



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Capital: In Barbara Chase Riboud's "Central Park"

Jennifer M. Wilks

Callaloo, Volume 32, Number 3, Summer 2009, pp. 1014-1026 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/cal.0.0484](https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.0.0484)



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/361416>

---

---

## LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF CAPITAL In Barbara Chase Riboud's "Central Park"

by Jennifer M. Wilks

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,  
that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,  
that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.  
—The Declaration of Independence (1776)

In her new novel, "Central Park", Barbara Chase-Riboud continues her provocative exploration of the multiple standards inherent in national and civic principles. Against the backdrop of Gilded Age New York, Chase-Riboud recreates the story of Hannah Elias, a black courtesan turned prosperous businesswoman, to interrogate the determination and deceit by which individuals, cities, and countries become great. The novel is filled with conduct unbecoming to both ladies and gentlemen: while Elias earns her living as a prostitute, or member of the Sisterhood, her clients belong to the unspoken brotherhood of white, male, and predominantly Protestant businessmen who build their fortunes on the backs of Greater New York. Yet it is Elias who eventually faces prosecution, a development Chase-Riboud attributes to the character's insistence on and success in claiming the American ideals of unalienable rights and self-invention. For rather than being content to accept the rudimentary citizenship allowed early twentieth-century African Americans or pursue the domestic happiness traditionally gendered as feminine, Elias dares to strike out on the modern (and often racialized as white and gendered as masculine) quest for life, liberty, and the pursuit of capital. This essay will examine how Chase-Riboud (1) parses the façades on which national, social, and racial identities are built and (2) negotiates how many narratives of identity and self-determination—including Hannah's own—cross the line between exception and exploitation.

In Hannah Elias, Chase-Riboud has found a fitting successor to the protagonists of her previous novels. Whereas, as Suzette Spencer notes, the slave status of Sally Hemings, the eponymous heroine of Chase-Riboud's 1979 debut novel, indelibly restricts her autonomy in her relationship with Thomas Jefferson, Elias seems to enjoy exceptional self-determination in her movement from prostitute to mistress (508). Elias's story also resonates with yet departs from that of Joseph Cinque, the *Amistad* revolt leader depicted in *Echo of Lions* (1989). Ashraf Rushdy contends that, in her representation of Cinque's engagement with John Quincy Adams and the United States legal system, Chase-Riboud reveals that "there are diverse places for politics . . . —the body, the court, and the nation" ("Representing the Constitution" 275). In effect, when Adams urges the United States Supreme Court to consider Cinque and his fellow Africans as humans rather than property, he is also urging the justices to contemplate the soundness of the nation as established

by the Constitution. While the body, the court, and the nation also define the terrain on which Hannah Elias's chronicle unfolds in "Central Park," the relationship between humanity and property differs markedly in the novel's early twentieth-century context. Indeed, Elias's personhood is reaffirmed rather than threatened through her association with material goods because, despite the perceptions of her white lovers, she belongs to no one but herself. And, finally, the perceived exoticism of Saartjie Baartman, the titular figure of Chase-Riboud's 2004 novel *Hottentot Venus*, becomes the means through which she and other African-descended peoples are decontextualized and dehumanized, yet Elias's apparent foreignness is the key to her entry into the circuits of modern power. All four stories—Hemings's, Cinque's, Baartman's, and Elias's—intersect with constructions of nationhood and modernity, but it is Elias who most successfully capitalizes, literally and figuratively, on this intersection.

### **The Historical Hannah: From Philadelphia Negro to Gilded Age Enigma**

From the middle of 1904 to the early part of 1905, the pages of the *New York Times* were abuzz with the blackmail case that retired glass manufacturer John R. Platt brought against the mysterious Hannah Elias. Platt, a white octogenarian, alleged that the thirty-six-year-old Elias had extorted \$685,385 from him. He claimed to have first met the younger woman in the Tenderloin in the 1880s and to have renewed their acquaintance during a visit to a Third Avenue massage parlor some ten years later. According to Platt, he had turned to the establishment, where Elias worked, in search of treatment for his rheumatism, and the latter was so helpful that he willingly gave her money to start a boarding house. This generosity, he alleged, was mistaken for gullibility, and what began as a relationship of friendship and gratitude became an unscrupulous negotiation in which Elias demanded money to keep their acquaintance secret from Platt's family ("Andrew"). That which Platt did not immediately avow was nonetheless suggested by the circumstances surrounding his encounters with Elias: the two knew each other first as client and prostitute, then as man and mistress, and their affiliation grew out of the intersection of sex and commerce. After a dramatic beginning that included Elias's refusal to surrender, the police invasion of her home, and her imprisonment in the notorious New York City jail known as the Tombs, the case disintegrated when Platt would not substantiate the charges in his testimony. His family attempted to recover the \$685,000 through a subsequent civil suit, but that case and the appeal that followed also failed (McLaren 145). Hannah Elias was a free, and now exonerated, woman.

