

**"A CENTURY NEW FOR THE DUTY AND THE DEED"
BLACK SPECULATIVE FICTION AT THE
TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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May 2024

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation examines four Black speculative novels from the turn of the twentieth century, published between 1892-1904. Texts from this tradition tend to be grouped under an umbrella of “proto-Afrofuturism” or “proto-science fiction” and considered as early, surprising instances of a speculative mode that would only fully emerge several decades later. This categorization, while accurate in some respects, flattens out the diversity of the Black speculative imagination at the turn of the century. Therefore, I prioritize demonstrating the uniqueness of each author’s vision. At the same time, I argue that these texts share a fundamental similarity in their approach: they anticipate Arthur Schomburg’s famous injunction that the “Negro must remake his past in order to make his future.” They use the affordances of the speculative mode to experiment with a shared Black history and explore the possibilities and limitations of that history for a viable and desirable Black future. The authors that I examine challenge the conclusions of racial science that were used to justify a racially stratified society. In doing so, these authors speculate about the imminent future of Black Americans. But even though the perspective of these texts is the imminent future, their central preoccupation is actually Black history. Each of these texts experiment with a different possible shared history with which Black Americans can anchor a collective political identity. This approach is in distinct contrast to the typical approach of turn of the century utopian texts. If we can say axiomatically that white utopian texts, though they often extrapolate and project a distant future, actually function to estrange the present moment; then we can say, in contrast, that Black utopian texts from this era, although they are concerned about an imminent future, more fundamentally estrange the *past*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For me, the prospect of completing a dissertation was always a radically speculative one, just outside the horizon of my imagination. Even now, it confounds me that this object exists. Yet somehow it does, and I have many people to thank for that.

First, my committee. James, for his always thorough and thoughtful feedback, going all the way back to my second-year review. My writing has improved significantly, in large part because your feedback has challenged me to think more rigorously and deeply. Kate, for her infectious enthusiasm and abiding support from beginning to end. Roland, for his good humor and his constructive suggestions in the early stages of this project.

My comrades at the Writing Center, especially Alyssa and Min, for all the conversations and commiseration about the writing process.

Darla and Rachael, my supervisors, for always advocating for me. Darla, for always seeing my potential and talking me through post-PhD next steps. Rachael, for her patience and generosity as I developed my teaching skills.

The Fishtown Crew—Micah, Spencer, and Jennie—for taking this rockabilly boi under their wings.

Stephen, for dinners, concerts, karaoke, bachelor parties, Maxi's shots, and everything in between. You have been a great intellectual sparring partner and a great friend, and I can't imagine my PhD experience without my fellow Barthes boi.

My undergraduate professors at the University of Utah who sparked my love for literature and ideas. Ann Engar, for encouraging me to think critically *and* creatively. Kathryn Stockton, for doing so much to help cultivate my voice as a writer.

My family—aunts, uncles, and grandparents—for setting me on this path by reading to me endlessly.

Dad, for reminding me that the real world exists: getting riled up about politics, recommending movies, and always remembering to ask what I've been “doing for fun.”

Mom, for everything. For reading and encouraging my first notebook of stories. For always believing in me and reminding me that I can achieve anything that I truly want to. For being there for every achievement and setback, big and small.

Sergei the cat, for stepping on my laptop to remind me it was time for a break.

And a very special thanks, of course, to Sidney. Putting up with writing-brained Brandon couldn't have been easy, even on the best days. Thank you for enduring the pacing, muttering, giggling, cursing, complaining, monologuing, and whatever else I was doing that I probably didn't even realize. I could not have done this without your love and support. I expected a lot from grad school, but never that I would meet my person and be living with her in Utopia by the end of it.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: REMAKING THE PAST

I have seen a land right merry with the sun, where children sing, and rolling hills lie like passionate women wanton with harvest. And there in the King's Highways sat and sits a figure veiled and bowed, by which the traveller's footsteps hasten as they go. On the tainted air broods fear. Three centuries' thought has been the raising and unveiling of that bowed human heart, and now behold a century new for the duty and the deed. The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, 1903

This quote, from which I draw the dissertation's title, is the concluding paragraph of Du Bois's essay "Of the Dawn of Freedom." Like many of the poetic passages in *The Souls of Black Folk*, it is enigmatic. The "figure veiled and bowed" is surely a symbol for "Black folk": relegated to the side of the highway, an underclass whose presence is considered an intractable "problem," and yet largely ignored. But whose fear broods? And whose duty and deed will be enacted in this new century? Does this new century contain the political possibility to overcome three centuries' worth of racial subordination, or will it be a continuation of the same? This tense combination of hopeful possibility and apprehension is expressed most clearly in Du Bois's famous statement that "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line." The prophetic refrain is both an ominous warning and a call to action. Yet the actual content of this essay is seemingly far less dramatic than this final passage would suggest. In "Of the Dawn of Freedom," Du Bois writes a straightforward history of the Freedmen's Bureau in which he asks his readers to reevaluate its maligned reputation. "The passing of a great human institution before its work is done, like the untimely passing of a single soul, but leaves a legacy of striving for other men. The legacy of the Freedmen's Bureau is the heavy heritage of this generation" (34).

A century new for the duty and the deed. I chose this for my title because it captures the space in which Black speculative fiction—particularly at the turn of the century—operates. It captures a unique and complex interaction between present, future, and past. The speaker is self-consciously positioned in a moment of transition and uncertainty, looking with anticipation and apprehension toward a century’s worth of unknown political potential. But the background—indeed, often the majority of the content, as in Du Bois’s essay—is always history. This dissertation explores four turn-of-the-century Black speculative novels: Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892); Sutton E. Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* (1899); Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood; Or, The Hidden Self* (1903); and Edward A. Johnson’s *Light Ahead for the Negro* (1904). I argue that these novels, although their approaches are substantially different, each function primarily to experiment with a shared Black history and explore the possibilities and limitations of that history for a viable and desirable Black future.

Put another way, all of these authors anticipate Arthur Schomburg’s famous injunction that the “Negro must remake his past in order to make his future” (231). What Schomburg has in mind is “antiquarian,” a turn to the archives “not only for the first true writing of Negro history, but for the rewriting of many important paragraphs of our common American history” (232). This approach is essentially what Du Bois accomplishes in “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” a revision or “rewriting” of an important era of American history (one that he would later treat much more thoroughly in *Black Reconstruction*). This project is also, importantly, one that all four of these authors contributed to. In the form of textbooks, poetry, sermons, speeches, and biographies, they all turned to the Black past and expressed ennobling versions of that history. But they

also pursued this project in a different way, outside the constraints of a more conventional or empirical version history, by turning to the speculative mode, which allowed them to more radically “remake” the past.

I elaborate on this central claim at the end of the introduction. Before that, I discuss some key conceptual ideas related to speculative fiction, describe my approach in interpreting these four texts, and offer a brief account of the cultural and ideological contexts at the turn of the century to which these texts were responding.

When I describe this project to others, many are surprised that a Black speculative tradition exists *at all* during this era. They are understandably much more familiar with Black speculative literature from the 1960s onward. In some ways, this reaction of pleasant surprise bleeds into specialist interpretations of these texts as well. Most of these texts are not “full-blown” speculative novels: their speculative elements exist alongside other, more realistic aspects. Consequently, the speculative aspects tend to be regarded as curiosities. They also tend to be grouped under an umbrella of “proto”-Afrofuturism or “proto-SF” and considered as early surprising instances of a speculative approach that would only fully emerge several decades later. This categorization, while accurate in some respects, flattens out the differences between these texts. For example, Zamalin’s recent *Black Utopia* traces the history of Black utopian thought as far back as Martin Delany’s 1859 *Blake; or, the Huts of America*, and he dedicates a chapter to this era: “Black Turn-of-the-Century Literary Utopianism.” And while he provides a great deal of insight, the short chapter’s emphasis on common political themes also tends to flatten the texts. When I began writing, I quickly realized how *different* these texts were from each other, in ways that I had not anticipated. Because I am dedicating an entire dissertation to

select group of texts, I have the luxury of space, and with that luxury hope to let these texts breathe more than is typical, and I hope to demonstrate how diverse Black turn-of-the-century speculative fiction really was. Therefore, each chapter focuses on a single Black speculative text, and I prioritize demonstrating the uniqueness of each author's vision.

