goddu aptly points out that, in most cases, “the gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history” (10), Collins parodies the gothic to disarm the demons of those nightmares and to face down and overcome the terror of slavery. By rendering slaveholders absurd, violent, and incapable of self-restraint, she emphasizes the benevolence and good judgment of her heroines.

As Collins depicts her heroines, she recasts one of Bleak House’s central issues—feminine virtue. I like Esther Summerson and Jane Eyre, Claire Neville must prove she is virtuous in spite of the stigma of her parents’ social transgressions. Collins uses the framework of Dickens’s social commentary to voice her perception, not just of the inheritance of virtue, but of the closely related issue of citizenship and the inheritance of freedom due former slaves. While Dickens’s social institution that governs inheritance, the Court of Chancery, is problematic, it pales in comparison to the legalized horrors of the social institution that governs families in Collins’s novel—the institution of slavery. While Dickens uses parody to critique the pretensions and exclusive social practices of upper-class characters but leaves space for heroic patriarchal protectors like Jarndyce, Collins parodies the tyranny of white patriarchy in a system that denies African Americans, particularly women, political rights.

Thus, Collins’s exploration of the workings of black female virtue in the context of slavery and patriarchal
power is directly related to demanding an inheritance of freedom—and citizenship rights—for African Americans. Although she seems to have taken inspiration from Dickens’s work as a social reformer, the political issues that The Curse of Caste takes up involve a far more explicit agenda that champions black men and women specifically, not just the poor. Refuting the social myth that black women lack sexual virtue like wise refutes the racist idea of black inferiority. Collins takes up the issue of black citizenship directly and explicitly in the novel; the very idea of black citizenship in a racially mixed republic drives the family drama and search for identity.

Collins’s rewriting of black female virtue and her assertion of racial equality moves forward the agenda of the Christian Recorder. The Recorder focused on asserting black claims to citizenship while addressing the challenges of Reconstruction. To assert black men’s entitlement to the inheritance of freedom, for example, the Recorder reported on the patriotism of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Regiment. Their valor in battle and their commitment to the war cause in spite of the federal government’s attempt to swindle them out of wages substantiated the regiment’s, and by association all black men’s, demand for equal rights (Anon., “Fifty-Fourth,” 149). The Fifty-Fourth asserted their rightful place in America through their patriotism, a central tenet of republican citizenship.

The Recorder repeatedly emphasized African American suitability for citizenship, and, for black men, military bravery often signaled entitlement to equal rights. Because black women’s sexual virtue was as important an issue as black men’s military loyalty in arguments for racial equality, the topic appears frequently throughout the newspaper and certainly in suffrage discourse. Collins’s rewriting of feminine virtue—black womanhood—as a counterpart to the masculine virtue displayed by black men conveys an implicit demand for political rights. As heteronormatively gendered members of the national family, African Americans could enter into the political arena.

Essays about black suffrage that engage the topic of gendered virtue follow many installations of the novel. Immediately following the first chapter of the novel, a reprint of an article from the Evening Bulletin appears. Responding to an “opprobrious” essay in the [Philadelphia?] Inquirer authored by an opponent to black suffrage under the pen name “American,” the reprint in the Christian Recorder has been penned by “Another American.” Objecting to “American’s” claim that a “scheme now on foot for giving social and political equality to the negro” is opprobrious, “Another American” asserts that the movement strives to “grant political equality to individuals irrespective of the race which they belong, the only qualification necessary, being the enlightenment which would fit them for the exercise of the right of suffrage” (29). Enlightenment, however, seems measured by the collective virtue of a community—particularly the way that its members respect one another’s rights. The pro-suffrage speaker finds inclusive democracy integral to the nation’s future. S/he says, “An opposite course violates the first principle of Democracy, for that principle asserts that the powers of government are derived from the governed” (29).

Writers against black suffrage, however, repeatedly invoked the threat
of miscegenation—the intermarrying of black and white—to discourage social or political equality. In the political rhetoric of the 1860's US, the language of miscegenation was tied inextricably to images of black hypersexuality. The issue of miscegenation signifies far more than interracial sex; laws against intermarriage inherently asserted black inferiority. Marriage is also a metaphor that invokes the concept of full rights under the law, including the right to vote. Equating civic and sexual virtue, opponents to equal rights argued that blacks would use the vote to gain political power, which they would employ primarily to elicit sexual relationships with whites. Just as the idea of the racially pure Anglo-Saxon body was threatened by miscegenation, the idea of a purified Anglo-American body politic was threatened by black suffrage. Dominant cultural readings of miscegenation insinuated that white men fell victim to the sexual wiles of black women or that white women would be helpless in the arms of enfranchised and hypersexual black men, thus "polluting" the Anglo-Saxon race.

Collins's miscegenation story refutes the myth that black men or women's lack of sexual virtue will pollute the body politic. Likewise, "Another American" refutes the racist logic that equates miscegenation and black suffrage. Claiming that French, Portuguese, and Spanish settlers intermarried with black and Native American women because "they preferred a virtuous black woman to a vicious white one" and criticizing "the present concubinage in the South" as the moral failure of Anglo-Saxon men, "Another American" explains that miscegenation takes place because black women are more virtuous than white women (69). Contrary to social myths about black women's lack of virtue, "An American" upholds black women as the epitome of virtue. Redefining miscegenation, for black writers like Collins and "An American," asserted fundamental equality between black and white.

While dominant social perceptions read miscegenation as a threat to Anglo-Saxon racial purity and also to the integrity of the republic, Collins recasts miscegenation as a symbol of inclusive democracy for the republic's future and likewise epitomizes sexual virtue in her black female characters. The initial failure of miscegenation in the Tracy family is symptomatic of the political problems within a national family rent asunder by the Civil War. Colonel Tracy's verbal assault on Lina's virtue rives Richard from his family much like the South's opposition to black citizenship (and belief in slavery) splits it from the North and tears the nation apart. The Tracy family is fragmented along racial lines and split between the North (where Richard and Lina try to enact social equality) and the South (where the Colonel rejects Lina as a member of his family). For North and South to be reunited, the Colonel must respect Lina's social equality, recognize the validity of her marriage to his son, and accept the "black" members of his family—hence Richard and Lina's relationship provides an allegorical romance of the republic. Collins expresses her vision for the nation's future by imagining a wealthy and powerful white family, much like the leadership base of the American republic, who must recognize the virtue and loyalty of former slaves and their descendants and welcome them into the family as equals.

The Inheritance of Virtue

Miscegenation precipitates the dramatic action of the Tracy family saga. When Richard claims that his marriage to Lina is legitimate, likewise asserting that she is his fellow citizen, he invokes an entire discourse of social equality and political entitlement that the Colonel perceives as a direct threat to his own political power. The
connotations of miscegenation and black citizenship rights suggest a radical revision of the social institutions around which Colonel Tracy has built his life and wealth, so when Richard challenges the principles of white male authority that his father embodies, he likewise makes a radical political statement. Rather than entertain some of Richard’s radical republican principles, which include racial equality, the Colonel obsesses over an imagined spectacle of unruly black female sexuality that threatens to contaminate the racial purity of his immediate family. The integrity of the white male body politic is at stake as well, but the Colonel only voices stereotypes and myths about Lina’s sexual virtue, or lack thereof, because he cannot imagine, or refuses to acknowledge, Richard’s vision of inclusive democracy. The Colonel represents the racist, anti-suffrage view of miscegenation as he attacks Lina’s sexual virtue; he thus propels Dickens’s interest in female sexual virtue to an altogether new level.