Why was this case so newsworthy given the long history of clandestine and exploitative interracial sex in the United States? As Angus McLaren notes in *Sexual Blackmail: A Modern History*, business between white male customers and black female prostitutes "was generally ignored," as was "the keeping by a wealthy white man of an African-American mistress" (146). Such is the attitude reflected in a letter to the editor published in the *New York Times* on June 10, 1904; signing off with the moniker "Fair Play," the writer asks why "all the machinery of justice should be set in motion with such a strenuous and amazing precipitancy" over what is "perfectly plainly a foolish infatuation that has waned" ("Fair

Play"). In short, there seemed to be nothing new about the liaison between Platt and Elias. If the racial dynamics of the case were as old the nation itself, however, its social and economic implications were as new as the young century. The Platt-Elias affair might never have come to light had it not threatened to sully the story behind New York's emergence as a center of modern capital and culture. In November 1903, another white, wealthy octogenarian made the city's news when he was murdered by a distraught black man named Cornelius Williams. The victim, Andrew Haswell Green, had presided over the Central Park Commission, helped to end the corruption of Tammany Hall, and championed the consolidation of New York through the borough system. For these and other efforts he was hailed as the "Father of Greater New York" (Maeder 29). For his frequent visits to family members who lived next door to Elias on Central Park West, Green received the less welcome attention of Williams, formerly a boarder in one of Elias's rooming houses. Thinking he had found the man who had helped corrupt the object of his affection, Williams shot and killed Green; it was only when Platt publicly admitted his relationship with Elias that Green's name was cleared and, by extension, the twentieth-century city's image saved from the nineteenth-century stain of racialized concubinage.

In addition to presenting Elias as antithetical to the image of the modern city, initial coverage of the Platt suit also cast her as treacherously foreign. In allegedly passing for white, a *New York Times* article from June 1, 1904 suggests, Elias rejected not only her race but also her nationality. Although "born in Philadelphia in the negro quarter," the unsigned piece notes, Elias "falsely and fraudulently represented herself to be a single woman of Spanish extraction" ("Says"). Furthermore, at the time of her arrest her household staff included a Japanese butler and an English nanny. Instead of addressing the link between these choices and social factors such as American racial prejudice and Gilded Age fascination with foreign cultures, the article describes Elias as an impostor who misled friends and lovers alike:

A story spread rapidly that beneath the silky black hair of the Spanish woman was a head covered with kinky curls. The women at Rockaway said that Mrs. Elias had spent thousands of dollars with manicures and dermatologists, who had promised to assist her in disguising her Negro blood. These stories caused Mrs. Elias much annoyance and the loss of many of her newly made friends. ("Says")

Because Elias chose not to speak to the press while her case was being tried, these recycled rumors went unchallenged for ten days, at which point Platt withdrew his complaint. Elias granted her first interview June 11, 1904, and, if not exactly a model of black pride, she did not pretend to be anything other than African American. In her words, she simply "never had much to do with [her] own race" ("Mrs. Elias").

Platt, on the other hand, was as talkative as Elias was silent and in multiple statements to the *New York Times* presented himself as a lifelong New Yorker who, although foolish, nonetheless had impeccable personal and civic credentials:

I have always lived in New York. I was born in New York, on Cedar Street, in 1820. For seven years I was a member of what is now the Seventh Regiment, and I was one of the men who raised a company

of Zouaves for service in the civil war [sic]. As I told you, I was the last President of the old volunteer firemen, so I have been a soldier and fireman a big part of my life. It comes pretty hard for an old soldier to be disgraced when his battle of life is almost over, but I have made up my mind to retreat in as good order as is possible. ("Andrew")

This capsule autobiography both elides and depends upon Platt's own familiarity with the adoption of fraudulent identities. During his visits to Elias on Central Park West, he would often assume the name "Mr. Green," a subterfuge that would seem less than honorable "for an old soldier." Yet one could argue that by admitting this choice elsewhere in the article Platt was attempting to rehabilitate his character by simultaneously aligning himself with the deceased father of the city and distancing himself from his former mistress. His gender, racial, and social privilege allowed him to firmly ground his name and reputation in New York, unlike Elias, who, according to the aforementioned news reports, shifted between cities and identities. Rather than mention his for-profit endeavors, Platt built his self-portrait around his career in public service. In short, Platt constructed his public persona in opposition to the portrayal of Elias as self-interested and suspiciously foreign; in other words, he presented himself as solidly American: white, male, prosperous, and civic-minded.