But these texts are also, of course, all within the same genre. When I initially grouped these texts together, my thinking was that they all had aspects of a literary *utopia*, which I defined very broadly as “a text that imagines a significantly different and better society.” I came to realize that this category was both too narrow and too broad. Too narrow because “utopian” does not fully capture the approach of most of these texts. Only one of them—Johnson’s *Light Ahead for the Negro*—is a full-fledged literary utopia. At least two of the texts are utopian only in a very vague sense, in that they imagine a better alternative to the status quo of turn-of-the-century racial oppression. Because of this imperfect fit, I have instead primarily opted for the concept of the *speculative*, which has the advantage of being “a deliberately broad term” (Babb 253). According to Babb, this “deliberately broad term” is meant to highlight the interconnections across forms employing the unreal: science fiction, fantasy, gothic, horror, utopian writing, and Afrofuturism” (Babb 253). I use the speculative in this broad sense. I approach these texts with the imperfect but useful heuristic that a *speculative* text is opposite or alternative to a *realistic* one. Put another way, the speculative imagination is “non-mimetic,” meaning it departs[s] from imitating consensus reality” (Oziewicz). As

I will demonstrate, there is a rich variety of approaches that all fit within the category of the *speculative*, but it is a useful point of departure.¹

At the same time, my initial vocabulary of “utopian” was too broad because I realized that these texts have a more fundamental similarity than simply imagining a better society for Black people. For Babb, what unites Black speculative fiction is that “[t]he genre uses the fantastic to question hierarchical ideologies that subordinate, warp, or exclude experiences not deemed to conform to preset norms, and to offer new relational modes in their stead” (253). More pointedly, the “hierarchical ideology” that Black speculative fiction often questions, subverts, or responds to is white supremacy², in its many expressions. Turn-of-the-century Black speculative fiction utilizes significant non-mimetic elements that function to question, subvert, and estrange this dominant ideology. Even more specifically, according to my argument, these authors responded to the prevalent idea that Black people existed somehow outside of history or the historical

¹There is still a debate, ongoing since at least the 1940s, about how and why to taxonomize various “non-mimetic” genres. According to Oziewicz, there is an “emerging consensus” that the term *speculative* does not refer to a particular sub-genre, style, approach, etc., but rather to “a fuzzy set super category that houses all non-mimetic genres.” I use the term in this more contemporary sense. The history of the shifting and contested meanings of *speculative* is important but ultimately tangential to my specific project here. For those interested, Oziewicz provides a slightly partisan but very comprehensive overview of this history.

² In the 21st century, it is common to understand the idea of “white supremacy” in a fairly narrow sense, as an ideology associated with extremist far-right groups (the Aryan Nations, the Proud Boys, etc.) The meaning I am attempting to capture is far broader. I am trying to capture a set of assumptions at the turn of the century, shared even among many white Progressives, that asserted the inferiority of non-white racial groups. At the turn of the century, white supremacy manifested on a spectrum ranging from extreme and blatant acts of violence on one end to fairly subtle forms of paternalism on the other. Later in the introduction, I discuss some of the features of turn-of-the-century American white supremacy that are especially salient for understanding the texts that I analyze.

process. This idea expressed itself in very abstract formulations, like those inherited from the Western philosophical tradition, what Gilroy calls “Africa’s expulsion from the official drama of historical movement” (135). But at the turn of the century, it also expressed itself more concretely, denying Black people’s agency and contribution to recent historical events. For example, as we see in Du Bois’s essay quoted earlier, one of the major historiographical conflicts in this era was the legacy of the recent “failure” of the Reconstruction period. And the dominant interpretation of this era was that of the Dunning School, which insisted that “The childlike blacks...were unprepared for freedom and incapable of properly exercising the political rights Northerners had thrust upon them. The fact that blacks took part in government...was a ‘diabolical development, ‘to be remembered, shuddered at, and ‘execrated’” (Foner xx). Responding to this dominant idea, the authors that I examine in this dissertation used the speculative mode to forcefully assert their presence in the historical record.

My Approach

My arguments about these texts all stem from a fundamental, hopefully uncontroversial assumption: that the speculative mode offers a reading experience that a realistic one does not. The basic question that has driven my inquiry into these texts and informed my interpretations is, *What does the speculative enable?* What does speculative fiction offer that other types of fiction do not? What is impossible in a realistic mode that the speculative makes possible? Each text, of course, offers a distinct perspective on this question. However, they all share at least one thing in common, which is that their speculative elements *estrangle* readers’ understanding of their world, in a way that a realistic approach could not. In fact, estrangement is a primary function of all four of

these novels. Here I follow scholars like Darko Suvin. Building on the ideas of estrangement developed by Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht, he argues that the distinguishing feature of science fiction is the “cognitive estrangement” that derives from the “narrative dominance” of a “novum,” a novelty or innovation in a narrative that acts as “a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality” (67-68). He applies the same lens to literary utopias more specifically, which he defines as

the construction of a particular community where sociopolitical institutions, norms, and relationships between people are organized according to a *radically different principle* than in the author’s community; this construction is based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis (30).

That utopias offer an “estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis” is a generally accepted axiom among utopian scholars. Wegner, for example, argues that utopian narratives offer a “critical estrangement of the author’s contemporary reality” and “a pushing up against the limits of representation and the contemporary imagination” (577). Cooper similarly describes the effect of a utopia: “By creating a world at a (temporal or spatial) distance from their own, utopian creators de-familiarize the world they know and inhabit; in the process they enable taken-for-granted aspects to be questioned and rethought” (5). The estranging and defamiliarizing effects of utopian fiction, or speculative fiction more generally, is the starting point of my analysis. What do these texts estrange, how, and to what end?

To analyze the estranging function of each novel, I attempt to triangulate and appropriately balance three important aspects: 1. the novel’s intended or probable

readers; 2. the author's stated or implicit intentions; and 3. a close reading of the text itself.

I agree with Roemer that, although a comprehensive theory about speculative or utopian fiction would seem to demand a close consideration of the reader's experience, relatively little has been written about this, and definitions of the genre generally privilege its formal aspects instead. Roemer offers his own definition to address this imbalance, in which he specifies that a utopia is "a fiction that invites readers to experience vicariously an alternative reality that critiques theirs by opening cognitive and affective spaces that encourage readers to perceive the realities and potentialities of their culture in new ways" (20). This is a crucial addition to any understanding of utopian or speculative fiction. And to understand how a reader might "perceive the realities and potentialities of their culture," it is necessary to understand the likely readership for these novels. In some ways, this is an unavoidably speculative exercise. But there are a few things that we can say with some assurance about these novels' readership. The first is that, in a general sense, these novels were written with both Black and white readers in mind. Addressing these competing audience expectations results in moments of clear "double voice" in these novels, where an utterance signifies something different depending on the racial identity of the reader. Relatedly, these texts often show the effects of operating under a "white gaze," in which a message intended for a Black reader is distorted by the expectations of an imagined white one. These audience expectations are important to keep in mind when reading these novels, and I address them in my chapters when relevant. However, with the caveat of a "double" audience in mind, it is

also safe to say that most³ of these novels were *primarily* addressed to Black readers. My analysis of these texts will typically assume young Black readers as the target audience.