The main characters of interest in *Bleak House* include Esther, the orphan governess, and her long lost mother, Lady Dedlock, whose shrewish sister told her that Esther was stillborn, then raised Esther in seclusion and secrecy. Lady Dedlock discovers through the course of the novel that Esther is alive and confesses to Esther in Chapter 36 that she is her mother. Dickens permits Lady Dedlock a modicum of feminine virtue in spite of her sexual transgression, but it is worth noting that he has no mercy for parents who willingly and knowingly forsake their children. One example of this impatience is the ultimate failure of the patriarch—a foolish and trifling man named Harold Skimpole. Although he is a minor character in *Bleak House*, Skimpole is one of the characters to comment on slavery, saying that slaves on American plantations “people the landscape for me, they give it a poetry for me” (307). Skimpole’s individual self-interest verges on solipsism, so it is not surpris-
In *The Curse of Caste*, among the ruling class in America, social assumptions about black female sexuality work to exclude black women from a specific gendered definition of virtue that merits the protection of the marriage contract and other political rights. Just as she expands Dickens's interest in social assumptions about feminine virtue, Collins interrogates the relationship between privileged upper-class white men and the women they hold in low esteem. Her interest in the sexual stigma attached to the maternal body (particularly when the mother's child is both black and white) illustrates the inseparability of constructions of black female sexuality from the hypocritical construction of southern gentlemanhood. The sympathy that the reader gains for Lina, whom slavery casts as a "fallen woman" by default, resonates with Dickensian sympathy for women, ranging from prostitutes to maids to Lady Dedlock herself, all of whom US society might label "fallen" and judge harshly due to their sexual history. In *The Curse of Caste*, however, it is not Lina's individual sexual history that makes her a fallen woman: the history of slavery casts all black women as fallen because they have no right to refuse the advances of their masters.

When Colonel Tracy purchases Lina, he denies the reality of sexual danger she faces by attributing her distress to her northern education and abolitionist propaganda, to the progressive belief, that is, that treating women as objects of property degrades them. He explains his purchase to his wife and son by saying, "Her distress was really affecting, and, out of pity for the young thing, I bought her with the lot" (23)—even though his idealized view of slavery leaves no room for the possibility that she is in real danger. He seems to pity her because he perceives her distress as a function of her loss of class status, a sense of entitlement that the Colonel finds inappropriate, though pitiful, in a slave. Although he "rescues" her from the degrading experience of a slave auction, and although Collins insinuates that her distress ensues from her fear that she has become vulnerable to sexual objectification or worse, the Colonel refuses to acknowledge that Lina is in sexual jeopardy at the hands of his fellow southern gentlemen. He then goes on to describe his dissatisfaction with her alleged class pretensions (and perhaps a subtle chastisement of his Yankee-educated son), for "slaves educated at the North are not just the thing to be introduced into a southern household. So, I guess I will sell this bit of humanity at the first offer" (23).

The Colonel takes umbrage with Lina's educated and genteel demeanor, believing her self-perception unfitting and impractical for a slave, but the glimpse he gets of Lina's capacity for virtue is what really disarms him. Having expressed his pity for and even recognition of "this bit of humanity," the Colonel goes on to explain his main reason for selling her: "Why she had the audacity to faint, when, by accident, she learned the name of her future master was Col. Tracy" (23). Having acquired the young girl from amidst the lechery of a "fancy girl" auction in the New Orleans slave market, Colonel Tracy becomes angry that Lina faints when she hears her new owner's name. He is quite offended by her fainting spell; the swoon suggests that she perceives herself as a lady in sexual jeopardy. She displays an apparent lack of gratitude or, at least, confidence in his gentlemanly intentions. He does not know of Lina's relation to his son and assumes that Lina faints because she expects to become his concubine. Given the history of New Orleans, that would be a well-informed and realistic presumption.

The integrity of the Colonel's self-image as a southern gentleman, built upon ideals of white racial purity and self-control, comes into crisis with even the implication that he would take a slave for a concubine. Faced with the reality of white men's sexual predation upon black women, Tracy's reaction to Lina becomes increasingly irrational,
even villainous. Meanwhile, the reader already questions the social institution of the southern gentleman, which feeds the Colonel’s ability to invoke racial myths about Lina, because the novel implies that both Lina’s father and grandfather were white men who could well have owned her mother and grandmother, respectively. Given the inherent irrationality of racism, Colonel Tracy’s absurd beliefs in the integrity and virtue of the figure of the southern gentleman conflict with the reality of slaveholding men who father children with anonymous, and powerless, enslaved women.

Colonel Tracy’s belief system, which denies and constantly erases white men’s hypocritical sexual behavior, substantiates his assumptions about his own superiority and justifies his exclusive purchase on social and political power. His belief system proves ridiculous in the context of the novel, almost symptomatic of the beliefs about slavery that characterize Dickens’s character Skimpole, who glorifies slavery and is as oblivious to its effects on the family as he is to the deleterious effects of his own irresponsible behavior on his own family. In the Colonel’s idyllic and self-centered view of slavery, Lina has no reason to fear or resist remand or to expect that her white father will protect her. (Although he raises Lina as his own, her father Master Hartley never bothers to manumit her.)

A main tenet of the Colonel’s belief system, sexual self-restraint, in addition to being a key component of white racial purity, was so important a virtue within the cult of the southern gentleman because it distinguishes white men from the racist image they perpetuate of promiscuous blacks. Sexual self-restraint virtually parallels the capacity for self-government in racist discourse; by asserting black promiscuity, the southern gentleman justified his paternalism and denial of rights to his slaves as he alleged their innate inferiority. The spectacle of Master Hartley emphasizes how much the Colonel must deny to uphold his institution, and the contradiction is obvious. As Colonel Tracy faces Lina, he must likewise face the legacy of plâcage and the hypocrisy of the southern slaveholding way.

In sum, there is much at stake in constructions of feminine virtue when it comes to the institution of slavery. Lina’s fainting spell implicates Colonel Tracy in the deeply entrenched tradition that southern gentlemen prefer not to acknowledge: their illicit sexual relationships with enslaved women. In fact, Lina’s very existence calls attention to failed southern gentility because she is the product of just such a relationship. Rather than face that legacy, however, the Colonel chooses to condemn Lina for attracting the attention of wealthy white men and believing she has the right to be treated like a true woman.

When Richard returns South to announce that he has eloped with Lina, Colonel Tracy goes on a tirade. He constructs Lina’s sexuality even more pathologically, declaring: “Oh! that a son of mine should thus disgrace himself and family, as to marry a negress—a slave—the illegitimate offspring of a spendthrift, a drunkard, and a libertine, a being sunk so low in the scale of humanity as to be unworthy the name of a man. It’s awful! ’Tis abominable!” (39). Because Richard emulates Hartley’s assault on racial purity, a key element in the construction of patriarchal power, he discredits his family and lowers himself to the level of a libertine in his father’s eyes. Colonel Tracy cannot, and will not, separate masculine honor and racial purity. One function of masculine honor and the foundation of patriarchy is that the father, because he provides for the family financially and protects its “helpless” members (women and children), is entitled to govern not only the family but the entire nation. Richard’s indiscretion and Lina’s very existence emphasize the frequency with which white men fail to protect their own children, thus undermining the Colonel’s central justifications for patriarchal power.
Collins's reader, however, recognizes that Colonel Tracy and his social institutions are villainous and unjust because the narrator clearly idealizes Richard and Lina. The couple joins the New England household of Richard's aunt, who long ago (like Jane Eyre's parents) earned her brother's lasting disdain by marrying a poor Yankee minister named Hayes. The scene, later described as ill-fated because of the way that Colonel Tracy interprets it, emerges first as idyllic. Collins writes: "One beautiful morning, in a quiet New England village, far from their own home, Richard Tracy and the beautiful quadroon, Lina, were united for life" (24).

However, Colonel Tracy cuts this lifelong union short. Rather than acknowledge the problem of Hartley's depravity and excess, or distinguish it from Richard's sincere belief that Lina is his social equal, Colonel Tracy resorts to stereotypes of black female sexuality that project the cause of disorderly sexuality on Lina. She becomes the scapegoat for all sexual indiscretions that undermine patriarchy because her mother was enslaved and, according to the Colonel's beliefs, not only her condition of slavery but also her tendency toward hypersexual behavior is inherited from her mother. Like Esther's unbearable godmother, who judges her according to her mother's mistakes, Colonel Tracy condemns Lina simply because her mother was enslaved.

Colonel Tracy indictes himself, in Collins's reader's eyes, by rehearsing an absurd and reprehensible set of social prejudices. Like the riffians and "savages" in Martin Chuzzlewit, the Colonel reacts viciously when Richard and Lina challenge his hypocritical and exclusive definition of slaveholding freedom. While he previously described Lina as a "bit of humanity" regardless of her black ancestry, she becomes the sexual predator as he continues his rage (23). He accuses Richard: "Fool that you are, to allow yourself to be thus entrapped by a pretty face; and, no doubt, by this time you have wearied of your toy" (39). Although the Colonel never mentions her, Lina's black mother presents an even greater problem than her profligate father because the Colonel assumes that sexual excess is an inheritable trait passed on through the black mother. By this point, the Colonel nearly forgets that Lina's father is a "libertine." He cannot fathom the presence of feminine virtue within the system of slavery. Lina's race poses a greater social threat than her father's ungentlemanly behavior; Colonel Tracy concludes by saying: "Our society is getting into a pretty state, when the sons of the best families stoop to marry their fathers' slaves" (39).

