IJEEL
Peer-Reviewed International Journal

International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL)

ISSN: 2583-3812 Journal Home Page: https://ijeel.org/
Vol-4, Issue-4, Jul-Aug 2025 Journal CrossRef DOI: 10.22161/ijeel

The Anxiety of Vision in the *Colored American Magazine* and *Of One Blood*

Nellickal A. Jacob

Department of English, Ramjas College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Article Detail:

Received: 08 Jun 2025;

Received in revised form: 03 Jul 2025;

Accepted: 07 Jul 2025;

Available online: 11 Jul 2025

Keywords*— *African-American literature, Pauline Hopkins, Visual studies, Magazine fiction, Passing.

Abstract

To read Pauline Hopkins' novel Of One Blood in the context of its original location within the pages of the Colored American Magazine makes the concept of vision and visual representation appear in a whole new light. The novel's exploration of visuality reverberates in interesting ways with the rich visual environment of the magazine that believed in the virtue of asserting the visual presence African Americans. Such a heavy investment in the optics of racial identity speaks to Hopkins' novel in a number of ways. Of One Blood elaborates on the phenomenon of passing as well as several supernatural visual scenarios that speak back to the magazine's broader understanding of visual representation. The marked ambivalence with regard to visual self-presentation and perspectival looking in Hopkins' novel cast a shadow over both the idea of the visual image and the politics of looking.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to examine the thematics of visuality and study the implications that practices of looking have for the circulation and interpretation of African-American writing. The printed word and the visual text often co-habited and jostled in the same cultural spaces, setting up between themselves a dialogue of depth and texture. A striking example of such a fertile dialectic between the verbal and the visual is African-American magazine fiction around the turn of the twentieth century which stages a unique conversation between print and photographic cultures, each speaking to the other in ways that betray a profound ambivalence about the very idea of representation. However, the literary archive and the photographic archive are not merely co-producers of a conflicted realm of African-American self-presentations, but are often engaged in cultural politics that need to be tracked, read and situated differently. To interpret the body of printed texts in isolation from the visual texts that were often inscribed within the contours of these texts and/or in close juxtaposition to them would be to ignore a crucial component of the material contexts of circulation and reception that produced and fashioned such texts. This article attempts to track the visual contexts and subtexts of one of these printed texts—Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*, serialized from November 1902 to November 1903 in the various numbers of the *Colored American Magazine* — by re-situating it in the context of its specific location within the magazine.

II. THE *COLORED AMERICAN MAGAZINE*

The *Colored American Magazine*, which Hopkins edited for about four years from 1900—before the magazine shifted base and its ideological moorings under the new stewardship of Booker T.

Washington—was a periodical that had a fairly focused agenda. It purported to present to "the colored people of the United States, a medium through which they [could] demonstrate their ability and tastes, in fiction poetry and art, as well in the arena of historical social and economic literature." (Hopkins 1900, 3) However, this editorial pronouncement concealed a more active program that sought to fashion a positive self-image for middle class African Americans. The "essential middle-class orientation" (Fultz 102) of journals like the *Colored American Magazine* enabled it to speak meaningfully to its readership that, as circulation figures show, were in a large measure made up of black middle-class professionals and a sizeable number of literate African-American artisans (Carby 126-127). The strong editorial voice that made no attempts to conceal its pedagogic role to educate readers into a consciousness of the vast potential represented by the "ability and tastes" of its colored readership, consciously foregrounded the need for the self-presentation of African-Americans "in the proper light before the world" (Hopkins qtd. in Flutz 105). Striving hard to project an image of an educated and successful African-American middle class "assimilable into respectable white society" (Schneider 160), the editorial policy clearly reveals its project "to define as well as create the boundaries of a black magazine-reading public" (Carby 125). This arduous task of reflecting and constructing a carefully worked out intellectual and historical genealogy for an African-American readership whose self-image had to be literally 'produced' through the pages of the magazine, was accomplished in no small measure by Pauline Hopkins, the "real work-horse of the magazine" (Schneider 159).

