



“Or my name  
ain’t Venus Johnson”:  
The Birth of Pauline Hopkins’  
Black Female Detective  
in *Hagar’s Daughter*  
Andrea Tinnemeyer

**Abstract.** Pauline Hopkins’ *Hagar’s Daughter* (serialized 1901–03) meditates on detective fiction’s potential to offer agency and self-created potential for a Black woman in Jim Crow times. The result is a liberating use of genre that not only celebrates the prowess of its detective, Venus Johnson, but also affirms the knowledge that flows from Black women and their communities.

When Pauline Hopkins published *Hagar’s Daughter* in the *Colored American Magazine* (1901–03) under a pen name, Sarah A. Allen, she introduced two self-referential elements that would characterize this text: multiple identities and the need for detection.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the ensuing months, Hopkins would provide standard cliffhangers, leaving readers on edge and eager for the next chapter. The novel’s tangled storylines center the lives of three mixed-race characters, depicting moments where they are embroiled in villainous plots and schemes, and facing and for the most part overcoming, prejudices. Critics of Hopkins’ body of work, which spans three novels, numerous editorials, and biographies of famous Black men and women, tend to favor *Contending Forces* as her crowning achievement, but for all its entangled plots and restless exploration of genres, or perhaps precisely because of them, her second text, *Hagar’s Daughter*, distinguishes itself as a pioneering work of fiction; in it, Hopkins accomplishes a first in African American letters: she pens a novel that features a Black female detective.

*Andrea Tinnemeyer* is the author of recent articles on works by Rudolph Fisher, Gabriel García Márquez, and Mariana Enríquez, and has also published a book investigating captivity narratives (*U of Nebraska P*, 2008). She is currently writing a book-length study on Jessie Redmon Fauset as a pioneer in transatlantic modernism.