Colonel Tracy's solution for his problem, of course, is his recourse to the law that protects elite gentlemen like him from contact with individuals whose race and class mark them as inferior to him. He demands that Richard seek a divorce, expecting Richard to have lost interest in his sexual "toy": "If you have, it will be well, for as you are under age, your marriage is illegal, and, with the assistance of a trusty lawyer, its validity may be annulled. You can visit Europe a year or two, until the memory of this disgraceful affair has died out. I will settle an annuity on your ___" (39); Collins insinuates that to have added the word wife would have choked him. Later, when Richard refers unflatteringly to Lina as his wife—thus insisting that his marriage is legal and Lina is, by extension, his social equal—the Colonel decides to take the law into his own hands and opens fire on his son.

When the Colonel chokes on the word wife, "he corrects himself by saying "on the girl, which will be sufficient to support her decently, and that is much better than she deserves, the artful wench, to palm herself off for a lady" (39). Although Lina is an "artful wench" who has only enough sexual agency "to palm herself off for a lady" on her gullible young son, it is the "northern demagogues," the abolition-
ists, who truly threaten Colonel Tracy's claims to power and who have
"encompassed the ruin" of his son (39). The Colonel's question, "What is to
become of our institution, if we take
our slaves upon an equality with our-
selves?" (39) demonstrates that
Richard's belief in racial equality
shakes the very foundations of his
father's white patriarchal world.

Although the Colonel plans to
solve the problem of race and inheri-
tance through legal recourse, Richard
refuses to divorce Lina in spite of his
father's imminent curse. He says,
"Those pernicious sentiments, as you
are pleased to term them, which I have
imbibed at the North, only teach me to
respect the rights of my fellow-citizens"
(40; emphasis mine). Richard calls the
institution "accursed" and warns his
father against "a just God [who] will
allow any people so deeply wronged to
go unavenged" (40). He attacks the
institution of southern gentlemanhood,
invoking God as the ultimate patriar-
chal power. Richard sacrifices his fami-
ly ties and patriarchal inheritance in a
futile attempt to protect his wife, and
perhaps it is his radical claim that Lina
is his "fellow-citizen" that pushes his
father over the edge. The image of citi-
zenship and equality for the freed peo-
ple that Richard imagines through his
relationship with Lina proves irrecon-
cilable with the institution of the south-
ern gentleman as Colonel Tracy knows
it. Richard's principles connect the
explosive issue of miscegenation with
citizenship rights for African
Americans.

Richard's insistence that Lina is his
social equal, his use of the word wife
that his father cannot say, legitimizes
 interracial marriage and reasserts
African American claims to the inheri-
tance of citizenship. Unlike her
American literary predecessors Child,
Stowe, Wells Brown, and Jacobs,
Collins reimagines a story of mixed
race romance in which the white male
strives to do right by his slave bride;
Richard Tracy is the only male figure
in a "tragic mulatta" story to marry his
enslaved beloved legally by removing
her to a place where slavery is not the
law of the land.10 Only he asserts,
when he refers to blacks as citizens,
that his spouse is his equal.

The stakes in defending and
redefining feminine virtue, for Collins,
are very high because they parallel
demands for social equality and citi-
zenship. Political change has to take
place because the shadow under which
the Colonel lives signals to the reader
that he is wrong and Richard is right,
particularly because Richards recog-
nizes and honors Lina as a virtuous
wife and calls all blacks his fellow citi-
zens. By relocating the question of fem-
nine virtue introduced in Bleak House
to the context of US slavery and black
citizenship, Collins intensifies
Dickens's social critique exponentially.

Juxtaposing the two novels pro-
vides two different readings of the
inheritance of virtue. Like Esther
Summerson, Claire Neville inherits the
stigma of a social transgression com-
mitted by her parents. While Esther's
parents affronted the social institution
of marriage by having premarital sex,
Claire's parents affronted the social
institutions of slavery by trying to legal-
ize miscegenation. Inheritance, as the
transmission of wealth through family
members and the transmission of virtue
from parents to children, is a central
issue in Bleak House and The Curse of
Castle, although the transmission of
wealth takes a back seat in Collins’s
analysis. Collins is more interested in
the inheritance of virtue and its atten-
dant connotations of political inclusion.
While, for Dickens, feminine virtue in
particular is more relevant to the
nuclear family, Collins expands the
political significance of virtue. Collins
establishes the inheritance of virtue as
precurorsy evidence that black people
are equal members of the American
national family; as American citizens,
people of African descent were like-
wise entitled to inherit the American
national legacy of freedom.

While pseudoscientific racism
marked inferior traits that allegedly

670 AFRICAN AMERICAN REVIEW
passed from black parent to child, justifying the legal precept that the child follows in the condition of the mother, Collins’s characterization of Lina and Claire refutes that dominant racist definition of inheritance much as Dickens refutes the idea that Esther will inherit her mother’s disgrace. Dickens questioned the inheritance of feminine virtue by creating a heroine whose unquestionable virtue contradicts the expectations of her unforgiving godmother. Esther’s godmother asserts a draconian social standard of sexual purity, going so far as to tell her sister that her child has died rather than endure the embarrassment of an illegitimate child who carries her name. Refusing to reveal the identity of Esther’s mother, her godmother tells her, “Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace and you were hers” (65).

Claire’s caregiver, Juno, likewise refuses to divulge Claire’s parentage but seems to do so, not out of shame but because she wants to protect Claire from the fate that befell her mother at the hands of the proud Tracy family. Although Juno says nothing of disgrace, Claire inherits even greater stigma from her mother in the eyes of those who uphold the “evil institution.” Because “the child follows the condition of the mother,” Claire is technically enslaved. Her mother, though raised as an affluent planter’s daughter, was also the daughter of an enslaved mother. Yet the inheritance of slave status is only an externally prescribed attribute; rather than transmitting inferior traits to Claire, Lina bequeaths an inheritance of virtue to her daughter. Dickens frees Esther from social assumptions about inherited virtue and status, Collins rewrites those assumptions altogether as she moves the story from London to New Orleans.

For Dickens, social assumptions about feminine virtue were symptomatic of the upper class’s socially exclusive and prescriptive standards for behavior as well as a dismissive attitude toward unprotected working-class women. The example of the prostitute in Oliver Twist, rendered sympathetically by Dickens, made it less comfortable or convenient for Brits with a conscience to blame “fallen women” for their situation and look away from the conditions in the slums and factories that led to such situations. Even Lady Dedlock, a highly privileged woman who chooses the sexual transgression of a premarital affair, gains sympathy as Dickens portrays her in Bleak House. Indeed, Dickens had sympathy toward socially victimized women and sponsored a halfway house for them in London.

Collins integrates Dickens’s theme of feminine virtue with his satirical representation of American slaveholders. The parameters of feminine virtue that circumscribe Lina and Claire’s story differ from those that confine Lady Dedlock and Esther because of the way the former inherit status through the institution of slavery. Collins’s Lina, like Dickens’s Lady Dedlock, is a mother separated from her child at birth as a result of social prejudices.11 Lina embodies the legacy of slavery as written upon the black female body, but she also epitomizes virtuous womanhood although, like some of the characters in Bleak House, Lina’s and Claire’s birthright excludes them from the conventional ranks of virtuous “true women” as defined within dominant social institutions.12 Collins’s views on race come into focus because Claire’s inheritance of racialized feminine virtue, contrary to dominant social prejudice, becomes an asset outside the context and control of the evil institution. Only the illogical dictates of the institution of slavery negate Lina’s claims to virtue and freedom.