Historical reading literacy is a notoriously elusive metric to reconstruct, in part because reading is a mostly solitary activity that does not express itself directly in the archive. This difficulty is further enhanced by the fact that, “[b]y and large, what has been preserved as the ‘official’ record of American literary history does not include the literature or literary activities of African Americans” (McHenry 7). However, we can say with some assurance that literacy across the board increased dramatically at the turn of the century. “Kaestle can point to ‘the decreasing prices [of newspapers, magazines, and books], escalating circulation figures, and rising educational levels’ as strong evidence that more Americans than ever before were reading better and more” (Roemer 84). For obvious reasons, nonwhite literacy rates were far lower, but they still demonstrated a significant upward trend. “According to United States Census data, by 1880 70 percent of the black population was illiterate; by 1910 30 percent of the black population remained illiterate. What these and other figures document is the slow but steady rise in black literacy in the United States in the decades of the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries” (McHenry 4-5). These novels were all published in the middle of this period (1892-1904), and the authors would have had this encouraging trend in mind.

With the rise in education and literacy, there was a corresponding effort to articulate the relationship between Black literature and Black identity. “The growing

³ I am going to write “most of these novels” several times in this introduction. The exception is almost always Edward A. Johnson’s *Light Ahead for the Negro*. It is an anomaly in many ways, and the fact that it is an anomaly is a key to its interpretation, as I explain in the final chapter.

numbers of educated black men and women considered reading and other literary work as essential to the project of refashioning the personal identity and reconstructing the public image of African Americans in the last decade of the nineteenth century.” (McHenry 189). This in turn led to a concerted effort of Black authors contributing toward what Victoria Earle Matthews in 1895 called “race literature.” She argued that “‘thoughtful, well-defined and intelligently placed [literary] efforts’ would supply ‘influential and accurate information, on all subjects relating to the Negro and his environments, to inform the American mind’” (McHenry 188). Perhaps the most famous articulation of the importance of “race literature” comes from *Iola Leroy*, in which Harper argues that “out of the race must come its own thinkers and writers. Authors belonging to the white race have written good racial books...but it seems to be almost impossible for a white man to put himself completely in our place. No man can feel the iron which enters another man’s soul” (Harper 238). The authors of the texts that I analyze were targeting a newly literate Black readership and, in conjunction, were also contributing self-consciously to this emerging corpus of “race literature.”

Less speculative than constructing an image of an intended reader is inferring the authors’ intentions for these works. For one, it was much more common in this era than now to provide a candid, sincere statement about a novel’s purpose. Two of the novels have explicit addresses to the audience that explain the author’s intended effect. For example, Frances Harper writes in the endnote to *Iola Leroy* that “I have woven a story whose mission will not be in vain if it awaken in the hearts of our countrymen a stronger sense of justice and a more Christlike humanity” (251). The novels that do not have direct paratextual statements like this have second-person addresses that invoke the purpose of

the book and offer a didactic conclusion for the reader. A critical reading cannot always take these statements at face value, of course, but they still provide useful insight. In addition to these more direct statements, I also include brief analyses of some of the authors' other published works, in hopes of demonstrating a throughline of themes, political ideas, rhetorical constructions, etc.

Finally, I also attempt to let these speculative fictions speak for themselves, as it were, and identify the ways that their formal and generic aspects amplify or augment the authors' intentions. I do this primarily to avoid reductive readings of these texts as solely ideological statements. Speculative fiction that tends toward a "utopian" perspective is especially susceptible to these types of readings. Because literary utopias are explicitly political in a way that no other fictional genres are, they are "so often taken to be the expressions of political opinion or ideology" (Jameson xiii). This severely limits interpretive possibilities. Additionally, some of the texts I examine incorporate debates on contested issues to an extent that makes it impossible to confidently assign a political position to the author, even if one wanted to. Griggs, for example, builds his narrative around two co-protagonists who often voice directly contradictory positions, one endorsing assimilationist rhetoric, the other separatist. It feels unsatisfactory to take this contested dialogue as evidence that Griggs subscribed neatly to one or the other (although some scholars try, regardless).

To sidestep the temptation to read these texts as straightforward expressions of their authors' political visions, I attempt to emphasize the formal and generic qualities of the texts. In my opinion, the most compelling contemporary theorist of the Utopia genre is Fredric Jameson. He offers a method for prioritizing the "form" of a Utopia rather than

solely its content. He argues that a utopian text is “a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality” (xii). This interpretation conforms with other definitions that emphasize an estrangement of the present moment through a representation of difference. However, Jameson adds a crucial additional layer. He argues that the Utopian form not only estranges our understanding of the present moment, but just as importantly lays bare our inability to imagine anything outside of our own horizon. By inviting the reader to this “meditation” on what radical difference might look like, the utopian form confirms how difficult it is to imagine this type of difference in the first place. Utopia “serve[s] the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment” (xiii). Put another way, the value of Utopia “lies in the walls it allows us to feel around our minds, the invisible limits it gives us to detect by sheerest induction, the miring of our imaginations in...the mud of the present age in which winged Utopian shoes stick, imagining that to be the force of gravity itself”⁴ (*Seeds of Time* 75, qtd. in Daniels 148). Therefore, no matter how imaginatively a utopian author envisions a radical alternative to the present, these “invisible limits” always impose themselves, and therefore these utopias inevitably “fail.” Yet, paradoxically, these failures in a utopian narrative constitute the essential cognitive value of utopias because it is these points of failure that allow the reader to “detect by sheerest induction” their own imaginative limitations. And therefore, “the best utopias are those,” according to Jameson, “that fail the most comprehensively” (xiii).

⁴ This articulation is similar to a line from Walter Mosley’s “Black to the Future,” in which he writes: “The destroyer-creator [the author] must first be able to imagine a world beyond his mental prison. The hardest thing to do is to break the chains of reality and go beyond into a world of your own creation” (Mosley 407). Mosley, however, is much more optimistic than Jameson about our ability to “break these chains.”

I take this contention seriously in my analyses and make inferences about how these inevitable failures provide insight into Black political imagination at the turn of the century. All of these authors' visions fail, some more comprehensively than others. In *Iola Leroy*, Harper envisions a radical model for a separatist Black counterpublic, but her commitment to "racial uplift" results in a splintering of Black solidarity, leaving the Black underclass excluded from its utopian potential. The failure in Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* is more literal: the secret society of Black men that he envisions cannot sustain itself under the weight of its members' contradictory positions. In *Of One Blood*, Hopkins imagines a utopian civilization that reconstructs the ennobling history of ancient Africa. But even though some characters are able to escape the racial politics of the United States and start anew in this civilization, others cannot escape the constraining and punishing effects of the "color line." *Light Ahead for the Negro* is a modest failure, in the sense that Johnson's imagined society is not very radically different. But he is similarly limited by his ideological horizon, and "social equality" between Black and white Americans is for him unimaginable.

This approach—seeing a utopia's failure as an indication of the "invisible limits" of a historical moment's political imagination—not only allows richer interpretations of these texts, but it also allows us as 21st-century readers to approach them with a bit more grace and nuance than I think is typical. Reading these texts (or any speculative fiction from a different era) in the 21st century produces an incredibly disorienting effect, which feels like a *double* estrangement. While we are experiencing (to the extent that our historical understanding and imaginations allow) the estranging effects intended for a late 19th-century audience, we are *also* feeling more directly estranged simply by the passage

of time, more than a century away from the “present day” to which these authors were responding. In some ways, this past present is all-too-familiar, and these authors’ appeals for Black dignity and equality are unfortunately not so dissimilar from contemporary appeals for the same. In many other ways, however, the political visions that these authors present are uncomfortable, to put it bluntly. They present ideas that, with the benefit of hindsight, we feel reassured knowing are no longer dominant. The most conspicuous are the lingering influence that the Cult of Domesticity maintained on ideas about gender, the aspiration toward respectability and white Victorian morality, and the inequalitarian outcomes of “racial uplift” ideology.

