

The Klondike in Pauline E. Hopkins' *Contending Forces*

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The Klondike, a globally known point of reference, was often depicted in less than flattering terms in American fiction. For example, in Willa Cather's novel *My Antonia* (1918) Tiny Soderball makes money there at the expense of three of her toes and her interest in life (Cather 302). The African American writer Pauline E. Hopkins, the single most productive black woman writer at the turn of the century (Yarborough xxxviii), had seen the Klondike in an even grimmer light. In her 1900 novel *Contending Forces* she chooses it as the location for the wretched, impoverished death of her chief villain, John Langley, a death that is ironically appropriate in a number of ways, and draws together all the major preoccupations of the novel.

Contending Forces, the only fiction published in book form during Hopkins' lifetime (Yarborough xxx), is, according to one critic,

a virtual curiosity cabinet of its era. Phrenology, racial politics, Klondike gold discoveries, British manumission, feminism, occultism, and myriad other topics make the pages bristle. It is as though the narrative mind of the text wishes to sound its repleteness, its comprehensive intelligence as a fit complement of the novel's whitened faces. (Baker 26-28)

With the phrase 'the novel's whitened faces' Baker is referring, somewhat satirically, to Hopkins' own avowed aim in her 'little romance', "to do all that I can in a humble way to raise the stigma of degradation from my race" (Hopkins 13).

The plot of the novel is a complicated one, with a large cast of characters, and many tortuous twists and turns, but its central story opens in 1790, with the English slaveholder Charles Montfort's decision to leave Bermuda for North Carolina with his wife Grace and his sons Charles and Jesse. Through the treacherous machinations of his neighbour Anson Pollock he is murdered there and his home looted and destroyed. His wife Grace commits suicide, and his two sons are separated. Charles

leaves for England with an English patron and Jesse eventually escapes to New Hampshire, where he marries a black woman. The novel then jumps forward in time to Will and Dora Smith, a mixed-race brother and sister living in Boston, who are eventually identified as the grandchildren of Jesse Montfort. Dora Smith is at first engaged to John Langley, who is eventually revealed as a descendant of Anson Pollock. Will Smith falls in love with the mysterious Sappho Clark, who as Mabelle Beaubean was raped at the age of fourteen and gave birth to an illegitimate child. Through John Langley's spite and treachery, Will and Sappho are separated for many years, but finally marry. An English M.P., Charles Montfort-Withington, is revealed as the descendant of Charles Montfort, and through his efforts Ma Smith, the mother of Will and Dora, is legally awarded a hundred and fifty thousand dollars as the heir of Jesse Montfort.

Hopkins, as Elizabeth Ammons has pointed out, attempts to create positive images of black American middle-class life (Ammons 78), and this accounts for what Baker has described as 'the novel's whitened faces', that is, Hopkins' emphasis on forgiveness, accommodation and decorous behaviour. John Langley's death in the Klondike in pursuit of gold tempers these positive, middle-class images in that the wicked Langley is upwardly socially mobile to a fault. Not only does he contemptuously tell Sappho Clark that "'Ambitious men do not marry women with stories like yours!'" (320), but he is ashamed to acknowledge his mother, an ex-slave. He dies as a fitting punishment for his ambition and his greed, having tried to deny his origins, and having been allured from home by the temptation of immense fortunes to be dug out of the earth in the new Eldorado—the Klondike gold-fields (398).

Greed, 'the power of the almighty dollar' (256), has been identified earlier by Sappho Clark's family friend Luke Sawyer, in the key speech of the novel, as one of the 'contending forces' of the title which are dooming the African American race to despair, and it is Charles Montfort's greed which sets the opening tragic events of the novel in motion. Charles Montfort is a white man, although "there might even have been a strain of African blood polluting the fair stream of Montfort's vitality" (23) as Hopkins puts it.¹ He is a slaveholder in Bermuda, owning about seven hundred slaves, and moves to the United States to escape the financial consequences of Lord Stanley's policy of emancipation, not because he does not intend to free his slaves, but because he wants to

do it gradually 'without impoverishing himself' (24).