Despite their similarities, however, Collins’s view of a woman’s role in challenging social institutions seems very different from Dickens’s. As Carolyn Dever says of conventional social opinion in Bleak House, “it is impossible to separate the maternal body from the dangerous body of the sexually transgressive woman” (49).
Lady Dedlock's desires make her behavior a threat to the sacred institution of marriage (for Dickens, this desire is problematic), while Lina's desire for equality in marriage threatens racial hierarchies (for Collins, this is progressive). While Lina has the potential to disrupt social institutions in a manner that points toward reform, Lady Dedlock does not. Clearly, though, both authors connect the virtue of the mothers to virginity and the virtue of the daughters to implied chastity as well as to diligence, generosity, and humility.

Yet the same kinds of virtue comment on very different issues; the practice of Christian humanism might be a sufficient moral lesson for Dickens's readers, but for Collins's readers the change extends far beyond individual hearts and minds. According to their respective social institutions, both Esther and Claire were conceived outside the limits of legal definitions of marriage, but for Collins the law, not the mother, is at fault. Collins makes critical points about race, gender, and virtue by differentiating Lina from Lady Dedlock. Lina does marry before conceiving her daughter; she is not a sexually transgressive woman unless one blames her for the failure of the legal system to protect (mixed race) women or for her father-in-law's investment in a racist social institution.

Fulfilling Richard's prediction, Lina becomes an "avenging spirit," an invisible presence in the Tracy household, as her daughter Claire disproves the southern gentry's prejudices and myths about black female sexuality. While Claire engenders the Colonel's change of conscience, Lina's spirit also forces the southern gentleman whose vitriol led to her demise to revisit his class pretensions and racial prejudices because his memories of shooting Richard become "retribution" for the sin of slavery (59). Claire, living proof of her mother's grace rather than her grandfather's shame, disproves Colonel Tracy's assumptions about Lina.13

Haunted Portraits

While both Claire's and Esther's parents commit a social transgression, the correspondence between the two governesses is even stronger than that between their respective parents. While the social assumptions and stereotypes that the Colonel uses to vilify and destroy Lina certainly would have resonated with African Americans in 1865, so too would the search for family identity that characterizes both Claire's and Esther's stories. Just as his misreading of Lina undermines Colonel Tracy's credibility within the narrative, his foolish behavior toward Claire calls the authority of white patriarchs further into question. Collins's depictions of Colonel Tracy, somewhat villainous as he derides Lina and shoots Richard, verge on parody as he interacts with Claire. Using the conventions of gothic parody to accompany his increasing awareness of his own guilt, Collins emphasizes black female virtue by highlighting Claire's inherent goodness. The search for family identity, although it invokes the legacy of slavery, also meshes with the tradition of the gothic family mystery and resonates with the gothic parody found in *Bleak House*.

Portraits facilitate both heroines' assertion of family identity and inheritance. While Esther sees her own image in Lady Dedlock, asking herself, "Shall I ever forget the rapid beating at my heart" when she sees her (Dickens 304), Claire's heart races when she hears the story of her parents. Claire actually gazes upon the portrait of a man who looks just like her; in *Bleak House* Mr. Guppy experiences the moment of recognition when he looks at Lady Dedlock's portrait but cannot quite place Esther's face in it. The manner in which Claire and Esther ascertain their identities is quite similar, "by a re-tracing of recognized traits from other faces, signally from portraits" (Sedgwick 261). As Claire and her
grandparents, who clearly recognize her in Richard’s portrait, begin to recognize her “true” identity. Furthermore, the narrative structure becomes closer to Esther’s search for identity.

Claire’s very existence is more politically charged than Esther’s, however, because she is the product of an interracial marriage. The issue of miscegenation was a social concern of explosive proportions in 1865, so for Collins to insert miscegenation into the well-known plot of family mysteries may have made it seem less scandalous. Her miscegenation story becomes part of a recognizable cultural form; the scenes in the old library in the Tracy home, made less serious through parody and the comic appearance of the spooked Colonel, equate the issue of miscegenation with just another family mystery.

The portrait scene in The Curse of Caste would have been quite familiar to literate readers. As Deidre Lynch says about the conventional gothic tradition, to enter the old library, “is to be recruited into a genealogical plot . . . while surrounded by books, ink, and paper the protagonists of Gothic fiction embark on their projects of memory and mourning. These projects establish the terms on which the generations will be linked and on which the living will relate to the family dead” (29). Rather than turn to written evidence in the Tracy library, however, Collins relies on the gothic trope of the portrait to establish Claire’s lineage. The undeniable evidence of miscegenation, of the deep interconnectedness between black and white Americans, appears in the dual images of Richard Tracy’s portrait and Claire’s face. The connection between Richard and Claire also reminds the family of Lina’s existence and of the love affair that forced the Tracy family to reckon with the legacy of slavery.

As the story’s ghost and “avenging spirit,” Lina’s memory and presence saturates the story shortly after Claire confides in Mrs. Tracy that she is an orphan and knows nothing of her par-ents. Claire’s declaration of motherlessness precipitates the revelation of her family heritage and her inclusion in the Tracy family, particularly because Mrs. Tracy responds to it with the promise, “Stay with me always, Claire, and you shall never again sigh for a mother’s love” (56). The connection solidifies with an undeniable assertion of Claire’s virtue and wholesomeness as Mrs. Tracy confesses: “Claire, dear, you remind me, in a thousand ways, of my poor absent son. . . . This strange resemblance first enlisted my affection for you, but I love you for yourself alone, since I have learned to know your gentle heart” (55-56). Claire is so inherently good that her father’s identity does not matter. Like a good governor, and like Esther, she proceeds through her own personal merits. Mrs. Tracy then tells Claire the history of her family’s downfall, saying: “I could not confide my history to an indifferent person, but with your kind, sensitive heart, I know you will sympathize with me” (55). The emotional connection between Claire and the Tracy family, and her capacity to “sympathize” with their history of family fragmentation, connects the world of the freed people to the southern gentry.

Once again, there is much more at stake in Claire’s identity than in Esther’s; technically, Claire could be remanded to slavery. By establishing her familial relationship with the Tracys, Claire also establishes that she “belongs” in the reunified family of North and South. Her past, the history of exclusion from the inheritance of freedom, connects her to the freed slaves as well as to the free Tracys. She becomes aware of this dual connection, her “blood thrill[s] through her veins” as she listens to the story of “Richard and his slave bride” (55).

While Claire’s “blood thrill[s] through her veins” at the sight of Richard’s portrait, Colonel Tracy’s experience of fear and excitement is even more exaggerated. Collins parodies the male bravery of most politically powerful character in the novel, ren-

INTERTEXTUAL INFLUENCE AND THE INHERITANCE OF VIRTUE IN THE CURSE OF CASTE 673
dering him foolish-looking, much as Dickens parodies American slaveholders and men who uphold slavery like Skimpole. As a Colonel, the elder Tracy should be brave (since military bravery is integral to republican masculinity). Collins’s proud and prejudiced Colonel, avowed slaveholder and defender of “the Southern way,” is haunted and puzzled by the resemblance of their new governess to his son Richard. The Colonel cannot think of Richard without remembering Lina; his remorse forces him to reconsider the “sin” of miscegenation. Collins paints a sinisterly humorous picture of the imperious Colonel tiptoing around his own house at night, feeling imprisoned by the wrath he has brought down on his home. As he stalks the hallways, he chastises himself and curses his actions against Richard:

“Why is it;” he exclaimed excitedly, “the pale face of Claire Neville haunts my sleeping and waking hours, follows me like an avenging spirit? Her voice and smile madden me. Fool that I am to allow myself to be thus imprisoned.” And the colonel made a desperate but vain attempt to rally his spirits.

“This is more than useless,” he exclaimed. “Oh, Richard, my son! my son! my punishment is indeed greater than I can bear! A thousand times have I bitterly execrated that deed. My curse has recoiled upon my own head.” (59; original emphasis)

The “avenging spirit” that he sees in Claire’s face is the Colonel’s memory of her mother—the slave who has been wronged and whose side a just God, according to Richard, takes up. Claire’s voice, particularly her singing, is a trait she inherited from her mother that “maddens” the Colonel. His superstition and guilt about his unfair judgment of Lina haunt him, although he transposes the superstition onto his slaves and tries to deny that it affects him. To avoid “chiding from the superstitious blacks” at the house, he steals away at midnight to look on a portrait of Richard painted shortly before he eloped with Lina. The irony of the novel’s title also subverts some of the conventional expectations of the story—while racist discourse would “curse” blacks with “tainted blood,” the curse in this novel clearly comes from a wealthy white man’s shortcomings, not from Lina’s “tainted” blood. Any taint in Lina’s background comes from her drunken, dissolute wastrel of a white father. For these reasons, Collin’s portrayal of the Colonel in the library scene seems more parody than melodrama.