Historically, critics have taken these conspicuous ideological aspects of turn-of-the-century Black literature as evidence that this body of work is of limited value, marred by an overwhelming aspiration toward whiteness and gentility. This negative evaluation traces all the way back to the Harlem Renaissance, an era that artists and intellectuals sometimes framed as a rejection of what had come before and “as a ‘new’ birth for black artists” (Gebhard & McCaskill 12). Gebhard & McCaskill summarize a common sentiment from leaders of the Harlem Renaissance: that the turn of the century was “a time of accommodation and passivity, of false white idols and thus a literary as well as political failure” (12). This overall sentiment extends in different ways into more contemporary scholarship as well. The most notorious criticism is Houston Baker’s assessment of novels like *Iola Leroy*, which he accuses of “ignoring black southern soundings, preferring instead a soothing mulatto utopianism. Economics, politics, sociology, and even religion were left out of account. In their place... a bright Victorian

morality in whiteface” (32-33). Other scholars, like Bruce, are more measured but still ultimately find limited value in the African American literature of this period.

More recent scholarship has challenged this conventional wisdom and reached a more nuanced perspective. But current scholarship sometimes tends toward an overcorrection. There is a tendency to interpret texts from this canon as having a subversive intent hidden beneath the veneer of respectability. In other words, to posit these texts as having hidden politics that conform better to our own present. For example, Fielder, writing about “radical respectability,” argues that “nineteenth-century Black women’s fiction actually contains some of the very critiques of respectability that contemporary scholars [like Baker] would demand, even as those critiques appear alongside the employment of respectability” (189). While it is true that the deployment of respectability can be complex, I think it is a stretch to argue that authors a century ago critiqued this idea to the extent that our present sensibilities “demand.”

To be sure, I agree that there is much more to these texts than what is immediately apparent on the surface. At the same time, the ideological complexity that is revealed on a closer reading of these texts is sometimes taken as license to ascribe political positions to these authors that would not have even been available to them. It is far more valuable to view the complexities and ambiguities of these texts as representations of ideological limitations rather than as covert expressions of more agreeable political ideas. Jameson argues that we “cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet” (xii). With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to view these texts as examples of “visions” that we have “thrown off.” The challenge in approaching them is to not outright reject these visions or

to supplant them with “better” visions that we wish the authors would have expressed, but rather to take them seriously on their own terms as representations of these authors’ horizons.

Ideological Horizons: Racial Science, Racial Uplift, and the “New Negro”

Because my interpretations of these novels hinge on the assumption that, as speculative texts, they function to estrange the “hierarchical ideologies” (Babb 253) of the present moment, it is especially important to understand how these ideologies expressed themselves at the turn of the century. In particular, it is crucial to understand how the ideology of white supremacy manifested during this era, since, as I discussed earlier, this is primarily what these authors are writing against. Turn-of-the-century American white supremacy is obviously an enormous category, and it is important to keep in mind that it is not a monolithic one. However, there is one significant aspect that is pervasive and especially relevant to my topic, which is “racial scientists’ appropriation of evolutionary theory” (Salazar 162).

“It would hardly be too much to say,” Perry Miller memorably writes, “that the bulk of American ‘thought’ in this period, measured solely by the weight of printed paper, was not thought at all, but only a recapitulation of [Herbert] Spencer” (qtd. in Rooney 16n17). This is probably an exaggeration, but it is certainly the impression that one gets when wading through this phase of the American intellectual tradition. There is a drive to apply an evolutionary framework to every aspect of the world that, though not uncontested, is inescapable. Racial scientists were particularly keen on repurposing an evolutionary framework to support their ever-proliferating theories about racial difference and hierarchy. By this time, polygenism had generally been rejected in favor

of a return to a monogenetic account of the origin of racial groups. Evolutionary processes explained the differentiation of races over time, “with different races being conceived either as the product of different evolutionary trajectories (visualized as different branches on a tree) or, more commonly, as developmental stages on a single evolutionary ladder” (Salazar 162).

American racial scientists generally applied a Darwinian framework, but, as Salazar notes, they also “adopted the ideas of Lamarck to make one very important modification to Darwin’s theory” (162). “[M]ost racial scientists in the United States seized on the Lamarckian principle of acquired traits in order to integrate and justify the role of human agency and even individual choice in the mechanism of evolutionary ‘progress’” (162). “Racial difference, in this model, could thus be ascribed to the progressive efforts of a particular racial group” (163). In this way, turn-of-the-century racial science was an elaborate amalgam of contradictory schools of evolutionary thought, and it reflected “a period of transition between the ‘transformable race’ of the eighteenth century and the rigid, interior genetic logics of the twentieth” (Schuller 10). At the same time that the differences between racial groups, as an outcome of evolutionary processes, were imagined to be vast and significant, it was also imagined that racial groups could intentionally and collectively improve themselves.

The idea that applied human agency could result in beneficial evolutionary outcomes over a relatively short period of time found its ultimate expression in the genre of the literary utopia. The turn of the 20th century was a Golden Age for literary utopias. By Jean Pfaelzer’s calculation, more than 100 American utopian novels were written in the decade of 1886-1896 alone. There are numerous historical conditions that can

feasibly explain this outpouring. One of them is undeniably the genre's symbiosis with American articulations of evolutionary theory. The utopian novel is an ideal vehicle for these ideas because it provides a narrative conceit that can accommodate the time scale required for speculating about evolutionary development. In other words, evolutionary change takes place over several generations, and utopian novels offer a fictional vantage point from which to observe it. This is particularly true of time travel narratives, in which a traveler from the present arrives in the future to observe all of the positive changes that have taken place. Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, the most popular American utopian novel, demonstrates this very clearly. In the form of a sermon from the future (the year 2000), Bellamy establishes the link between evolution and progress:

For twofold is the return of man to God 'who is our home,' the return of the individual by the way of death, *and the return of the race by the fulfillment of the evolution*, when the divine secret hidden in the germ shall be perfectly unfolded. With a tear for the dark past, turn we then to the dazzling future, and, veiling our eyes, press forward. The long and weary winter of the race is ended (217; emphasis mine).

In this case the "race" that Bellamy refers to is ostensibly all of humanity, who, by choosing to organize society around the principle of cooperation rather than competition, have evolved beyond the misery of their "dark past" in the nineteenth century.

Bellamy's novel is basically silent on the issue of racial difference (a point I return to in the last chapter), but many other utopian novels are certainly not. As Fabi points out, the genre at the turn of the century "had become an important playground for the racialist, eugenicist, and segregationist discourse of white writers" (45). The extrapolation of evolutionary ideas often resulted in the complete elimination of racial difference. For example, In Mary E. Bradley's 1890 *Mizora*, an explorer discovers an all-female, utopian society at the center of the earth. This society, on its way toward

perfection, enacted a form of eugenics that—in addition to eliminating “idiots,” “lunatics,” “deformity,” and “disease”—eliminated those of a “dark complexion,” creating an Aryan race (104). Put very simply, if utopianism is “social dreaming,” then many American utopian authors were “dreaming of a white future” (Pfaelzer “Dreaming” 325).

Unsurprisingly, as far as I am aware, turn-of-the-century white utopian authors never speculated seriously about the possibility of Black racial development. Evolutionary development was applied to futures that either failed to imagine Black people’s existence (as in Bellamy) or worse, that actively imagined them out of it. The whiteness of imagined futures is a problem that would persist well into the 20th century, arguably to this day. “The ‘blanching of the future,’ in Gregory Rutledge’s phrase...has functioned in various ways to discourage African American writers from laying claim to the futuristic imagination” (Dubey 17). There has been a major corrective to this paucity of imagination, and Walter Mosley was fortunately correct when he predicted in 2000 that “Within the next five years... there will be an explosion of science fiction from the black community” (407). However, it is fair to say that Black authors at the turn of the 20th century, as we will see, did not generally participate in the same white imagination that extrapolated evolutionary development into the future. Similarly, they did not set their novels in a distant future. (The exception, as always, is Edward Johnson.) But it is crucial that we not mistake this rejection of a popular speculative mode as an indication that Black authors rejected speculative literature entirely because, as I hope to demonstrate in this dissertation, Black speculative imaginations at the turn of the century were quite robust and diverse.