One critic remarks of Charles Montfort that

Hopkins is careful to remove any motivation or intention on his part that could be attributed to cruelty or personal avariciousness. Thus she establishes the economic basis of slavery as the primary factor in this decision which precipitates all the events and conditions in the rest of the text. (Carby 1986 310)

But, in fact, Hopkins does not make any distinction between the economic basis of slavery and personal avariciousness, and does explicitly identify Montfort's greed as the precipitating factor in the plot, declaring that

If Charles Montfort had been contented to accept the rulings of the English Parliament, and had allowed his human property to come under the new laws just made for its government, although poorer in the end, he would have spared himself and family all the horrors which were to follow his selfish flight to save that property. (65)

Desire for money is early established in the novel as a dangerous and destabilizing influence through the image of Charles Montfort's little boy Jesse trying to build himself houses out of golden coins. It is a scene viewed with amazement by the covetous Anson Pollock, and clearly prefigures the excitement felt by his descendant John Langley at the promise of the Klondike goldfields. Pollock's eyes "were fairly dazzled by the sight of the gold so carelessly strewing the floor. It positively took away his breath" (49).

Pollock's descendant John Langley is drawn by the 'dazzling promise' (398) of the Klondike and boasts to his business partner that he will return within two years and 'dazzle' him with his wealth (399). Pollock, and later Langley, feel that here is a fortune which may be picked up with very little effort. Jesse, and by extension his father Charles, feel that a solid structure may be built from money alone. That little Jesse at his play is intended by Hopkins to be a significant, symbolic figure is confirmed by the immediately preceding detail that Jesse astride his brother's pony reminds his father of something he had seen on his last Sunday in Bermuda: a little black boy astride his mother's back spurring her as if she were his horse (48)—a genial and yet very disquieting image of slavery. As Jesse plays with the gold coins, Jesse in his childish glee, Charles in his paternal negligence and Anson in his jealous excitement all collude in a vision of easy wealth that denies the grim reality of hard labour and servitude. The importance of this scene is emphasized by the fact that, like John Langley's being shown the

Klondike field of ice and snow on the fortune-teller's screen, it is one of only eight scenes accompanied by an illustration. The gold littering the floor in Jesse's play is, however, not echoed by any equivalent gold in the Klondike.²

In some ways Hopkins treats the desire for money as an absolute evil, and one that is the effect as well as the cause of slavery. She remarks of John Langley's mercenary attachment to his fiancée, Dora Smith, that

Langley's nature was the natural product of such an institution as slavery. Natural instinct for good had been perverted by a mixture of "cracker" blood of the lowest type on his father's side with whatever God-saving quality that might have been loaned the Negro by pitying nature. (221)

Yet Doctor Lewis, who is based to some extent on Booker T. Washington (Yarborough xxxviii), and who displaces John Langley as Dora Smith's husband, declares that "'If you want honey, you must have money'" (126), and he and his 'upbuilding' of the African American race are very sympathetically treated by Hopkins (381). The restitution of the hundred and fifty thousand dollars to the Smith family is a vital element in the general righting of wrongs with which the novel concludes. John Langley, clearly with Hopkins' approval, sends Dora a heavy gold bracelet set with pearls on her wedding day as a gesture of remorse (383), and his intention if he finds gold in the Klondike is to settle down to law and 'do good among his fellows as a sort of atonement' for his earlier behaviour (399). The 'hardy Eastern men' (399) who make up the party to the Klondike are not criticized by Hopkins but described as 'gallant' (400). John Langley's death there, then, expresses some of Hopkins' ambivalence about ambition and the desirability of money.