While he projects superstition on his servants, Colonel Tracy seems nervous and frightened himself. Collins presents him as an almost picaresque figure as he sneaks around his vast plantation home at midnight to enter the haunted library; his stature and power are significantly reduced in this pitiul portrayal. The “dark epoch” and the “canker worm” affecting the Colonel’s memory and heart parallel the epoch of slavery in American history (58). When he realizes that his curse has recoiled on his own head, he must be aware that his complicity in slavery and the selling of other humans has fragmented his own family, just as the sale of slaves fragments African American families.14 Collins’s particular metaphors here would have suggested to her Christian Recorder readers that the Colonel is oblivious to the ways he has enslaved himself. That a plantation master so obliviously laments his situation using the tropes of slavery subverts and supplants his privilege as a slave owner; it seems safe to presume that such scenes of elite white, self-inflicted subjection would have been ironic to a black readership.

As the Colonel muses on the way Claire’s face “haunts [his] sleeping and waking hours,” he becomes distraught over shooting and disowning his oldest son. Venturing back to the library, long since sealed off and unoccupied, grief and regret drive Colonel Tracy to the portrait of Richard, banished to the site of the shooting, a forbidden zone within his own home:
Years had passed since he had looked upon his son. . . . Years had passed since he had crossed the blood-stained threshold. An irresistible inclination to visit that picture seemed to take possession of him. . . .

. . . [Taking a small lamp, with caution steps, [he] threaded his way through the shadowy halls. It was rather humiliating to be stealing through his own house like a thief, at midnight. He cautiously approached the door, paused, and listened; he thought—was almost certain that he heard voices within. Listening a moment longer, and hearing nothing, he thought it only a treak of his perturbed imagination. (59-60).

The Colonel's fear, escalated to the point of delusion, may be intimately connected to his sense of guilt. His humility, long-awaited by the reader, comes only after years and "years had passed" (59). He comes face to face with the influence of the institution of slavery on his own family, as "with one effort the heavy oaken door swung back, disclosing to his astonished gaze, his wife and Claire Neville standing before the veiled picture, their faces white with terror" (60). The juxtaposition of the words white and terror is no accident; Colonel Tracy has terrorized his own son just as centuries of slave owners and overseers terrorized African American slaves. The ghostly presence in the room is Claire's mother, a victim of the Colonel's white terror and accursed whiteness.

When Claire and Mrs. Tracy enter the library, Mrs. Tracy draws back a heavy veil that covers the portrait. Practically speaking, the veil protects the stored painting, yet Collins implies a double meaning. Richard's face is veiled because he is the father of an octroon child; the metaphor of the veil conveys the unspeakable fact of Richard's marriage and, for Colonel Tracy, a mark of shame. While Lady Dedlock's shame is premarital sex, Richard's portrait is veiled because he committed the "sin" of miscegenation. Prohibitions and stigma attached to miscegenation serve as a major legal and cultural symbol of inequality.15

Hiding the portrait from view and concealing the history of a forbidden marriage, the veil marks "a system of prohibitions by which sexual desire is enhanced and specified" (Sedgwick 256). Richard's love and desire for Lina shame his father, likewise forced under the shadow of slavery, another signifier of veiling. The veil overlays Richard's image because, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says, social institutions construct racial identity and social status; they are "social and relational rather than original and private" (256).

Mrs. Tracy, however, pulls this veil aside for Claire's benefit. By making miscegenation honorable through her clearly virtuous characterization of Richard, Lina, and Claire, Collins challenges a social taboo. Lina's drop of "black blood" is not shameful, but the Colonel's belief in racial purity and black inferiority bring about his shame and the attendant need to veil his son's face. That the veil can be drawn back and the shame excrated reveals that racial inferiority is a personal belief rather than an innate characteristic. Drawing back the veil exposes the family's connection to slavery in general and to Lina as well as to Claire in particular. By drawing back the veil, Claire and Mrs. Tracy open up a future in which racial myths, particularly myths about Lina's sexuality, can be undone.

As he looks at his son in Claire's face, the Colonel's racial stereotypes begin to crumble. Shocked when he finds his wife and Claire already viewing the portrait, he gazes "alternately, with staring eyes, upon the portrait of Richard and the pale trembling girl." Claire's identity, signally, traces through her white father—certainly a novel idea and demand for recognition in contrast to slavery's norm—a system in which the child always follows the condition of the mother.16 "Claire's eyes were riveted upon that striking face" as she recognizes her long-lost father (57). Only when the Colonel begins to recognize and perhaps
embracing a filial relationship with Claire, who is legally Manville’s slave, does he witness the horror of slavery as a curse within his own home.

When Mrs. Tracy reveals Richard’s portrait to Claire, the orphan exclaims: “Mrs. Tracy, who am I? Oh, that face has haunted me in my dreams since my earliest recollection!” (57). Her ensuing search for identity, inspired by a portrait, invokes the gothic trope of portraiture as prosopopeia: to ascertain one’s sense of self through the “fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity…” as de Man suggests, “confers upon it the power of speech” (75-76). Richard’s portrait thus gives voice to Claire’s identity as a Tracy; the moment of recognition that solidifies their genealogy, furthermore, voices the unspoken interrelationship between white and black Americans.

As the product of both miscegenation and her father’s ideals of equality, Claire’s resemblance to Richard’s picture brings to the fore the attendant memory of his radical political position regarding the interrelatedness of black and white. As proof that Lina was Richard’s wife, Claire is the incarnation of Richard’s statements about citizenship. The portrait reminds the Colonel of the sacrifice Richard made for his stated fellow citizens; his picture and memory might even serve as proxy for an image of the freed people as equal American citizens.

The resemblance of Claire’s face to Richard’s brings about a radical change in how other characters understand her identity; it substantiates her blackness. The changes in Esther’s and Claire’s countenance also challenge externally prescribed, social evaluations of beauty and a woman’s worth. By virtue of her selflessness, Esther contracts a terrible fever and emerges with disfiguring scars. Claire also generously nurses Mrs. Tracy, whose nervous condition is exacerbated by the incident in the library, fulfilling all of Mrs. Tracy’s expectations of her goodness and sacrificing her own health in the process.

Claire, too, falls ill with a terrible “brain fever” and almost dies. While Esther’s external countenance changes because of the scars, she remains good and beautiful in spite of them. Claire’s countenance also changes permanently, although perhaps not physically, because when the Tracys recognize her as their grandchild, they apparently also “see” her legal status as chattel.

Claire’s face becomes racially “marked” because of her resemblance to each of her parents, and dominant racist stereotypes would interpret this racial “marking” as a sign of inferiority. Of course, Claire’s personality dispels any assumptions that her race makes her inferior. Instead, her face comes to signify Lina’s legacy of slavery, Richard’s belief in racial equality, and the inextricable history of black and white Americans. Like Esther, the changes to her countenance do not affect the goodness that others see in her. Because Collins emphasizes the similarities between Richard’s and Claire’s countenances, she challenges racist beliefs in hereditary differences between black and white; she also provides an alternative image to the pervasive racial caricatures that represented the freed peoples as grotesques. While political cartoons portrayed former slaves by exaggerating and contorting their facial figures to make them as physically unlike white people as possible, Collins renders any ostensibly difference invisible.

Claire’s resemblance to her father, rather than her mother, bespeaks a different social status than that of a slave. She is Richard’s fellow citizen. As she wrestles with her own sense of belonging and lineage, she not only enlists the support of Colonel and Mrs. Tracy but also brings them closer to their long lost son. Eventually, Claire and a family friend deliver Richard from exile and excommunication. As Claire gives a new voice to the family history of silence and shame, she restores her father to his place in the household. By endowing Richard with access to his home and inheritance, Claire effective-
ly rescues him. Collins’s novel, from that point on, signals her ongoing debate with the supposed social status and honor of white patriarchs who own slaves.