It is equally important to note that, even though Black authors declined to engage with this particular mode of literary utopia, they *did* engage very forcefully with the broader discourse in which racial science and evolutionary logic intersected. Black authors and activists seized on some of the assumptions of this discourse and used them for their own ends, turning them back to challenge the racist conclusions that were used to justify a racially stratified society. Most significantly, they repurposed the assumption that human agency could guide racial development. As Salazar argues, “The irony of this neo-Lamarckian turn...was that it thereby also provided an important weapon for challenging the racist policies and laws that racial science was often developed to justify” (163). To be sure, the ways that Black authors engaged with racial science were often more complex than simply accepting at face value and recapitulating its assumptions. But racial science was an inescapable element of these authors’ horizon, and they necessarily all engaged with it to some extent, in ways that are important for understanding their speculative visions.

In the individual chapters, I look more closely at each texts’ engagement with racial science and evolutionary discourse. But there are two major contexts that suffuse all of these texts that are essential to discuss: 1. the ideology of “racial uplift”; and 2. the trope of the “New Negro,” both of which are tied to the assumption of evolutionary racial development.

Very broadly speaking, “racial uplift” simply refers to any intraracial efforts to advance or improve the condition of Black people. It consolidated as an idea or approach at the end of the nineteenth century, continuing well into the twentieth, and its articulations were incredibly varied. Uplift was “so much a part of the *Zeitgeist* that

leaders as disparate in their philosophies and followers as Marcus Garvey, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois all made use of the same word to describe hopes for their people” (Schenbeck 12). Gaines explores two of the major connotations of “uplift,” a term that he argues has held “mixed meanings for African Americans” (1). “One popular understanding of uplift, dating from the antislavery folk religion of the slaves, speaks of a personal or collective spiritual—and potentially social—transcendence of worldly oppression and misery” (Gaines 1). In contrast to this more “popular” meaning is the one articulated by “black elites,” in which “uplift came to mean an emphasis on self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority, and the accumulation of wealth” (2). In this formulation, in simple terms, “uplift” was imagined as a movement up the ladder from a place of primitivity and degradation toward what was imagined as “civilization”: cultural attitudes and behaviors that corresponded more closely to norms of white bourgeois morality. The evolutionary development of the race was imagined to express itself in “cultural” improvements, which as Gaines makes clear, were ultimately class differences. Uplift, as articulated by many Black elites, “was precisely...an argument for black humanity through evolutionary class differentiation” (Gaines 4). Black elites “distinguish[ed] themselves, as bourgeois agents of civilization, from the presumably undeveloped black majority” (2).

It is this second meaning that we are much more familiar with, both as a historical concept and one that appears in our own moment in slightly altered form—for example, in the usually pejorative concept of “respectability.” And it is this meaning that expresses itself most clearly in these texts. Black authors, in envisioning a possible “future of the race,” seem to have felt, consciously or not, the constraints of white assumptions of racial

inferiority, and their imagined “improvements” for the race therefore sometimes resembled a movement toward norms that white society found more acceptable. This is not to say, of course, that Black authors always acquiesced to this logic. They also struggled against it, resulting in what Gaines describes as a “dilemma of black writers torn between the desperate aspiration for the status of respectability, a strategy which tacitly endorsed prevailing assumptions of racial and social hierarchy, and the struggle to articulate an autonomous and oppositional racial group consciousness” (“Black Americans” 449). And in these texts, we certainly see successful presentations of “oppositional racial group consciousness” as well, sometimes existing alongside more ambiguous articulations of “racial uplift.”

The second important concept is the trope of the “New Negro.” Most modern readers probably associate this figure with Alain Locke’s Harlem Renaissance anthology. However, as Gates and Jarrett demonstrate, the trope of the New Negro was operative several decades before the Harlem Renaissance and was “a major discursive cornerstone of racial representation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (2). An early usage, in 1894, presents the creation of a New Negro as an ongoing project following the Civil War: “The problem for statesman, philanthropist, Christian, was no less than to make a new Negro” (Wright 23).

The concept of a “New Negro” has a complex relationship to “racial uplift.” In some ways, we can consider the “New Negro” as oppositional to “uplift.” Features commonly assigned to a paradigmatic “New Negro” were an opposition to assimilation, an emphasis on protest against racial inequality, and a sense of racial pride. Gaines identifies “a militant, black diasporic ‘New Negro’ race consciousness that challenged

uplift ideology's accommodation to the racial and economic status quo" (11). At the same time, the concept itself often reveals a dependency on the same evolutionary logic that racial uplift does. As Gates and Jarrett argue, the New Negro relied on evolutionary ideas of development and civilization, particularly that different racial groups were at different stages on a spectrum of progress. An 1895 speech compares the progress of Black people with that of the Anglo-Saxon: "Thirty years of freedom is scarcely enough to take the first steps in the arts of peace. It required centuries for the Anglo-Saxon to reach his present commanding position. The Negro's present days of infancy and of small beginnings are no criterion to measure his future by" (Bowen 32). In the context of racialist discourse on civilization, the "New" of New Negro emphasized a rejection of the traits of an "Old" type, but it also signified the relative newness of the African American's aspiration toward white civilization.

Importantly, this rejection of the Old and embrace of the New expresses a paradox of identity: it is an act of self-making that is also an act of self-negation. This "self-willed beginning...depended fundamentally upon self-negation, a turning away from the 'Old Negro' and the labyrinthine memory of black enslavement and toward the register of a 'New Negro,' an irresistible, spontaneously generated black and sufficient self" (Gates & Jarrett 4). In some ways, the limitations of New Negro as a political and cultural identity are the same limitations as a conventional utopian narrative: they exist outside of time and history: "just as Utopia signifies 'no-place,' so did 'New Negro signify a 'black person who lives at no place,' and at no time" (Gates & Jarrett 4).

Remaking the Past

Together, these two tropes significantly structured Black speculative imaginations at the turn of the century. A somewhat compromised promise for intentional racial evolutionary development interacted with a paradoxical quest for identity in which Black Americans attempted to forge a new racial consciousness while rejecting some aspects of their history. This complex ideological horizon, rife with contradictions, catalyzed equally complex speculative visions, each of them boldly unique. But despite these authors' very different visions, the dominant racial discourse of the era led them all to write in the same *tense*, as it were. As I discussed earlier, Black authors at the turn of the century generally avoided extrapolations into the far future. But they were, understandably, extremely invested in exploring the imminent future. (Even Johnson, who does imagine a distant future, is still, as I hope to demonstrate, mostly preoccupied with the present moment.) If, as the dominant discourse implied, there is so much potential for developing as a race and fashioning a new racial identity, what might the outcome be? And what *should* it be? Another way to state this is that these speculative visions operate precisely in the space between the "Old" and the "New Negro." A "New Negro" seems to be emerging, offering an oppositional alternative to the assimilationist rhetoric that characterizes the period, but the viability, and even the basic features, of this new identity are largely in question. These novels anxiously monitor and speculate about the immediate future of this emerging identity.