Langley's death after the rest of his companions is significantly solitary. *Contending Forces* has been described as a celebration of 'black gynocentric morality' (Tate 1989 121); John Langley's last words as he dies are "'Dear, dear mother'" (401), acknowledging his bond to the mother of whom he had been ashamed. He dies alone, and conscious of his loneliness, dragging himself outside the cabin so that he may have "'the moon and stars for company'" (400). The physical coldness and isolation of the Canadian scene express his emotionally starved life, and the detail that 'unknown constellations looked down upon his misery' (400) suggests a much longer journey into an alien landscape than his actual journey from Boston. Indeed, even this actual journey is made to seem longer by Hopkins' allusion to Langley at the moment of his death

as a 'child of sunny climes' (401). The subtitle of *Contending Forces* is *A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, and north and south are often set in counterpoint. Here, too, Hopkins is ambivalent. She herself lived in Boston, although she was born in Portland, Maine, and much of the action of the novel takes place in Boston, which is congratulated on its ideals of equality, its architecture and its culture, and is described as 'New England's freest city' (115). Yet Ophelia Davis, a laundress from the South now living in Boston, comments on the racism of white Bostonians as contrasted with the warmth of "'the big white folks'" in the South, which she attributes to the fact that they have "'nussed so many black mammies'" (192). She and her friend Sarah Ann White admire the fair-haired, mixed-race beauty of Sappho Clark as specifically from Louisiana, Sarah Ann observing of it quite without satire that it is "'somethin' God made'" (107).³ New Orleans, despite the fact that it is the site of the brothel where Sappho is raped as a girl (260), becomes the utopian site of the school Doctor Lewis builds for African Americans (387-388): this is indeed an element in the pervasive Resurrection imagery which connects New Orleans with Easter, where Easter 'is something to dream of, and defies description' (391) and where "the sweet odor of the magnolia, mingled with a thousand other subtle perfumes, intoxicated the senses" (392).

Hopkins is similarly ambivalent about Bermuda. Like New Orleans, it has a history of slavery, and yet even when Hopkins recalls this history, describing a scene from the seventeen-nineties, Bermuda appears as an exotic paradise. Charles Montfort watches a crowd of slaves dancing in the square:

The scanty raiment of gay-colored cotton stuffs set off the varied complexions, —yellow, bronze, white,—the flashing eyes, the gleaming teeth, and gave infinite variety to the scene. Over there, waterfalls fell in the sunlight in silvery waves; parti-colored butterflies of vivid coloring, and humming-birds flashed through the air with electrical radiance; gay parrakeets swung and chattered from the branches of the trees. (26)

That even the slaves are happy and at leisure in this scene suggests that a place of tropical beauty is their natural habitat. Conversely, John Langley's death, of cold and starvation⁴ in a landscape which offers no natural food and in a climate too harsh for a human being to bear, suggests that Canada is no place for an African American.

Charles Reade's novel of 1856, *It is Never Too Late To Mend*, offers an interesting contrast in its depiction of the miseries of the Australian gold

rush. At one point the English gold-diggers hear a lark sing, and Reade comments,

Dulce domum!

And these shaggy men full of oaths and strife and cupidity had once been curly-headed boys, and some had strolled about the English fields with little sisters and little brothers, and seen the lark rise and heard him sing this very song. The little playmates lay in the churchyard, and they were full of oaths and drink and lusts and remorse, but no note was changed in this immortal song. (Reade 454)

Reade presents a similarity between England and Australia in order to emphasize the 'cupidity' of the gold-diggers. Canada is depicted as utterly dissimilar from the United States in *Contending Forces*, and John Langley's guilt and greed are complicated by the prediction of his death by a fortune-teller, Madam Frances, who is Sappho's own aunt. She shows Langley various visions of the future, and when, Macbeth-like, he insists on knowing more,

Again he looked at the screen, and saw dark outlines resolve themselves into shapes. He saw what appeared to be a field of ice and snow, vast and unbroken—terrible in its dreary isolation. (285)

This is the field of ice and snow on which he dies, having dragged himself from the cabin in which his companions have perished. Like Hopkins' insistence on the importance of heredity and phrenology, other forms of destiny, this prediction tends to draw attention away from the personal responsibility Charles Reade emphasizes, and to focus attention on the 'dreary isolation' in which Langley perishes.