Despite having ample evidence of Claire’s identity, the Colonel goes to extensive lengths to prove beyond a doubt that she is Richard’s daughter. (Indeed, the plot drags on like a case in Dickens’s probate court.) In a narrative substitution that replaces Richard with Claire, Colonel Tracy begins to see racism as a curse and slavery as an evil institution that destroys families. As an invisible presence in this family history, Lina’s “avenging spirit” seems to precipitate the transformation. Lina’s absence, conspicuous because she is the missing piece of the miscegenated family triangle, mirrors the complete absence of rights that characterized her life, despite Richard’s best intentions to protect her. The vulnerability of the slave bride—Claire’s mother—questions the marriage contract as well as the ability of white men to protect the interests of blacks and women in an exclusive democracy.

**Law, Inheritance, and Liberal Ideology**

The *Curse of Caste* and *Bleak House* express great skepticism about contractual systems of law and government; Collins knows that contracts only work if drawn between equals, and Dickens is apparently concerned that the judicial system only distances individuals from family obligations. Collins emphasizes that the marriage contract, a fundamental feature of democracy, has no power to protect Lina. The language of the passage in which Reverend Hayes “performed the rite, which united this ill-fated couple” foreshadows doom within the nuptial scene (25). Although, as Judith Newton illustrates, men like Jarnyce are capable of patriarchal benevolence, Collins calls the image of the most benevolent, protective husband into question because the utter lack of racial equality in the nation jeopardizes any family with African ancestry, regardless of an individual white man’s good intentions. Lina’s ominous anxiety when Richard first declares his love for her earlier in the novel suggests that she, too, knows that women have no rights and that the protection of a husband or father insufficiently safeguards her from the reality of racial and sexual oppression. Sensing that her brother and sister plot to disinherit her, she tells Richard “[a] presentiment of evil hovers over me...” (19). Richard responds with claims informed by his own sense of privilege and entitlement to power: “Lina, whatever be your fate or fortune, I will never desert you, so help me God! I will make you my own dear wife; my arm shall protect you, and all the love of my warm, true heart shall be yours” (20). His liberal sense of individual agency does not account for the impact he and Lina will suffer when her father’s creditors remand her to slavery.

The social structure of the institution overwhelms his power to protect her; the absence of a community ethos that crosses racial lines results in Richard’s violent downfall as he strives to fulfill his promise to Lina. The idea that individual measures could disrupt the system of slavery, likewise, proves overly optimistic. If individuals only seek social justice on their own behalf, as is the case with Richard, that justice is not social at all. Like Richard Carstone, a privileged heir who never manages to support himself or his wife and child as he awaits the rewards of his inheritance. Richard Tracy’s expectations and sense of entitlement to an inheritance of freedom and privilege lead to his near demise.

The failure of the marriage contract becomes a sign of past misdeeds needing excommunication. The Colonel must rescind his refusal to recognize Lina and Richard’s marriage if he is to accept Claire as his granddaughter. This recognition legitimizes Claire’s
birth and endows Lina with the status of a legal subject with rights; as the only means of access to liberal contract and democratic rights available to women, marriage is the foundation of male legal responsibility to protect and act on behalf of women's rights. When Colonel Tracy first refuses to recognize Lina as his daughter-in-law, he not only denies her rights but becomes responsible for her death; he fails as a citizen of a miscegenated republic. If, for the family tragedy to be resolved, the Colonel must come to recognize Lina's rights, so the nation must learn to recognize the rights of the formerly enslaved.

Appropriating the rhetoric of virtuous citizenship, Collins demands participation in democracy by revealing the inadequacies of the marriage contract and the incapacity of white men to represent and govern African Americans, particularly women. Allegorically speaking, if contract law represents the foundation of liberal democracy, the failure of the marriage contract indicates white men's failure to protect or guarantee women's rights. Collins idealizes Lina and Claire, so they exceed both the Colonel and Richard's virtue; Claire's very presence becomes integral to inclusive democracy because, if she is to be the Tracys' legitimate grandchild, she also represents the rights denied her mother. As Elsa Barkley Brown's scholarship on concepts of freedom and black women's political history points out, demands for equality and citizenship significantly rewrite the republican male image, exceeding the parameters of "conceptualizations of republican representative government and liberal democracy" (Brown, "To Catch" 124). The images of power and virtue that create a new national identity reflected in Collins's novel do not include Jefferson Davis, but rather a radical republican woman.

Liberal individualism, therefore, has limited success within social institutions built on racial and gender difference. Richard erroneously believes that "according to a liberal ideology [of] self-regulating," impersonal "contractual relations that make social relations just," he will be able to escape slavery and do right by Lina (Brown, "To Catch" 126). The couple's need to "escape" their own community to marry illustrates that "the community and each individual in the community are ultimately responsible for every other person," a value lost in the individualist world of southern nobility (Brown, "To Catch" 126). Even though he delivers her to the assumed safety of a republican Yankee community, injustice in the South threatens justice everywhere. Richard fails to protect his wife.

Esther and Claire more closely emulate republican civic virtue. As Barkley Brown suggests, black women in particular challenged the very foundations of a purely contractual model of liberal democracy. Claire's and Esther's selfless benevolence toward the people around them contrasts markedly with the self-serving actions of male characters. Collins's southern gentlemen Colonel Tracy and Richard seem to share some of the beliefs and attitudes of Dickens's Skimpole and Richard Carstone, primarily because all four male characters share a sense of liberalism or Enlightened individualism. As Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin suggest, American vernacular gentility "failed to develop the sense of public duty and privilege that had once been an important part of the aristocratic package of values and behavior" (229). Each male character's liberalism emphasizes individual rights over community responsibilities. This political ideology is well suited to contract law, which served slaveholding men particularly well as they claimed the enslaved as their property.

The similarities between Collins's depiction of southern nobility and Dickens's characterization of English upper classes likewise question institutions of social power established through tradition and the inheritance of status and unearned privileges. The
question of inheritance in The Curse of Caste takes on new dimensions because the southern gentlemen who enjoy the privileges of slaveholding actually sell their own children. The relationship between family ties or lineage and what one actually inherits if the father is a slave owner and the mother a slave provides a dramatic critique of contractual obligations that protect property. As Dickens criticized the probate courts and illuminated the way that laws governing property could destroy families, Collins expands that critique by making the property a member of the family. Collins forces the reader to question liberal ideology and the contractual relationships that permitted family to be property. Can a system wherein fathers sell their children and women are sexually stigmatized by default uphold any ideals of family responsibility?

Rights of property, likewise, keep African Americans in bondage just as they organize the demise of the main characters in Bleak House. While I do not mean to liken US slavery to the legal proceedings that individuals willingly pursued in Dickens’s novel, the legal concept of individual property rights overshadows the legal responsibilities of virtuous citizenship in either case. Staunchly invested in individual entitlement to resources, both systems legally justify a contractual system that exploits, rather than protects, families. Dickensian dilettantes compare to the southern “gentlemen” in Collins’s novel because they are unable to govern their own families successfully. Dickens chastises the likes of Richard Carstone and Mr. Skimpole, who leeches from everyone around him to support his self-indulgent and utterly irresponsible lifestyle.

The inheritance of status among England’s aristocrats and the United States’ “blue-bloods” and Southern Gentlemen seems entirely unjustified; many of the most virtuous characters in the respective novels tend to be poor or black. The idea that aristocratic “bloodlines” or exclusive class status engender noble behavior proves unlikely in Bleak House just as the idea that slave status, or one drop of black blood, contaminates the moral integrity of Lina or Claire proves unlikely in The Curse of Caste. Dickens’s indictment of the effete elite proved politically germane to African Americans striving to overcome the past as well as morally suitable to write a lesson about republican civic duty and the inheritance of virtue.

Collins uses Dickens’s style of social critique as the basis for her project and foregrounds race as the predominant social justice issue. As what may have been Collins’s most extended opportunity to express her political ideals thoroughly, her novel deserves critical attention in the context of the literary and political history that its narrative structure encompasses. In a moment of Reconstruction optimism, Collins mends the rupture between North and South by unifying southern slaveholding and overtly abolitionist interests, for Richard Tracy most certainly operated on abolitionist principles when he married Lina. Claire’s very presence in the Tracy home symbolizes newly redefined social relations that, in the rhetorical and political economy of the 1860s, likewise signified political rights. When Claire learns the details of her parents’ marriage, she uses them only to interpret the past. The future, one in which Claire ascertains social equality by assuming the role of the Tracy family’s legitimate offspring, suggests an imminent end to formulations of social relations that, in a past that legitimated slavery, equated blackness with inferiority.