At the same time: a "New Negro" can only be understood in contrast to an "Old" one, and a consideration of what constituted this previous identity leads inevitably to a critical reflection on Black history. Here we arrive at the crux of my argument. Although

the tense or perspective of these speculative texts is indeed the imminent future of Black Americans, their central preoccupation is actually Black history. They are primarily concerned with interrogating the uses of Black history for the formation of a viable and desirable racial identity. Each of these texts experiment with a different possible shared history with which Black Americans can anchor this identity—a different possible articulation of the “Old” that might inform the “New.” This approach is in distinct contrast to the typical approach of turn of the century utopian texts. To oversimplify slightly: if we can say axiomatically that white utopian texts, though they often extrapolate and project a distant future, actually function to estrange the present moment; then we can say, in contrast, that Black utopian texts from this era, although they are concerned about an imminent future, more fundamentally estrange the *past*. I hope to demonstrate the unique ways in which each text enacts this estrangement.

In some ways, turn-of-the-century Black speculative engagement with history is one important phase of an ongoing tradition. In the 2000 essay “Black to the Future,” a classic manifesto on the potential of Black science fiction, the novelist Walter Mosley describes the relationship between Black science fiction and Black history. “Black people,” he writes, “have been cut off from their African ancestry by the scythe of slavery and from an American heritage by being excluded from history. For us, science fiction offers an alternative where that which deviates from the norm is the norm.” (405). He lays out the advantages of science fiction, arguing that it “allows history to be rewritten or ignored.” (405). Mosley’s is perhaps the most explicit articulation of this idea, that writing Black futures is also inevitably about *rewriting* the Black past, and this idea is implicit in much contemporary Black speculative fiction.

Seventy-five years before this, Arthur Schomburg, also in a manifesto of sorts, articulates this idea more imperatively: “The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future” (231). He continues:

Though it is orthodox to think of America as the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past, what is a luxury for the nation as a whole becomes a prime social necessity for the Negro. For him, a group tradition must supply compensation for persecution, and pride of race the antidote for prejudice. History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset. So among the rising democratic millions we find the Negro thinking more collectively, more retrospectively than the rest, and apt out of the very pressure of the present to become the most enthusiastic antiquarian of them all” (231).

“Antiquarian” is a key word here, because Schomburg is not writing about speculative fiction but about history. In particular, he has in mind “leading Negro book-collectors and research societies,” who were discovering and collecting the raw material with which to write history, “not only for the first true writing of Negro history, but for the rewriting of many important paragraphs of our common American history” (232).

Schomburg refers to a “definite desire and determination to have a history, well documented, widely known at least within race circles, and administered as a stimulating and inspiring tradition for the coming generations” (231). When Schomburg refers to this “definite desire,” he may well have in mind some of the authors I write about in this dissertation. All of them anticipated this imperative to “remake” their history, and all of them engaged, to varying degrees, in the writing and transmission of history. To name a few examples: Hopkins’s series “Famous Men...” and “Famous Women of the Negro Race” highlighted the contributions of notable African Americans, past and present. Griggs was an educator. Johnson’s first publication was a primary school textbook, A

School History of the Negro Race in America. I argue that these four authors' speculative texts are also manifestations of this "definite desire and determination to have a history." They are simply in a different mode than a conventional history. And as opposed to conventional history, which must anchor itself in some way to an archive, speculative fiction has the potential to more radically "remake" history, rather than "digging up" material that was always there.

These texts utilize the unique affordances of speculative fiction to experiment with imagining the ways that a specific Black past might form a foundation for "making a future." Saidiya Hartman, whose own engagement with Black archives is proudly speculative, writes, "It is only when you are stranded in a hostile country that you need a romance of origins" (98). "Every generation confronts the task of choosing its past" (100). This generation of Black authors is doing precisely that. Each author works with a unique historical moment, some of them sticking more closely to documented historical reality than others. And each of them speculates about the possibilities and limitations of this history for informing a racial identity. If we imagine that a conventional white utopian text extrapolates from the present into a far future, then these Black speculative texts extrapolate from a unique Black *past* into an *imminent* future.

In Chapter 2, I explore *Iola Leroy* and Frances Harper's revision or "remaking" of the history of the Civil War and early Reconstruction in response to a solidifying "Lost Cause" narrative that invoked a nostalgia for antebellum plantation life. Harper creates an idealized version of an all-Black Reconstruction-era community and explicates its utopian dimensions. Rather than giving a strictly "historical" account of a community like this, Harper instead frames it as a model or experiment, a speculative space in which

to imagine a possible articulation of Black identity at the turn of the century: a self-determined enclave operating outside the bounds and norms of white judgment.

Importantly, Harper depicts the utopian community as enabled by a process of rupture (created by the Civil War) and subsequent renewal. In her fictionalization of the period of the Civil War into early Reconstruction, she emphasizes that the practice of a newly acquired freedom required a deliberate rupture from the white plantation family and a reforming of a Black community made up of both biological and chosen kin. Crucially, Harper uses this process of rupture and renewal as a means to illuminate the current political moment.

In Chapter 3, I explore Sutton E. Griggs's vision of an "Imperium in Imperio," a secret society of Black men whose organization is overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, indebted to the ideology, rhetoric, and mythology of the American Revolution. What Griggs creates in his novel is not primarily a utopia, but an *alternate history*, one that does not posit any radically different historical narrative. Griggs presents a narrative that closely resembles an already familiar American history: subjects whose government has failed to represent and protect them, whose peaceful appeals have failed, and who feel they have no recourse left but to separate, violently if necessary. The alternate history of the Imperium functions to literalize and amplify Black Americans' already existing proximity to the history and ideals of the American Revolution and offers a space to imagine the logical conclusion for an oppressed group of people who are asked to demonstrate loyalty and patriotism toward a country that subjugates them. And the logical conclusion, according to the novel, is that under current conditions, a peaceful resolution is impossible. A catastrophic race war, though it is ultimately forestalled at the

end, is the inevitable outcome under these conditions. The alternate history enables an apocalyptic warning to a white audience that they have a “New Negro” on their hands, one who is willing to “die in honor rather than live in disgrace” (163).

In Chapter 4, I explore Pauline Hopkins’s repurposing of the “lost race” novel subgenre to reconstruct an ancient African past. *Of One Blood*, which begins as a somewhat conventional melodrama diverges crucially in the second half into the contours of an adventure novel, in which the protagonist Reuel Briggs travels to Northeast Africa in search of treasure and discovers instead a Black utopia, the hidden city of Telassar, a technologically advanced civilization descended from the inhabitants of the ancient city of Meroe. Hopkins uses contemporary archaeological discoveries to frame “Ethiopia” as the origin of Western civilization, in a clear attempt to offer a source of racial pride for her Black readers. But what Hopkins’s speculative experiment ultimately offers is a way of imagining racial identity completely outside of the framework of turn-of-the-century racial science. In particular, Telassar exists outside of the ideology of racial “purity,” a concept that “became an obsession in Anglo-Saxon America” (Smedley 239). With her reconstruction of a semi-mythical African past, Hopkins offers a way of imagining Black identity not in terms of blood or any other category of racial science, but according to a more fundamental and mystical connection of collective memory, one that transcends space and time. The utopian city of Telassar enables the estrangement of racial science and opens an imaginative space in which to imagine these alternatives.

In Chapter 5, I explore Edward A. Johnson’s obscure *Light Ahead for the Negro*, which is by far the most conventional future time-travel novel but also, paradoxically, the *least* invested in envisioning a future for Black Americans. Yet despite its very different

orientation from the other novels, *Light Ahead* is still ultimately attuned to their basic project, which is reflecting on the meaning and making of Black history. Johnson's unique contribution is investigating the present moment—the turn-of-the-century Jim Crow South—not as the present but as a contested moment of *history*. Johnson utilizes the future time travel premise not primarily to make predictions, but to imagine the present moment as a historian would. Johnson demonstrates the ongoing efforts at revisionist histories of the Reconstruction era and then applies those same methods from the vantage point of an imagined future. What Johnson offers us, in the end, is a revisionist history of the present, one that functions to estrange white turn-of-the-century readers' understanding of the so-called "Negro problem."