Like other products of the magazine revolution that began in the 1880's, the *Colored American Magazine* sustained itself by publishing advertisements that helped in providing much needed finances that were hard to come by. The magazine carried essays on a range of topics from religion to race, a series of biographical sketches of famous colored people, columns that offered career advice to young men and women and a prolific gallery of middle-class men and women who represented the new standard of African-American identity. Interwoven with this generic heterogeneity were serialized novels and short stories that need to be read with the periodic nature of magazine publication, owing to its impact on plot in obvious ways, like the need for suspending the narrative at critical junctures in consonance with "the strategies and formulas of the sensational fiction of dime novels and magazines" (Carby 145). It is crucial to disassemble a novel like Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood* to its disaggregated form in the pages of the magazine to track its resonances within the rich matrix of which it is a part. To see the novel in conversation with other print genres that the magazine included, opens up the space for recognizing the broader material contexts that the novel reverberated with and in turn spoke back to.

One of the interesting means whereby the *Colored American Magazine* went about its task of imaging African-American identity was its consistent use of photographs. The magazine carried numerous snapshots of successful African-American individuals that corresponded to short verbal profiles that provided an account of their accomplishments, both major and minor. This project of 'peopling' its pages with photographs that attempted to construct a contemporary visual archive however, sat uneasily with the parallel project to trace a historical past for African Americans that countered racist constructions of that past.

The portraits of African-American figures in the magazine are likewise strenuously deployed as a counter to the dominant ways of visually marking the colored body. Bearing the markers of bourgeois success, these figures return the camera's gaze with poise and dignity. Many of the figures represented the cross-racial African-Americans whose portraits, according to Smith, call into question the whole visual foundation of racial difference. As Carol Allen points out, the *Colored American Magazine*'s use of portraits "gave indisputable evidence that racial segregation had no validity because the faces of black and white relatives debunked any consideration that human beings are biologically divided by race" (Allen 25).

However, as the next section of this paper will argue in the context of Hopkins's serialised novel *Of One Blood*, the portraits belie a deeper and less sanguine relationship to visuality.

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.4.2

III. READING THE VISUAL SIGN IN *OF ONE BLOOD*

Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1902-1903) is a novel that is in a continuous dialogue with the thematics of visuality and its relationship to race. The poignancy of this dialogue is particularly acute when the novel is placed against the background of its original location in the *Colored American Magazine*. Serialized in a magazine that was situated within the representational codes of dominant visual culture in turn of the century America, the novel offers a fascinating commentary on the idea of vision and the politics of sight. The novel also institutes an interesting novelistic dialogue between different regimes of looking. The protocols of vision that play a crucial role in interracial relations, find themselves at their disciplinary limits in *Of One Blood*. My reading of the novel will focus primarily on three thematic strands that in various ways coalesce around notions of visibility. The first of these strands is the idea of 'passing' as an instance of the problematic link between racial taxonomies and vision.

"The modern epistemology of race hinges on the relation between visibility and truth," argues Samira Kawash, who goes on to analyze the race phenomenon of passing as a limit case that radically attenuates the relationship between vision and truth (Kawash 129). The passing figure is one that is central to Hopkins's novel that similarly underscores the provisionality of vision as a guide to stable meaning.

The novel thematizes the interpretative problem of reading bodies, a problem that is primarily visual. The comforting knowledge that bodies, like photographs which are its 'natural' signifiers, can be decoded in order to coincide with the ideology of race is rendered disconcertingly unstable by both central characters Reuel and Dianthe, whose bodies resist such stability. By strategically withholding the truth from the reader until later on in the novel, Hopkins makes us participate in and then acknowledge the distorting gaze of racism.

"Visibility interrupts knowability," calling into question the semiotics of looking that reduces facial features to a set of racial signs (Kawash 132). The naïve belief that the "face will tell its own tale" (Hopkins 1988, 448) is shattered by the impenetrability of the body that possesses truths that it does not yield up easily. In the case of Dianthe, the idea of race and visibility collide even more dramatically. "Fair as the fairest woman" and "not in any way the preconceived idea of a Negro" (Hopkins 1988, 453), Dianthe is a visual reminder of the unreliability of visual markers of race. Her reappearance in the novel after she loses her memory in the accident, wipes out her racial identity as well, leaving the world no choice but to take her at 'face value'. This emphasizes the fragility of racial difference and raises the crucial question: how does one establish racial identity as an essence? If appearance is disconnected with essence, then the discourse of race is forced to drive that essence down deeper into the non-visual. This dis-located essence fractures the scientific/empirical gaze of dominant visual protocols, conceding the deficiency of sight, which "becomes an insufficient guarantee of knowledge" (Kawash 130).