Separating Elias out from early twentieth-century understandings of American identity, however, ultimately proved difficult. The ongoing coverage of and interest in the Platt-Elias affair reveals the many ways in which Elias's story corresponded to rather than contradicted the guiding principles of her age. In a period in which "speculation," "ostentation," and "prevarication" prevailed (Cashman 4), Elias used the attendant social and economic flux to reinvent herself and improve her standard of living; this transformation, particularly its financial dimension, captivated the public. Instead of being outraged by her supposed racial trespassing, followers of the trial were eager to learn how "Elias had made her way from being a cook earning \$3 a week to being the mistress of a man who paid \$20,000 to the lawyer who secured her divorce" (McLaren 146). Journalist Jack Thorne, reporting for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, implicitly compared Elias to the tycoons of the day; "there were many among them in the city worth tens of millions who had stolen from the poor," he asserted, but they "were not being served papers" (qtd. in Suggs 163–64). Similarly, Platt's family members, whom he ultimately identified as the instigators of the legal proceedings, were less concerned with the integrity of their elder's reputation than they were with the balance of his bank accounts. After testifying that his gifts to Elias had left him virtually penniless, Platt "admitted that he never would have tried to get it back if his relatives had not stirred up a row over it" ("Platt"). When August Nanz, her former attorney, told the *New York Times* that he considered Elias to be "a very dangerous woman," he based his evaluation not on her racially ambiguous identity or morally questionable profession but instead on his "business transactions with her" ("Former"). She was dangerous, in other words, because her skillful negotiation of the twentieth-century politics of the body, the court, and the nation revealed the difficulty of policing the boundary between social outcast and independent citizen, African American courtesan and wealthy entrepreneur. Where one category ended and the other began was apparently determined by neither the state nor Elias's associates, but solely by the woman herself.

### The Fictional Hannah: Fact Meets Façade

Described by Chase-Riboud as a “non-fiction historical novel,” “Central Park” suggests that the Platt case was but one remarkable adventure among many in the life of Hannah Elias (3). Initially, Hannah the character seems to be the marginal social figure that Elias the historical personage appears to be in the pages of the *New York Times*. When news of Andrew Green’s murder breaks early in the novel, Hannah is an enigma, a mysterious woman sequestered in a sumptuous home overlooking the park from which the book draws its name. Over the course of six sections interweaving past and present, however, Chase-Riboud reveals Hannah’s centrality not only to the history of the Gilded Age but also to the chronicle of the United States. Hers is an “all-American” story in that it features individual self-making and cultural assimilation, political intrigue and legal vindication. To reinforce the link between Hannah’s trajectory and the nation’s, Chase-Riboud notes the coincidence between several of the character’s defining personal moments and landmark national events: her 1865 birth—in Philadelphia and under the name Bessie Elias—falls on the last day of the Civil War, and the crime that precipitates her turn to prostitution occurs in 1876, just as the United States is preparing to celebrate its centennial. These juxtapositions inscribe another forgotten voice into the national record and, in the process, allude to the myriad contradictions underlying United States society. Philadelphia is both the “cradle of liberty” and the site of the “terrible poverty” into which Hannah is born (89); the Centennial is a time of both celebration (of the country’s progress) and loss (of Hannah’s innocence). Because she learns early on to profit from these incongruities, Hannah achieves a measure of success unheard of for Chase-Riboud’s previous protagonists. She, too, eventually fades into obscurity, but the epilogue suggests that this disappearance is willing, not imposed, and proposes that, though unknown to most, Hannah’s legacy lives on in the ultimate symbol of New York City’s progress and prosperity: its real estate.