A Note on Vocabulary

I try to stay close to the preferred vocabulary of turn-of-the-century Black Americans. In cases where we now consider the vocabulary offensive, I use quotation marks. This happens most frequently with the word *Negro*, which was the standard designation for a Black person until the middle of the 20th century.

I apply the same approach to key vocabulary that is outdated. For example, these authors prefer the term *amalgamation* to its synonym *miscegenation*, which has a negative connotation and an ugly history. The word *miscegenation* is a relatively recent invention and, not surprisingly, an American one. It first appeared in the 1863 pamphlet "Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races."⁵ *Miscegenation* is a Latin

⁵ This pamphlet was actually a literary forgery employed in an unsuccessful hoax against Lincoln. The pamphlet advocates for "miscegenation," but only in an attempt to trick Lincoln into endorsing its ostensibly absurd and dangerous values. This bizarre history lends credence to the idea that the word was invented to conjure the appearance of scientific authority.

neologism, from “miscere” meaning “to mix” and “genus” meaning “race.” The term quickly gained currency, especially in post-Bellum racist science, because it appeared more clinical and scholarly than the more commonly used term, “amalgamation” (Islam 25). From the beginning, it has been used to oppose racial integration. The *OED* definition notes that “the term is used esp. by people who believe in concepts of racial superiority or racial purity and therefore object to interracial relationships.” The word is “freighted with mid-nineteenth century notions about breeding and ‘race,’” and at the turn of the century was generally invoked by proponents of white supremacy (Mitchell xxi). Chesnut, in “The Future American,” seems to recoil from the word, using it only once—in quotes—in reference to a contemporary anti-miscegenation law. I follow his lead and use miscegenation only in direct quotations. It is worth noting that, despite the overwhelmingly negative connotations of the word, it really is not etymologically far afield from our current vocabulary in the U.S. Descriptions of people as racially “mixed” are common (though not uncontested). As Michelle Mitchell aptly observes, “frightfully resilient notions about so-called race mixing persist to such a degree that U.S. English currently contains no real alternative” (xxi).

Finally, the *n-word* appears occasionally in these texts. In the rare cases where quoting these passages is critical to analysis, I censor the word.

CHAPTER 2

ALL-BLACK ENCLAVES IN HARPER'S *IOLA LEROY*

“In the tenuous times from the conclusion of the Civil War to the beginning of World War I,” Mobley writes, African Americans

followed four basic approaches to overcoming the racial dichotomy ingrained in southern society: political action within the Republican party; focus on economic self-help, morality, and racial unity; direct opposition to social injustice; and migration or "exodus" from the region. Sometimes black leaders resorted to a combination of these positions or shifted from one to another (340).

These four approaches are also roughly representative of the major ideological positions available to Black artists, activists, and intellectuals at the turn of the century. All of the novels that I analyze in this dissertation engage with these approaches in various ways. Especially pronounced at the turn of the century is the fault line between an emphasis on intraracial solidarity and “self-help” vs. a desire to agitate more directly against injustice. To be sure, none of these approaches are mutually exclusive, but they are still the major ideas that are presented frequently in turn-of-the-century Black literature, speculative fiction being no exception.

However, Mobley identifies a fifth approach that a small but significant number of African Americans pursued, especially in the early years of Reconstruction: “self-segregation within the borders of an all-black community” (340). During this era, somewhere between eighty-eight and two hundred “black towns” were established and promoted by former slaves (Taylor 280). Most of these towns were established by former slaves who migrated westward, as in the Exodusters who settled in Kansas in the 1870s.

But a significant minority were established in the vicinity of former plantations, “in the shadow of white society,” as Mobley puts it (340). Princeville, North Carolina⁶, for example, the first independently governed African American community, was initially established in 1865 as “Freedom Hill” by former slaves who did not follow the advice of the federal government and return to work for their former masters (341). Black towns like Princeville were “enclaves of black self-determination” that, despite often struggling to remain economically viable, stood in stark contrast to the much more dominant and exploitative arrangement of sharecropping (341).

This alternative “fifth” approach, a Black “enclave” outside of the immediate influence and supervision of white people, forms a crucial but overlooked speculative dimension of this chapter’s subject, Frances Harper’s 1892 *Iola Leroy*. Harper depicts a fictional, highly idealized settlement of former slaves who are able to purchase their former plantation and divide it amongst themselves. Harper portrays this settlement as a utopian community made possible by the apocalyptic rupture that the Civil War produced. This community, in turn, functions as a model for the second utopian site at the end of the novel, the *conversazione*, a discursive space in which Black people debate their own destiny outside the surveillance of white interlocutors.

Iola Leroy has traditionally been interpreted as an attempt to represent and revise the history of the Civil War and early Reconstruction, especially in response to a solidifying “Lost Cause” narrative that invoked a nostalgia for antebellum plantation life.

⁶ One major setting of *Iola Leroy* is a Black settlement, which was formerly a plantation, near the city of “C——, North Carolina.” This fictional settlement does not correspond exactly to Princeville, and it is clearly not Harper’s intention to give a strict historical account of any one settlement, but Princeville was a very likely inspiration for Harper’s depiction.

This interpretation is also the foundation of one of the most consistent criticisms of the novel: that its representation of this historical period is so idealized as to be ineffective or even damaging. Negative evaluations of the novel have accused it of “historical amnesia” and “myopia,” arguing that Harper sanitizes the realities of history in an attempt to escape or evade it (Foreman, “Reading Aright” 327). To be sure, there is no doubt that on some level Harper is attempting, as Blight argues, “to forge a positive view of black history” (*Race and Reunion* 367), and she certainly produces an idealized version of that history. So, these criticisms have force to the extent one believes that an “ennobling and romanticized” (Brown 291) rather than a strictly “accurate” Black history is a dubious political project. However, simply representing history is not the only or even primary function of the novel. Instead, Harper is “remaking” the past, to use Schomburg’s expression. She is idealizing a historical site—an all-Black Reconstruction era community—and explicating its utopian dimensions. Rather than giving a strictly “historical” account of a community like this, Harper is instead framing it as a model or experiment, a speculative space in which to imagine a possible articulation of Black identity at the turn of the century: a self-determined enclave operating outside the bounds and norms of white judgment.

Importantly, Harper depicts the utopian community as enabled by a process of rupture (created by the Civil War) and subsequent renewal. In her fictionalization of the period of the Civil War into early Reconstruction, she emphasizes that the practice of a newly acquired freedom required a deliberate rupture from the white plantation family and a re-forming of a Black community made up of both biological and chosen kin. Crucially, Harper uses this process of rupture and renewal as a means to illuminate the

current political moment. Although Harper does not explicitly shift the historical period, her references to contemporary figures and debates, especially at the end of the novel, deliberately invoke the present. In this subtle shift, Harper both reinvigorates the waning promise of Reconstruction and offers readers an imaginative space to consider how their historical period might also be understood similarly in terms of rupture and renewal. In particular, the novel's famous axiom, that "out of the race must come its own thinkers and writers" (238), functions as a meditation on the state of African American literature, inviting readers to consider Black literature, its relationship to white literary forms, and the requirements for developing an independent, self-determined tradition.

Ultimately, Harper's experiment has ambivalent results. *Iola* offers Black readers a unique space for imagining themselves as historical subjects with an ability and imperative to break away from a constraining turn-of-the-century white paternalism. At the same time, the novel's commitment to racial uplift results in a rupture that splinters Black solidarity, leaving the Black underclass, despite Harper's demonstrable affection and sympathy for its members, excluded from its utopian potential.