Post-slavery society could potentially have been like the world that Collins portrays in her optimistic text. Flanked in the Christian Recorder by demands for universal suffrage, detailed instructions for proper hand washing, reports from socially active church communities throughout the Reconstruction South, and advertisements to find relatives long lost to a history of slavery, these serialized
chapters must have given great hope and inspiration to their eager and receptive readers.20 Much like Dickens, Collins uses family mysteries and gothic conventions to establish the virtue of her heroine and to parody powerful racists. By invoking the socially transformative potential of the novel, she situates her narrator as an authoritative voice on social institutions and the inheritance of citizenship due African Americans.

Richard’s vision depends on his daughter Claire; before the Tracy family can learn to accept Richard’s views, the truth in his beliefs about his wife must be substantiated through the virtue of his daughter. The Curse of Caste asserts the rightful place of African American women in an antebellum national family by appealing to a republican virtue as powerful as military bravery: female sexual virtue and the family ties that virtuous women protect. Collins’s gendered construction of virtue does for black women what the patriotic depiction of the Fifty-Fourth does for African American men. Claire and her nurse Juno, because they maintain and restore family ties, can reconcile the damage that southern gentlemen have done to the family and, by extension, the nation.21 Through Claire, the novel looks toward an integrated future, a national allegory in which the interests of North and South coalesce, southerners learn tolerance and acceptance toward blacks, and a national family fractured by the Civil War has a happy family reunion. Before this reunion can take place, however, the white family must recover its own lost and rejected child, Claire.22

The specific example of the Tracy family provides a roadmap for reintegrating the American national family as it speaks to the lived experience of newly emancipated families. The Recorder posted several advertisements for their lost family members such as the one below that was published in the July 8, 1865, edition:

Information Wanted

Can anyone inform me of the whereabouts of John Person, the son of Hannah Person, of Alexandria, Va., who belonged to Alexander Santer. I have not seen him for ten years. I was sold to Joseph Bruin, who took me to New Orleans. My name was then Hannah Cole. This is the only child I have and I much desire to find him. Any information of his whereabouts can be directed to

HANNAH COLE
no. 14, Cedar St.
New Bedford, Massachusetts

This poignant announcement, a mother’s plea to find her only child, expresses what must have been one of Reconstruction’s most compelling goals—the rebuilding of the black family. It is entirely possible that Hannah Person could have been sold in New Orleans as a “fancy girl,” a concubine whose status as a slave marks her as promiscuous and exotic, much as the slaveholders in Collins’s novel mark Lina. The curse of sexual stigma that befalls black women due to slavery’s perverse logic likewise justifies separating enslaved women from their children.23 Family ties were of primary importance to the impoverished and struggling freedmen who had been separated from their loved ones during slavery and the image of the mother separated from her child remained a powerful, and very real, remnant of the “southern gentleman’s” assault on black women. That The Curse of Caste addresses the fragmentation of families due to slavery—one of the vilest ever mass-scale assaults on black women’s virtue—may have helped black readers identify with the plight of its characters.

In the novel, however, the mother who has lost her firstborn son as a result of the evil institution is not a former slave; she is the wife of a wealthy planter. The reader can see that the “southern way,” a tradition that supposedly idealizes the family, actually enables and abets the tyranny of the white patriarch. Just as slavery tore the national family apart, ripping South from North, it tears apart a white fami-
ly divided on the issue of slavery. Just as Claire’s presence as a virtuous black woman catalyzes the reunion of the Tracy family, the political act of recognizing the presence of virtuous black women in the nation, allegorically speaking, might help to restore a fragmented republic. Only when the white male characters recognize Claire as a black woman can they reunite the Tracy family; only when the nation recognizes the role of black women can it repair itself. Collins transposes the political and social plight of the freedmen in 1865 on an unlikely set of characters including a slaveholding southern patriarch, his nominally abolitionist exiled son, and the granddaughter whose individual graces and virtues win over her long-lost family well before they realize that she is their descendent, possibly an heiress, and (according to slavery’s rules and logic) a black slave.

Collins’s contemporaries strived toward asserting racial equality and the rights of the freed people; Collins devoted herself to literary activism, a form that her contemporaries Delany, Douglass, Harper, and Jacobs, like Charles Dickens, had all participated in during the antebellum years. As many of her contemporaries traveled South to educate and advocate for the freed slaves, Collins created a new fiction that reflects the brief era of Reconstruction optimism. The potential power of a novel to impact political reform (as Dickens’s did) suggests several reasons that Collins would turn to literature to enact social change. A novel like *The Curse of Caste* gave cultural credibility to claims of social equality between black and white by demonstrating the intellectual and artistic potential of its author. The emergence of African Americans as equal citizens in the reunited states also required cultural representations of this potential citizenry that refuted the caricatures and racist stereotypes about the freed people that pervaded public discourse, which Collins provides. Most importantly, as Collins resurrects Lina’s memory, and restores life to all black women victimized through slavery, she challenges the powerful social institutions that worked against black citizenship and equality. To gain power in the cultural milieu and make political statements, as Orlando Patterson tells us, one must “control (or at least be in a position to manipulate) appropriate symbolic instruments” (37). One must ask, then, whether 19th-century novels in the US constitute a form of cultural production authorized to transform political ideas and social values. It seems that, to Julia C. Collins, they most certainly did.

---

The author would like to thank Zubair Amir and Karin Spinn for their insightful reading of an earlier draft of this essay and to express her gratitude to Veta Smith Tucker and Joycelyn Moody for their confidence and guidance during the editorial process.

1. The library plot measures up with the conventions of several British novels, as Lynch illustrates, and the trope of a portrait and a family curse bears similarity to *The House of the Seven Gables*. See Williams for more on Hawthorne.

2. The February 25, 1865 issue of the *Christian Recorder* advertises a public lecture by Harper (30).

3. As McHenry illustrates, literature and reading groups constituted a form of social activism grounded in divine sanction: “to break down the strong barrier of prejudice, and raise ourselves in equality with those of our fellow beings who differ from us in complexion, but who are, with ourselves, children of the eternal parent” (58). Literacy and religious devotion evidenced African American suitability for citizenship and equality, so the appearance of a novel in the *Christian Recorder* might be construed as its own form of activism. McHenry likewise cites the influence of Dickens on African
American readers such as Douglass (125). On freed people’s searches for relatives lost through antebellum sales of slaves, see Wong.

4. Collins seems most interested in the social themes and impact of Dickens's work; her text does not borrow specific passages or stylistic devices that would constitute formal literary evidence of a one-to-one correspondence with Bleak House. As Robbins points out in relation to The Bandwoman's Narrative (hereafter BWN), Dickens was a very influential author among black abolitionists. Frederick Douglass serialized Bleak House in its entirety from April 1852 through December 1853 in Frederick Douglass's Paper (73). While Collins, unlike Crafts, does not pull lines from Bleak House verbatim, her apparent thematic (rather than stylistic) engagements with Dickens's representation of the social world are striking. Keyser also illustrates similarities between BWN and Jane Eyre. Of course, Bleak House itself is part of a longstanding novelistic tradition and shares conventions found in earlier novels. Collins seems to have been extraordinarily well read. Chapter 23 uses the term "tripping the light fantastic," an adaptation of a Milton phrase in L’Allegro that Thackeray adapted in his 1843 work Men's Wives. The phrase did not become common parlance in the US until 1894, with the musical comedy The Sidewalks of New York. Cf. Quinlan. It is possible that Collins and Dickens read similar works and understood how similar political debates shaped their novels. This kind of intertextuality points toward Bakhtinian dialogism, the heterogeneity of cultural productions in historical and social contexts, rather than the question of influence or a formalist definition of intertextuality.

5. The concept of literacy as citizenship appears in numerous original Recorder articles. As McHenry points out, literacy was a major component of citizenship. Collins used her novel both to assert her own qualifications for citizenship (and those of other literate African Americans) and to address some of the critical issues that faced African American society as a whole. African American writers like Collins, Jacobs, and Harper drew upon the tradition of literacy as citizenship established even before Frederick Douglass published his 1845 Narrative. In many cases, black leaders preferred universal suffrage to a literacy requirement. An April 1, 1865, record of a speech by William Allen in the Christian Recorder quotes Douglass as saying that "if a negro knows as much when sober, as an Irishman when drunk, he knows enough to vote" (qtd. in Allen).