It is fitting, then, that “Central Park” opens with a preface charting the social geography of Hannah’s life. Speaking in a conversational tone, an unnamed omniscient narrator explains:

Well you might call this whole tale the story of Hannah’s houses: the poor house, the whore house, the work house, the jail house, the crazy house, the outhouse, the alms house, the house of ill repute, the mug house, the crimp house, the tenement house, the merchant house, the house of J. P. Morgan, the banking house, the trading house, the Senate house, the house of mirrors, the play house, the court house, the gambling house, the opera house, the club house, the parish house, the house of assignation, the house of correction, the dead house, the parlor house, the panel house, the slaughter house, the shock and fall house, the Trinity house, the house of the spirits, the haunted house, the house of detention, the bawdy house, the governor’s house, the doll’s house, the fun house, the counting house, the movie house, the death house, the fashion house, the house of cards, but above all, the house on Central Park. (9)

The passage bears citing in its entirety because with it Chase-Riboud captures the social advances and disparities that marked the Gilded Age and, in so doing, situates her protago-

nist squarely within her historical moment. At the same time that downtown Manhattan was a maze of commerce, crime, and tenements in the late-nineteenth century, families like the Vanderbilts were in midtown building grand estates and founding illustrious institutions such as the Metropolitan Opera (Cashman 45, 123). With striking narrative economy, Chase-Riboud's twelve-line preface relocates Hannah from the former to the latter, from downtown squalor to midtown splendor. In a departure from *Sally Hemings*, however, where a census taker's decision to reclassify Hemings as white signals a denial of agency (15–16), Hannah's socio-geographic relocation establishes her authority. The reader's first encounter with the character, seen reacting to Andrew Green's murder, reinforces this difference: "Hannah knew the events that had taken place on 31<sup>st</sup> Street that morning would shake New York to its foundation as well as the life she had built from a windowless rented room in Five Points to this sumptuous mansion on Central Park" (20). If in her earlier novels Chase-Riboud was "interested in demonstrating the effects of definition on those who are defined," in "Central Park" she turns her eye to the impact of definition on those who define themselves (Rushdy, "Representing the Constitution" 261).

The twin pillars of Hannah's self-making are her beloved house and the park on which it sits. In recreating the mansion, Chase-Riboud underscores Hannah's agency by aligning her standard of living with that of the white tycoons who ruled the day. According to Sean Dennis Cashman, "Not since the heyday of the Venetian republic had successful merchant families indulged themselves in such ostentatious displays of wealth" (44). A popular trend was to announce one's success through the acquisition and display of foreign objects and styles. The Henry IV château built for Cornelius Vanderbilt II between 1878 and 1882 included a dining room with a jewel-encrusted ceiling, "oak beams . . . inlaid with mother of pearl," and "mahogany panels with scenes of Apollo and cupids in repoussé bronze" (Cashman 45). As depicted by Chase-Riboud, Hannah's home reflects this vogue with its "French Empire furniture" and array of "[e]xotic plants, gilded mirrors, bronze chandeliers, oriental carpets, wall tapestries, gold-leaf doors and ceilings painted with frescos of Egyptian blue starry nights" (20, 23). Unlike the press coverage of the Platt-Elias case, the novel's description of the fictional Hannah's foreign tastes signals an embrace rather than rejection of national identity; through her attention to the details of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century interior design, she has undertaken the very American project of building a monument to her own success.

Hannah explicitly associates this success with modern New York, particularly as represented by the public space from which the novel takes its name. Far from being an accident of geography, Hannah's residence on Central Park also denotes her self-awareness and self-invention:

Perhaps that is why she loved it, because it was so much like her life; where there had been barren rocks, unsightly swamp and pitiful poverty, there were now velvet lawns, flower beds, and statuary. The Park had educated Hannah and elevated and inspired love for the beautiful in her. She had been both what Central Park was now and what it had been. (26)

In this passage as well as in the novel's title, Central Park becomes a symbol for Hannah Elias, but a self-selected one. She has embraced the iconic New York—and, one could

say, American—location not because its story is more authentic or more valid than her own, but because its story *is* her story. Hannah has transformed herself as the park has been transformed, and, as civic leaders determined that Central Park “would be a park not for the nobility or the rich but for people of all classes” (26), so she has decided that the promises inherent in documents such as the Declaration of Independence should be extended to all citizens, even an impoverished black woman.

While this sweep from mansion to park to woman may seem quite broad, it is one that reflects the particular relationship between the self and private and public spaces during the Gilded Age. Building and body were not two separate entities in Hannah’s historical context; on the contrary, the former was an extension of the latter. In addition to certifying economic status, a well-appointed home also served as a means through which Americans “define[d],” “enact[ed],” and “perform[ed] the self” (Twigg 1). Accordingly, Hannah views her ornate bed as “Queen Cleopatra’s throne” and herself as “the reincarnation of Queen Cleopatra” (20, 22). Much more than a flight of fancy, the identification affirms Hannah’s power over men, many of whom evolve from being her clients to becoming her regular lovers unaware of their weakness before her. Chase-Riboud demonstrates the reach of this power when the district attorney investigating Green’s murder deposes Hannah at home:

Seated in Hannah’s drawing-room were District Attorney Jerome, Assistant District Attorney Appleton, a stenographer, detective McClusky and [her lawyer] August Nanz. None of those present except Nanz had ever seen or imagined an interior like the one in which they found themselves. It had disconcerted even Jerome, used to upper-class residences, who was speaking now in the hushed tones of a conversation being held in a cathedral. (170)

Although McClusky suspects Hannah of passing for white and lying about her knowledge of Green’s death, the detective is unable to shake the authority represented by her imposing home. The mansion at 236 Central Park West “provide[s a] coherent and stable representation . . . of self” where Hannah’s background alone cannot (Twigg 2).