The deconstruction of the idea of racial difference as a perceptual system of observable characteristics provides the novel with an opening into one of its primary concerns, namely, the social constructedness of racial difference and the idea of all races being 'of one blood'. For the narrator, the critical question is "who is clear enough in *vision* to decide who hath black blood and who hath it not?" (Hopkins 1988, 607 emphasis mine)

The passing figure will no doubt have to confront his real identity but in Reuel's case this disclosure is only a prerequisite for him to realize and accept his true identity as King Ergamenes. This return to authentic selfhood is not however a simple embracing of an African-American identity that has been vigorously disavowed, as is the case in Hopkins's short story, "The Test of Manhood" published alongside the second instalment of the novel in the 1906, December issue of the *Colored American Magazine*. Although both narratives deal with the theme of passing, *Of One Blood* describes the acknowledgement of racial identity in ways that complicate the usual moral of passing stories that highlight "the inevitable tragedies that would ensue should the color line be broached" and present the narrative dénouement as one in which the passing figure is presented "as evidence of the necessity of racial order rather than

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.4.2

its negation" (Kawash 133). By plotting Reuel's acknowledgement of his racial identity so as to converge with the moment of his ascension to the throne, Hopkins reverses the momentum of passing—not as shameful discovery as in Hopkins' short story "Test of Manhood", but as moment of elevation to a new and more powerful destiny. Furthermore, the decision to pass is not connected with greater social status, and Reuel's decision to marry Dianthe endangers his fictive identity rather than the conventional trope of the white woman lover who justifies the perpetuation of the concealment.

The novel's critique of visual surfaces as bearers of truth therefore reveals a fundamental ambivalence about the very idea of visual representation. It suggests the possibility that it may be a shallow dream to believe that surfaces reveal interiors and that the ocular-centric paradigm that photography confirms is based on a radical falsehood. The body is an ambiguous text that is opaque and resistant to the operations of the eye. Clearly there is more to the hundreds of impressive African-American visages that look out of the pages of the *Colored American Magazine* that *Of One Blood* seems to be in dialogue with. Behind the façade of the photographic pose that signify middle-class security and success, lurks a deeper anxiety that it is clearly not 'visible'. An ironic reminder of this troubled relationship to the visual in the context of passing, is the frequent appearance in numerous numbers of the magazine of an advertisement that seems to run counter to the editorial effort to "develop and intensify the bonds of that racial brotherhood, which alone can enable a people, to assert their racial rights" (Hopkins 1900, 3). I refer here to the advertisement for a product that describes itself as "Black Skin Remover," that promises to "turn the skin of a black or brown person four or five shades lighter and a mulatto person perfectly white" (Hopkins 1903 914). It is also interesting to note that the secrecy and shame that was associated with such projects is emphasized by the manufacturer's reassurance at the bottom of the advertisement that the product will be "packed so that no one will know the contents except the receiver" (Hopkins, 1903, 914). Clearly the project of visibilizing an acceptable African-American image of bourgeois acceptability was not able to repress the desire for an invisibility, which would permit a masking of racial difference rather than the revealing of it.

Perhaps nowhere is the novel's critique of dominant visual culture more in evidence than in the second thematic strand that I will examine, which is the novel's obsession with alternate ways of seeing. Such models of sight challenge the protocols of literary realism and mark the novel's choice of "adopting freer and less mimetic forms" (Daniels 174). Flying in the face of most scientific theories of vision of which photography is a product, the novel offers glimpses of an entirely different visual economy, one that decisively rejects an empirical notion of sight in favor of a non-materialist 'seeing'.

The opening scene of the novel describes Reuel gazing into the cold Boston night and experiencing the first 'vision' he has of Dianthe, whose "fair face" super-imposes itself on to the image of the night. This confirms his belief "that if we could strengthen our mental sight, we could discover the broad highway between this and the other world" (Hopkins 1988, 459). The novel goes on to explore this "clairvoyant sight" through a series of episodes where both Reuel and Dianthe experience "visionary scenes" that appear before their "entranced eyes."(Hopkins 1988, 525, 522).