6. No such black newspaper of this title appears in African American Newspapers and Periodicals: A National Bibliography.

7. Lemire discusses the paranoid fear of Democrats that miscegenation would devastate civilization in a nation without slavery. Radical abolitionists nonetheless argued that intermarriage between black and white was a fundamental marker of the social equality from which political equality would follow. Claiming that marriage was a personal issue, thus suggesting that women might have desire and agency in such matters, "the anti-slavery women of Massachusetts . . . between 1838 and 1843 petitioned their state legislature to overturn the law banning interracial marriage as part of their effort to 'obtain for . . . [blacks] equal civil and political rights and privileges with whites' " (Lemire 115).

8. Lina's ghostly presence in the Tracy household resembles the ghost of Lady Dedlock's Chesney Wold. Like Lila, that ghost was a woman who married into a family that opposed her own family's political interest during a civil war. Like Lina, she had none of the Dedlock's aristocratic blood. She died in agony and left a curse on the house. Although Lina makes no curse and is not a traitor to the Tracy family, her black ancestry puts her in an oppositional political position to slaveholders.

9. As Patterson points out, referencing Rollin G. Osterweis's "chivalric cult" of Southern Gentlemen, the essential features of the slaveholder's identity included "an excessively developed sense of honor and pride, militarism, the exclusion and idealization of women, and regional nationalism" (95).

10. Flashbacks in the main plot reveal Lina's tragic life as she experiences a series of events that resemble the romantic fate of Rosalie in white abolitionist Lydia Child's 1842 short story "The Quadroons" and the sexual objectification that William Wells Brown describes in his 1853 novel Clotel: or, the President's Daughter. Lina's experience as an educated quadroon rescued from a slave auction by a well-meaning gentleman parallels Wells Brown's eponymous Clotel, whose lover Horatio Green purchases her and sets up housekeeping in a florid sylvan cottage. Brown rewrites the idyllic cottage scene from Child's story. Child's quadroon heroine dies of a broken heart while Brown's Clotel survives abandonment by a politically aspiring, economically striving southern gentleman. Clotel knows very well that she alone can protect herself.

11. Arguably, the Colonel is directly responsible for Lina's death (she dies brokenhearted, not from childbirth). In fact, due to the Colonel's prejudice, Lina is socially dead long before she gives birth to Claire and never has a fighting chance to become a mother in a respectable family. As Patterson defines it, "slavery is the permanent, violent domination of nattily alienated and generally dishonored persons" (13). The condition of slavery results in a "social death." The symbolic logic of slavery, Patterson continues, renders the slave "culturally dead" (211), thus unable to impact the "complex of norms, values, ideas, and patterned behavior we call culture."

12. Dever credits Dickens with expanding the limits of feminine virtue because "The centrality of
such characters as Jo and Esther, alienated from any domestic structure but virtuous nonetheless, sets the stage for the systematic dismantling of family pathologies in favor of a virtue born of resistance" (45). Welter defines four main tenets of true womanhood integral to white women's sense of self: piety, purity, submission, and domesticity (20). As Barkley Brown argues, however, black women were systematically excluded from these principles. Discourses of racial inferiority sexualized black women and slavery deprived women of domesticity ("What" 300). Collins appeals to the Cult of True Womanhood nonetheless by demonstrating piety and illustrating that men's sexual nature, in the context of slavery, is uncontrollable and dangerous. Ina also fits Yellin's description of Child's Rosalie, whose "manners, aristocratic sensibilities, and polished language" mark her "as a model of patriarchal true womanhood; but her mixed racial heritage prevents her from achieving marriage, the traditional true woman's only goal" (Women 72).

13. Esther's guardian likewise says "that the virtues of the mothers shall, occasionally, be visited on the children, as well as the sins of the father" (Dickens, Bleak House 287).

14. Significantly, Collins uses gothic imagery to characterize the Colonel's life in terms that abolitionists also commonly used to describe slavery. She writes, "The colonel is living under a shadow, and has lived under it for years. . . . He had buoyed himself up with the belief that he was happy, while all the time the knowledge of ruin was nestled like a canker worm at his heart. But he had resolutely banished all thought of that one dark epoch in his life's history" (58).

15. Miscegenation, defined by Croly in 1864 as the "mingling of diverse races" that leads to "legitimate unions between whites and blacks" (65), was a heated political and social issue deployed by politicians and journalists to cause panic about African American demands for equality. Sugg also cites an 1888 essay by black activist Aaron Mossell declaring the unconstitutionality of miscegenation laws. While black leaders like Mossell would criticize laws that forbade interracial marriage because the spirit of the law degraded blacks, dominant white society participated in a hysteria over black men's alleged social goal to marry white women. Even suffragists used the panic rhetoric of miscegenation to oppose the Fifteenth Amendment. Many black activists punctuated demands to abolish anti-miscegenation laws with assurances that the issue was one of equal protection and the basis of social equality rather than interracial sexual desire. The topic continued in African American rights discourse well into the twentieth century when Alain Locke demanded the abolition of miscegenation laws in "Enter the New Negro."

16. Claire's resemblance to Richard might endow her with significant cultural capital. While, as Harris argues: "The state's official recognition of a racial identity that subordinated Blacks and of privileged property in rights property on race elevated whiteness from a passive attribute to an object of law and a resource deployable at the social, political, and institutional level to maintain control. . . . Whiteness, as the embodiment of white privilege transcended mere belief or preference; it became usable property, the subject of law's regard and protection" (16, 28). Divested of whiteness, Collins's heroines assume their own system of value by enacting virtue, the property of their individual character thus out-valuing the image of white masculinity, and thereby demand protection and regard on their own merits. Their gaze on the portraits of white patriarchy interrogates the value of whiteness, reducing it to a physical attribute, prioritizing action and speech as true markers of virtue.

17. This formulation applies to the behavior of Dickens's and Collins's "gentlemen" although they do not necessarily fit Altschuler and Blumin's example of the rural middle class in America. Altschuler and Blumin also cite Appleby, Hartz, the Ilandlins, and Kohl.

18. As Goldman has observed in reference to Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, narrative assertions of authority provide a metaphor for expanding the "purely contractual claims and obligations constructed in the liberal theory of government" (242). The claims of African Americans, synonymous with the liberal discourse guaranteeing citizenship and "full protection under the law," extend beyond "the liberal wish for freedom and the racial tie that attaches her to her family" (242).

19. Collins seems skeptical that the law could provide the ultimate means toward social and political equality. Her immediate sphere of interest: family tie and sexual virtue as well as the sanctity of legitimate Christian marriage—has legal implications, but Collins creates a narrator whose concerns and sphere of influence circulate in the private realm. What Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw calls "racial marketplace ideology"—the concept that "If social equality were to be achieved, blacks would essentially have to earn the respect of whites in the private social sphere"—operates in Collins's novel especially (qtd. in Lubiano 284). While Crenshaw refers to this ideology in a negative context regarding the Supreme Court's legal laissez-faire opinion in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), Collins, a middle-class black woman living in central Pennsylvania in 1864, may have seen this racial uplift strategy as a viable contribution that African American women in particular could make toward attaining citizenship.


21. Without the action of Claire's black nurse, Juno, the Tracy family would never solve the mystery of Claire's birth. Juno replaces the courts in her ability to authorize Claire's lineage; Claire does a better job than her father in forcing the Colonel to relinquish his pride and prejudice.

22. While white American writers from Catherine Sedgwick to Lydia Child created virtuous families
in the image of a virtuous republic, Collins flips the script. Her family becomes the model of what the republic should be. For more about the intersection of family and political values in Sedgwick, see VanDette.

23. According to slavery’s logic, substantiated by “race science,” black women were promiscuous, inherently capable of little or no virtue, capable of conceiving life and giving birth with little or no effort, and thus incapable of bonding with their offspring in a meaningful way. Cf. Morgan.

Works Cited

Morgan, Jennifer L. “Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and

INTERTEXTUAL INFLUENCE AND THE INHERITANCE OF VIRTUE IN THE CURSE OF CASTE 685