The attention to Hannah’s décor also places her within a broader literary context extending back to African American modernism. Her self-making through the home resonates quite strikingly with the depiction of Helga Crane in Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* (1928). Helga’s first scene also takes place in her bedroom, and, as Thadious M. Davis argues, “the focus on Helga’s femaleness, combined with her race, in the privacy of the sexually charged atmosphere of her bedroom sets the stage for her seeking to define a space for self-actualization and to redefine herself as subject in all aspects of her being” (xiv). Upon arriving in New York, Helga adopts the city as her own only after finding a home that promises to be the safe, private space that her room at Naxos was. She welcomes the invitation to live with her new friend Anne because the latter’s household is “in complete accord with what she designated as her ‘aesthetic sense’” and its opulence contributes to her sense of feeling “established, secure, [and] comfortable” (Larsen 47, 48). This association of luxury and security foreshadows Hannah’s attachment to her mansion; indeed, one could very well imagine Chase-Riboud’s protagonist living amongst the “brass-bound Chinese tea-chests, luxurious deep chairs and davenports,” “lustrous Eastern rugs,” and “Japanese prints” that adorn Anne’s brownstone (Larsen 47).

Building and body are intertwined in “Central Park” not only because of the age in which Hannah lives but also because of the manner in which her economic ascent begins. Interspersed among the houses listed in the novel’s preface are the “whore house,” “house of ill repute,” and “house of assignation,” a sequence that parallels the character’s advancement through the various levels of prostitution. As Hannah moves from the Philadelphia brothel where she makes her debut to the New York high society where she makes her fortune, she shifts from considering her body’s value on the marriage market to calculating its worth on what might be called the open market. A traumatic childhood episode introduces an eleven-year-old Hannah to the theory, if not acknowledged practice, of prostitution. When her twin brother becomes ill, Hannah accompanies her father, a horse whisperer, to Saratoga Springs to work as his assistant. “The trip to Saratoga Springs inspired two deep desires in her,” Chase-Riboud writes, “to marry a Pullman porter . . . and two, to own a private Pullman car herself” (91). The first dream is dashed when a white jockey realizes that the “water boy” is in fact a girl and, with other jockeys, proceeds to rape Hannah (91). The crime leads her father’s employer to pay him off with a “generous bonus that prevented him from bringing charges,” and Hannah learns that, although her body may now be “worthless” on the marriage market, its effective sale has given her father the money needed to buy the family’s first home (92).

This lesson in using her body as currency resurfaces six years later as Hannah enters young womanhood. With the story of her rape known only to her and her now deceased father, Hannah has matured within the bounds of respectable late-nineteenth-century African American femininity: she “played the piano, belonged to the Free Public Library and attended Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. After graduating from the Philadelphia House of Industry, she was put out to service as a downstairs maid” (96). When her white employer offers to loan his wife’s gown in exchange for sexual favors, however, Hannah consents in order to wear the dress to her sister’s wedding. The ensuing events reveal that, compared to Hannah’s body, her words hold little value. Her unwitting mistress charges Hannah with theft and larceny, her complicit master chastises her dishonest behavior, and her distraught mother, ignoring Hannah’s attempts to explain, accuses her of substituting “crime for slavery” (98). Outraged by the hypocrisy of all three, Hannah faces her three-month prison term with the resolve of a woman fully cognizant of the double standards with which society judges women and men:

Her mother had no idea how her father had gotten the money to pay for their house. *She*, Bessie, had paid for it, with her body and her humiliation. Her father had sold his sacred right to protect his daughter and avenge her violation. Monarch had sold his daughter for a fistful of dollars and made her a whore instead of vindicating her like a man. Her mother’s home . . . was in fact *her* house, Hannah thought. And sex had bought it. Sex, Hannah suddenly realized[,] could make anything happen. It was the greatest power in the world she thought. It moved men and mountains and she had that power because the seller was always stronger than the buyer. (99)

Although this realization, like its predecessor, is couched in economic terms, the nineteen-year-old Hannah differs from her eleven-year-old self in that she vows to be the sole determinant and beneficiary of any future sales of her body.