These alternate perceptual systems that the novel repeatedly uses, reveal the poverty of the scientific gaze, as well as demonstrate the revolutionary power of the different ways of seeing. Unlike the static photographic gaze that fixes identity by placing it within the grids of race, class and gender, the visions that Reuel experiences are mobile, non-linear and capable of weaving in and out of chronological time. Reuel's "power of second sight" (Hopkins 1988, 572) enables him to look into the future, a function that gets externalized in the magic disk that Ai shows him in the hidden city. Released from linear temporality, Reuel's visions allow him to 'see' the tragic destinies of Dianthe and Molly and also serves as a contrast to the sterile medical gaze of the doctors who pronounce Dianthe dead, before Reuel reanimates her. He therefore takes a plunge into the "mysterious regions of science" (Hopkins 1988, 464) that enables him to 'see' the possibility of life where science sees a mere corpse. Furthermore, Reuel's alternate visions

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.4.2

also reorganize the notions of spatiality that frame the perspectival gaze of the eye/camera.

In the fascinating visionary moment that occurs in a tent near Meroe, Reuel sees unfold in front of him a scene of the traitorous Jim reading Aubrey's letter. Jim sits behind Reuel all along, oblivious of having his image projected forward into space before Reuel's eyes: "Twice did the visionary scene, passing behind the seer, recross his entranced eyes" (Hopkins 1988, 522). Here Hopkins seems to almost deliberately mock the photographic convention of perspectival seeing, which debars the unidirectional gaze from both multiplanar vision as well as double vision that the above scene demonstrates.

The novel's visionary moments also articulate an interesting relationship between image and text, space and time. On two occasions, the hypnotic sight visualizes a text so as to reveal a dimension of meaning that it conceals. In the scene described above, Reuel 'sees' a text demonstrating Aubrey's duplicity visualized before his eyes by the "shadowy figure of the shining apparition in the tent door" who "point[s] letter by letter, to the pictured page of the billet" (Hopkins 1988, 522). Dianthe too sees a vision of Mira whose "heavy marks in ink, underscore" a line in the Bible which prophesies that "there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed" (Hopkins 1988, 506). In both these cases, Hopkins inverts the relationship between text and image, by using the printed page as an illustrative mechanism within the visual scenario. In doing so she stages the subsumption of the word into the image, as well as suggests that visionary 'seeing' can reveal the duplicity of language and reanimate it with significance.

Such experiments with alternate models of vision as well as the problematization of dominant regimes of visuality are also demonstrated in another thematic strand that betrays the novel's anxiety about picturing the African-American woman, whose body is the site of sexualized violence. This image of the violated body that bears the burden of that defilement produces a deep anxiety about the act of visibilising such bodies. The representation of such female figures, the novel seems to suggest, is fraught with the tensions of seeing them both as sites of desire and reminders of the loss of purity. *Of One Blood* seems to manifest this anxiety in two ways.

Firstly, the novel problematizes the act of visualizing the figure of the African-American woman. Dianthe first appears in the novel in a dematerialized vision that appears to Reuel: "Silhouetted against the background of the lowering sky and waving branches, he saw distinctly outlined a fair face...with soft brown eyes, deep and earnest... O how real, how very real did the passing shadow appear to the gazer" (Hopkins 1988, 445). Soon afterwards, seeing her perform during her solo performance at the musical concert, he realizes that she is the same woman who appeared to him in his vision: "the hall seemed to grow dim and shadowy; the sea of faces melted away, there before him in the blaze of light—like a lovely phantom-stood a woman wearing the face of his vision…" (Hopkins 1988, 454). Once again in Mount Auburn, he encounters a vision of Dianthe who prophesies that he would come to her aid soon. On this occasion, Reuel is not able to "see her features distinctly, only the eyes-large, bright and dark," until later the moon gave a distinct view of the lovely features" (Hopkins 1988, 461).

Dianthe's reappearance in the novel, after the accident that erases her memory, is significantly void of her old visual identity. The fact that no one, except Reuel and Aubrey, can 'see' her as the woman whose voice enthralled the audience at the concert demonstrates the problem of visibilizing voice. To all others, her real identity is invisible.

This textual resistance to the visual embodiment of Dianthe strengthens the similitude between her and the figure of her mother Mira, whose ghostly form appears to both Reuel and Dianthe. Both women are victims of racialized violence. In Dianthe's case, that violence has added to it the fact of incest. As Smith points out, for Hopkins, slavery perpetuated "not only rape but also incest, as white heirs raped the half-sisters begotten by their own fathers" (Smith 202).