Canada is mentioned briefly in the novel as a place where slaves could escape to freedom (36), but does not seem to share in the surprisingly positive image offered of Britain. It is curious that Empire Loyalists are spoken of as having retreated only to the Bahamas (28). Bermuda, where the novel opens, is described as having 'always been intensely British, —intensely loyal' (21), and the novel is framed by a consciousness of Britain: it opens with a reference to anti-slavery agitation in Britain (17), and closes with a group of African Americas on a ship bound for Britain.

This group consists of Doctor Lewis and his wife Dora, their daughter Sappho, Dora's and Will's mother Ma Smith, Will Smith, Sappho Clark, and Sappho Clark's little boy born of the rape, Alphonse. It is important that this is a reconstituted and reunited extended family,

and many African America novels turn on such reunions, unsurprisingly since the African American family was torn apart by slavery. It is an aspect of the poetic justice of Langley's death that he dies separated from any member of his family. The reunited family is on its way to visit yet another long-lost relative, Charles Montfort-Withington.

Ma Smith has earlier remarked that there are "'strangely tangled threads in the lives of many colored families'" (373) and a later novel by the African American writer Zara Wright, published in 1920 and actually called *Black and White Tangled Threads* reveals a similar disposition to romanticize the English relatives. In this novel the English Lord Blankleigh returns from the United States with his long-lost wife and daughter. The members of his household

strewed flowers everywhere, and standing there with outstretched arms and silvery white hair, and a smile of welcome on her aristocratic face, stood Lord Blankleigh's mother, and on each side his two sisters, all eager to welcome home Lady Blankleigh, the daughter of an ex-slave, "Mildred Yates." (Wright 193)

Wright's benign picture of the Blankleigh family is very similar to Hopkins' benign picture of Charles Montfort-Withington of Blankshire (the names perhaps suggesting a rather endearing vagueness).

Will Smith has earlier angrily rebutted a suggestion that African Americans should leave America (300). Yet this corporate visit to Britain does appear to be connected with his own blueprint for an African American 'paradise' (interestingly completely opposed to Doctor Lewis's Southern one) in a place 'across the water' where black people could be 'associated on equal terms with men of the highest culture' (389).

The political and historical context of *Contending Forces* is relevant here: the United States' continuing acquisition of new territories had provoked debate about the citizenship of both the 'internally and externally colonized', and in the northern states racist commentators had identified a temperate climate, a higher civilization and a pure Anglo-Saxon stock as intrinsically connected (Carby 1987 133-134): Hopkins indeed plays on Anglo-Saxon racial pride by pleading in her Preface "for that justice of heart and mind for my people which the Anglo-Saxon in America never withholds from suffering humanity" (15). Her explicit claiming of Britain as a fitting destination for all the 'good' African American characters is perhaps consciously balanced by her selection of Canada as a grave for her African American villain. The Klondike is too cold, too inhospitable, too mercenary a choice for John Langley, but Britain,

although we never see Hopkins' characters arrive there, and although Doctor Lewis has previously characterized Will Smith's vision of his overseas paradise as "Chimerical and quixotic" (389), is depicted, in the person of Charles Montfort-Withington, as warm and welcoming.

In *Contending Forces* Canada becomes, through Hopkins' use of the Klondike, the specious promise of unearned wealth, Britain the true promise of an earned inheritance. Constructed in opposition to the inhabited, colourful landscapes in which black people can thrive, Canada is demonized as a white hell.

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Endnotes

1. Thereby outraging the African American writer Gwendolyn Brooks some eighty years later (Brooks 405).
2. Despite Carby's observation that John Langley dies 'surrounded by an immense fortune' (Carby140), he actually finds nothing there but 'gaunt famine' (399).
3. Another remark which infuriated Gwendolyn Brooks in 1978 (Brooks 405).
4. Not in a mining accident as one critic has stated (Tate 57).

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