Chase-Riboud completes the character's economic coming-of-age with the introduction of Edward, a New York City client and banker intrigued by Hannah's intellect. It is Edward who synthesizes the lessons of her youth into a comprehensive, if informal, financial education, one that acknowledges the implicit relationship between commercial pursuits and national ideals: "Money is not these banknotes I leave beside the bed when I've consumed your merchandise, money is only what it can buy—status, influence, power, loyalty. And what is power, influence, loyalty? . . . Freedom, Hannah, freedom" (138). Edward follows this observation with lectures on the principles of sound investing, the history of banking, and the strategies of corporate moguls. If the didacticism of the lengthy passages at times robs Chase-Riboud's prose of its verve, the instruction nonetheless serves the novel's project of characterizing Hannah as a modern, thinking subject. With the knowledge drawn from Edward's lessons, she begins to realize her dream of becoming "a woman of property" (120). She rises from working the dance halls of the Bowery to owning property throughout Manhattan, and her business acumen is so remarkable that clients and employees alike give her the period-appropriate nickname "the Capitalist" (291). As the narrator observes earlier in the novel, "The Gilded Age had begun, and [Hannah] was part of it" (128).

### Negotiating Exceptionalism and Exploitation

Despite her exceptional success, however, Chase-Riboud's Hannah is still an African American woman in an early twentieth-century society that attributes the "inalienable rights" of the Declaration of Independence primarily to white men. As a result, "Central Park" also raises the question of how much agency the character actually possesses. Hannah's trajectory from rape survivor to prostitute to courtesan recalls the language used by Spencer to describe "the relation between [Thomas] Jefferson and [Sally] Hemings as a founding violence, an inaugural racial and sexual encounter . . . suggestive of the violent subject formation of blacks in the American republic" (508). Sexual assault is the foundation on which Hannah's eventual empire is built, and she herself acknowledges trauma as a primary factor in many women's turn to prostitution:

But it seems to me there is always some great loss or emptiness in fallen women—and it usually has to do with the loss of a man—abuse by a father or brother or being abandoned by a father, brother or uncle—being left by a husband or a pimp, being disappointed in true love, being forced into prostitution by a mother or sister—there is always this sense of aloneness, abandonment, of longing and loss and above all a pathetic sense of injustice in a whore's character. (140)

Hannah maintains that her case is unique; she tells Edward that she "entered the life because [she] was tired of having to kowtow to a weak man's power" (142). This assertion, however, cannot prevent the reader from suspecting that Hannah has reinvented not only herself but also her emotional history. She, too, has been abandoned by her father, who commits suicide when his implicit acceptance of Hannah's rape becomes too much to

bear, as well as by other family members, who disown her after her initial prison term in Philadelphia. Likewise, Hannah also considers prostitution a means to correct the gender and economic injustice she has experienced. Harnessing her body's ability "to buy something of value" and obscuring her racial identity enable her to control men in ways that polite society does not allow and to achieve the safety and comfort denied her when she lived as a poor black woman (92).

Nowhere is this loss and loneliness more apparent than in the series of personal letters that punctuate the story of Hannah's houses. These intimate documents mirror their public counterparts in their capacity to "record, circumscribe, and liberate bodies" (Rushdy, "Representing the Constitution" 261). The first, written just after Hannah's stint in New York's Blackwell Prison, foreshadows the personal declaration of independence and self-determination that the character later recites to Edward. Saying goodbye as she informs her mother of her decision to remain in New York and pass for white, Hannah presents her familial estrangement as a painful but necessary sacrifice in her quest "to better [her] condition" (119). The process of erasure and inscription is repeated in two subsequent missives, but, rather than speaking unchallenged to a silent audience (the letter to Hannah's mother is returned unopened), Hannah finds herself contending with the visions that others have of who she is or what they think she should be. In response to a lover's farewell letter, Hannah tries to dissuade him from leaving by explaining her life in the very language she once pitied: as a series of abandonments, beginning with her immediate family (her father, twin brother, and mother) and culminating with the beloved to whom she is writing. When her twin reestablishes contact during the Platt case, his sexist, judgmental, and mercenary claims again place Hannah on the defensive:

*Fifteen years ago, you washed your hands of me in disgust. Mama followed suit and disowned me. I[,] in turn, changed my name and passed for white. I missed you more than the others for I believed you indeed to be the best half of myself and that we could no more dissolve that tie than quit the union of the United States of America. It is now too late to re-unite and we can only separate and go our own ways. I am what I am. You will have your hush money, but I am Bessie no more. (276)*

Here as in all the letters, the tone of regret, disdain, sorrow, and rejection contrasts sharply with the triumph with which Hannah assumed her place in the Gilded Age. At this point in the novel she has lost her parents, siblings, multiple children (either to death or adoption), and, by her own admission, the only man she has ever loved; the sorrowful turn of events leaves one wondering whether the character's victory is any more substantive than the gold leaf used to embellish her furniture.