It is against this hesitant and shadowy visibility granted to African-American women that the novel's other manifestation of visual anxiety appears. This takes the form of a visual over-investment, in the visual spectacle of Candace: "Yes; she was a Venus, a superb statue of bronze, moulded by a great sculptor; but an animated statue, in which one saw the blood circulate, and from which life flowed... Her loveliness was absolutely ideal and perfect" (Hopkins 1988 568-

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.4.2

69). Here, Candace is described in language that seems to highlight the vitality of her feminine body, starkly contrasted to the disembodied nature of Dianthe's appearance. Representing pure femininity unsoiled by the corruptions of miscegenation predicated on rape, Candace can bear the full brunt of the male gaze. Objectified as the model of feminine perfection, the picture of Candace offsets the disembodied, tortured bodies of Dianthe and Mira, representing the novel's vision of an untainted future.

IV. CONCLUSION

Of One Blood then is a novel that speaks to the highly charged visual environment of the *Colored American Magazine* and marks the boundaries of vision while recognizing how visual cultures are an intrinsic part of racial and gender ideologies. In doing so, it merges realist and romance traditions and dislodges the logic of linear time and space (Keck 2024). It is perhaps a measure of the novel's anxiety of vision that forces it to embody itself outside discernible generic categories. As Daniels demonstrates, "[i]nstead of dismissing the text as disjointed as a result of its polygeneric makeup, we should celebrate it as an aesthetic accomplishment in black fiction for the simple reason that it defies the mainstream values of the white literary establishment" (Daniels 173). This generic indecision mimics at the level of form, the text's troubled relationship with the taxonomies of visual order.

The novel's location within the pages of the *Colored American Magazine*, sharply foreground the idea of visibility that it seeks to draw attention to. The cultural work of fashioning a visible identity for the African American, which the magazine seems to be overtly engaged in, is undermined by a deep ambivalence about the politics of vision. The fictive register of Hopkins's novel succeeds in articulating that ambivalence in ways that were not possible in the rest of the magazine.

REFERENCES

[1] Firmin Allen, Carol. *Black Woman Intellectuals: Strategies of Nation Family and Neighbourhood in the Works of Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fauset, and Marita Bonner*. New York: Garland Publishing. 1998.

[2] Fabian, Ann. *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-CenturyAmerica*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

[3] Daniels, Melissa Asher. The Limits of Literary Realism: *Of One Blood*'s Post-Racial Fantasy by Pauline Hopkins. *Callaloo*. 36.1 (2013) 158-176

[4] Fultz, Michael. ""The Morning Cometh": African-American Periodicals, Education, and the Black Middle Class, 1900-1930". *Journal of Negro History* 80.3 (1995) 97-112

[5] Gruesser, John Cullen Ed. *The Unruly Voice: Rediscovering Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996.

[6] Hirsch, Marianne, ed. *The Familial Gaze*. Hanover: The University Press of New England, 1999.

[7] Hopkins, Pauline, ed. *Colored American Magazine*: Volume 1 (1900), (New York, Negro Universities Press, 1969)

[8] Hopkins, Pauline ed. *Colored American Magazine*: Volume 5 (1902), (New York, Negro Universities Press, 1969)

[9] Hopkins, Pauline ed. *Colored American Magazine*: Volume 6 (1903), (New York, Negro Universities Press, 1969)

[10] Hopkins, Pauline ed. *The Magazine Novels*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

[11] Kawash, Samira. *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity and Singularity in African American Narrative*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

[12] Keck, Michaela. "Black Time Travel, Chronotopicity, and the Reparative Desire for Beauty in Pauline E. Hopkins's *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self*". *Time Travel in World Literature and Cinema*. Edited by Bernard Montoneri. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024

[13] Lalvani, Suren. *Photography, Vision, and The Production Of Modern Bodies*. Albany:State University of New York Press, 1996.

[14] Otten, Thomas J. " Pauline Hopkins and the Hidden Self of Race". ELH. 59.1 (1992) 227-256.

[15] Rudisill, Richard. *Mirror Image: The Influence of the Daguerreotype on American Society. Albuquerque*: University of New Mexico Press, 1971.

[16] Sánchez-Eppler, Karen. *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism and the Politics of the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

[17] Schneider, Mark R. "Boston's Pro-Civil Rights Bookerites". *Journal of Negro History*. 80.4 (1995) 157-169.

[18] Smith, Shawn Michelle. *American Archives: Gender Race and Class in Visual Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.4.2