Rather than definitively associating Hannah with the pathos evoked by her apparent status as a disgraced, lonely woman or with the triumph suggested by her nickname "the Capitalist," Chase-Riboud instead situates the character between these two affective poles. When Hannah contends that she has "never searched for happiness [but has] reached for success" (276), her words prompt the question of whether happiness and success are mutually exclusive for everyone or only for socially transgressive figures. Just as the captains of industry sacrificed open competition for the "sound commercial order" of "monopoly control" (Cashman 38), so Hannah trades the traditional signs of bourgeois

womanhood—love, marriage, and family—for the freedom of being the sole proprietor of her mind and body. She falls short, however, of gaining access to all of the prerogatives of bourgeois manhood in general and white bourgeois manhood in particular. Unlike her clients, who solidify or advance their social status through the acquisition of lovers, money, and property, Hannah is emotionally and socially isolated by her pursuit. The day of Andrew Green's funeral finds her musing about the "harem of rich men who had transformed her from a public woman into a banker" as well as the fact that "she was now richer than several of them and equal in wealth to a dozen more," but she is no closer to the love she once associated with the figure of the Pullman porter (77). Hannah can now afford the private Pullman car that she once desired, but she no longer has any close family or companions with whom to share her journeys.

As with the powerful impression left by her home, the cost and significance of Hannah's achievements are not lost on her contemporaries. Edward, her former client and instructor, greets news of John Platt's charges against Hannah by acknowledging her implicit membership in the ranks of early twentieth-century financiers: "We love Hannah because she's one of us. And we hate her because she's a woman and a renegade who has upset ever so slightly the balance of power" (252). According to Edward, Hannah's business acumen merits the admiration of his fellow bankers, but such affection is likely to be short-lived given that his peers are more accustomed to "screwing" women, Hannah included, just as they "are screwing the United States out of its gold and silver, its land and mineral resources, its oil and water" (252). Similarly, the New York society women who follow the court proceedings adopt Hannah as a "*cause célèbre*" and ask whether her path to wealth "was . . . a crime, or simply enterprise" (393). These voices position Hannah's story as "a necessary supplement to the written record" of the Gilded Age (Rushdy, "I Write in Tongues" 120), one in which the entrepreneurship and self-determination of an African American woman were lauded before either was widely accessible to, or deemed suitable for, blacks or women. In hoping for the exoneration that Hannah ultimately receives, Edward and the socialites identify Hannah not as a threat to early twentieth-century United States society, but as part and parcel of it: Edward because of his belief in meritocracy and the socialites because of their interest in women's rights.

Chase-Riboud's protagonist can also be read as emblematic of her age because of the extent to which her story is characterized by uncertainty and illusion. During the Gilded Age, aesthetic texts such as Hannah's imported designer gowns and her magnificent home were deployed to counter "the emptiness and alienation brought about by modernization," to "provide a luster which [would conceal] deeper social and cultural anxiety" (Twigg 3). In other words, Hannah's triumphant entry into the "dazzling age of individualism, economic prosperity, and technological revolution" through chance and subterfuge is more common than not (Twigg 3). Chase-Riboud reinforces this claim by presenting Hannah's reinvention as but one of many masquerades. August Nanz, the character's attorney, is the descendant of a Swedish immigrant who changed his name "to sound more Anglo-Saxon"; the reader later learns that Nanz's performance of normative Anglo-Saxon manhood also entails pretending to be heterosexual (65). One of the most ardent followers of Hannah's trial as depicted in "Central Park" is none other than a fictionalized Belle Da Costa Greene, banker J. P. Morgan's private librarian and, in the novel, an individual who lives "an independent, precarious and luxurious life as false as that of Hannah" (259).<sup>1</sup>

Born Belle Marion Greener to African American parents from Washington, DC, Greene enters Morgan's employ as a Portuguese American. In her case, as in those of Nanz and Elias, the ability to perform an identity convincingly—especially when accompanied by signs of wealth and culture—is the only authentication necessary.

Finally, despite their awareness of her racial passing, Hannah's closest observers—in particular Nanz, Greene, and Detective McCluskey—fail to grasp how skillfully she commands the art of illusion. Instead of suffering from the fragmentation of the self often associated with the advent of modernization, Hannah literally fragments herself in order to expand her business. Chase-Riboud alludes to this stratagem when some of Hannah's clients comment on her "uncanny" ability "to be [in] two places at the same time" (72). It is only by assembling clues offered in subsequent chapters that the reader discovers that which all of these characters miss: Hannah has been switching places with Sadie, her younger sister and double. This sibling is introduced in the gloss on Hannah's family history; her fate is questioned in the letter from Hannah's twin—"We fear for Sadie's [welfare], too. Your favorite sister and double disappeared from the face of the earth some years ago" (272); and her location is confirmed in a scene in which Hannah closes most of her New York bank accounts at the same time that she meets with three of her most powerful clients. In effect, Hannah clones herself long before the migration of such a possibility from the realm of science fiction to that of scientific fact. In so doing, she not only maximizes her profits but also guards against becoming a fully "public" woman. For, much like the house on Central Park, Sadie simultaneously represents Hannah to the world and shields her from its view.

\* \* \*

Set in 1911, the epilogue of "Central Park" features a demolition team tearing down the block that includes Hannah's mansion. The narration explains that the once magnificent homes on Central Park West are being removed "to make way for a new skyscraper apartment building of some 17 floors" (425). While this replacement suggests the familiar dissociation of people of color, especially women, from the march of progress, the novel as a whole delivers an altogether different message. As noted earlier, the book's final lines observe that, despite Hannah's eventual retreat into obscurity, "her apartment buildings still standing at the subway entrance of the IRT at 72<sup>nd</sup> and Broadway, 86<sup>th</sup> and Columbus[,] and 59<sup>th</sup> and Fifth on Central Park" remain as a testament to her memory and to her modernity (426). With this retelling of Hannah's story, Barbara Chase-Riboud forcefully demonstrates how one remarkable African American woman not only dared to pursue life, liberty, and capital but also, to the surprise of everyone perhaps except Hannah Elias herself, succeeded.

#### NOTES

1. For more on Greene, see Heidi Ardizzone, *An Illuminated Life: Belle da Costa Greene's Journey from Prejudice to Privilege* (New York: Norton, 2007).

WORKS CITED

- "Andrew H. Green's Memory Is Cleared." *New York Times* 2 June 1904: 1.
- Cashman, Sean Dennis. *America in the Gilded Age: From the Death of Lincoln to the Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*. 2nd ed. New York: New York UP, 1988.
- Chase-Riboud, Barbara. *Central Park*. Ms. 2007.
- . *Echo of Lions*. New York: Harper, 1989.
- . *Hottentot Venus: A Novel*. New York: Doubleday, 2003.
- . *Sally Hemings: A Novel*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1979.
- "Fair Play." Letter. *New York Times* 10 June 1904: 8.
- "Former Counsel Would Tell of Hannah Elias." *New York Times* 10 June 1904: 3.
- Larsen, Nella. *Quicksand*. 1928. Ed. and introd. Thadious M. Davis. New York: Penguin, 2002.
- Maeder, Jay. "Sins of the Father: The Murder of Andrew Haswell Green, 1903." *New York Daily News* 11 Mar. 1998: 29. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 15 Jan. 2008.
- McClaren, Angus. *Sexual Blackmail: A Modern History*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002.
- "Mrs. Elias Is Free; Platt Wouldn't Talk." *New York Times* 11 June 1904: 1.
- "Platt Gave Mrs. Elias \$685,000, He Declares." *New York Times* 18 Jan. 1905: 16.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. "'I Write in Tongues': The Supplement of Voice in Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings*." *Contemporary Literature* 35.1 (1994): 100–35.
- . "Representing the Constitution: Embodiments of America in Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Echo of Lions*." *Critique* 36.4 (1995): 258–80.
- "Says Mrs. Elias Got \$685,385 Blackmail." *New York Times* 1 June 1904: 1.
- Spencer, Suzette. "Historical Memory, Romantic Narrative, and Sally Hemings." *African American Review* 40.3 (2006): 507–31.
- Suggs, Jon Christian. *Whispered Consolations: Law and Narrative in African American Life*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000.
- Twigg, Reginald. "Aestheticizing the Home: Textual Strategies of Taste, Self-Identity, and Bourgeois Hegemony in America's 'Gilded Age.'" *Text and Performance Quarterly* 12.1 (1992): 1–20.