Frances Harper and *Iola Leroy*

By the time Frances Watkins Harper (1825-1911) published *Iola Leroy* in 1892, she was already well-known and respected for her achievements as a poet, activist, lecturer, and teacher. Foster calls her "the most popular African American poet prior to Paul Laurence Dunbar" (*Minnie's Sacrifice* xii). Harper published in a variety of genres and was "one of very few African Americans who published regularly in both the religious press and the secular press, in venues read largely by blacks in and in venues read primarily by whites" (xv). *Iola Leroy* was published as a bound novel, which was

somewhat of a departure from her previous output.⁷ Moreover, it was a significant risk to her reputation, something William Still articulates when he expresses his concern that Harper might make a “blunder” “at this late date in life” (61). Foster argues that, not only would Harper’s novel be judged as representative of her abilities, a reputation that Harper had cultivated over decades, but the novel would also be considered representative of her race (“Introduction” xxxi). This was a common challenge for turn-of-the-century Black writers, exacerbated for Harper because she published this novel quite late in her career.

Harper’s influence on the development of African American literature cannot be overstated. But in the context of this dissertation and its specific group of texts, what is most notable about Harper’s biography is the extent to which she differs from the other authors that I examine. Griggs, Hopkins, and Johnson were all born in the same decade. Harper was born more than 30 years before any of them and, while not born into slavery, she was very active in abolition activism and at the turn of the century had a much deeper memory of slavery and antebellum America than the other authors could have had. Additionally, she published *Iola Leroy* much later in her career than the other authors published their respective speculative texts. I would venture that these biographical details contributed to a speculative project that gives sustained attention to the recent past.

⁷ Foster’s recovery of three novels serialized in the *Christian Recorder* (the journal of the AME church) from 1868-1888—*Minnie’s Sacrifice*, *Sowing and Reaping*, and *Trial and Triumph*—voided the long-held assumption that *Iola Leroy* was Harper’s first attempt at the novel form. The shift from Harper’s poetry to *Iola* was not as profound as previously believed. At the same time, Harper, who published *Iola Leroy* as a bound book, likely had significantly different intentions with the project than her serialized novels. As Mitchell notes, “By publishing *Iola Leroy* as a bound book, rather than serializing it in the *Christian Recorder*, Harper clearly hoped to reach the broadest possible audience while maintaining a community-centered perspective” (49).

In her endnote, Harper describes *Iola Leroy* as woven “[f]rom threads of fact and fiction” (251). The threads of *Iola*’s narrative are divided into three distinct historical periods: the Civil War, the antebellum period, and Reconstruction. The novel begins near the outbreak of the Civil War, focusing on a group of enslaved people on a plantation in North Carolina. The news of an approaching Union army leads to discussion and debate about whether they should take advantage of this opportunity to escape to freedom. Most of the plantation chooses to escape to the safety of the Union army, believing that the promise of freedom outweighs any reason for staying. Those that choose not to escape have various attachments to the plantation that keep them in place. The character Uncle Daniel, for example, gives many reasons for not leaving, but his final explanation is that he made a promise that he would look after the wife and children of “Marse Robert,” the owner of the plantation— “I promised Marse Robert I would do it, an’ I mus’ be as good as my word” (75). The character Ben Tunnel does not express any attachment to the white plantation family, but he chooses to stay because he does not want to leave his frail mother behind— “while I love freedom more than a child loves its mother’s milk, I’ve made up my mind to stay on the plantation” (83). Most of the characters, though, overcome their attachments to the plantation to pursue their love of freedom. Robert, for example, feels that “All the ties which bound him to his home were as ropes of sand, now that freedom had come so near” (85).

Those who do escape serve the Union forces in various ways: as spies, soldiers, scouts, etc. We are introduced to Iola Leroy, who the Union Commander saves from slavery as “a trembling dove from the gory vulture’s nest” (88). Iola takes a position as a

nurse in the field hospital that “was needing gentle, womanly ministrations” (88). The physician at the field hospital, Dr. Gresham, takes an interest in Iola and proposes to her.

At this point, the narrative flashes back briefly to the antebellum South, “[n]early twenty years before the war,” focusing on Iola’s family background (102). Iola’s father, Eugene Leroy, manumits and then marries her mother, Marie. Their children, Iola and Harry, who pass as white, are sent to Northern boarding schools, and kept ignorant of their “negro blood.” At her school, Iola defends the institution of slavery: “[M]y father is a slave-holder, and my mother is as good to our servants as she can be...Our slaves do not want their freedom. They would not take it if we gave it to them” (128). Soon after this scene, Iola’s father dies and, because of “a flaw in the marriage and an informality in the manumission,” both Iola and her mother are returned to the South and enslaved (126).

After this brief flashback, the narrative returns to Dr. Gresham’s proposal, which Iola rejects, saying that “[t]here are barriers between us that I cannot pass” (136). She also refuses to marry and “dream of happiness” until she has reunited with her mother. “I should be ashamed to live and ashamed to die were I to choose a happy lot for myself and leave poor mamma to struggle alone” (142). The Civil War ends halfway through the novel, and the rest of the narrative takes place during the early Reconstruction period. This section of the novel generally follows Iola and others’ efforts to reunite with their family members, “[t]o bind anew the ties which slavery had broken and gather together the remnants of...scattered family” (162). The novel describes several scenes of reunion at “colored churches,” including Iola’s reunion with her mother and brother. This section of the novel also contains a significant representation of a settlement of freed people, founded on the site of the former plantation by a group who “banded together, bought

[the] plantation, and divided it among themselves” (165). “It was on a clearing in [the] woods, where Robert and Uncle Daniel had held their last prayer-meeting. Now the gloomy silence of those woods was broken by the hum of industry, the murmur of cheerful voices, and the merry laughter of happy children” (165).

The last few chapters of the novel are more didactic and depict debates about contested issues in Black politics. The novel ends with Iola rejecting Dr. Gresham a second time, choosing instead to marry Dr. Latimer who, like Iola, could pass but chooses to identify as Black. They both move South, dedicating their lives to the advancement of their race, “esteem[ing] it a blessed privilege to stand on the threshold of a new era and labor for those who had passed from the old oligarchy of slavery into the new commonwealth of freedom” (244).

Although the plot of the novel is straightforward (especially compared to others that I analyze), its formal qualities are not. Ammons points out that the novel’s formal experimentation and “formal self-fracturing”

speaks to the inadequacy of any single inherited long narrative form—the slave narrative, the domestic novel, the nineteenth-century African American novel, the white antislavery novel, the tight high-culture Anglo-European art novel—to serve her purpose of writing a political novel about a black woman in the United States (27).

Mitchell similarly argues that Harper’s prioritization of “formal experimentation” “adopts and adapts three genres that commanded significant audiences in the nineteenth century: sentimental romance, the slave narrative, and plantation fiction” (29; 26). According to Mitchell, the popularity of these genres demonstrated the interest that turn-of-the-century readers had in Black characters, and that “Harper hoped to use Americans’ attraction to black characters as an opportunity to expose them to images that were more faithful to

the community” (28). The most obvious example of Harper providing “faithful image” is her depiction of the contributions and heroism of Black soldiers, a topic typically undermined by turn-of-the-century literature, which often emphasized the stereotypical cowardice of the Black soldier.

In the endnote to the novel, Harper casts a very wide net to describe her intended audience:

[The novel] will not be in vain if it awaken in the hearts of our countrymen a stronger sense of justice and a more Christlike humanity in behalf of those whom the fortunes of war threw, homeless, ignorant and poor, upon the threshold of a new era. Nor will it be in vain if it inspire the children of those upon whose brows God has poured the chrism of that new era to determine that they will embrace every opportunity, develop every faculty, and use every power God has given them to rise in the scale of character and condition, and to add their quota of good citizenship to the best welfare of the nation (251).

In other words, Harper has both Black and white audiences in mind, wanting to inspire both, to different ends. Harper’s statement is in line with Mitchell’s observation that publishing *Iola Leroy* as a bound novel, as opposed to serializing it in a Black religious publication like *The Christian Recorder*, was meant to reach a wider audience (49). However, the consensus is that her more “immediate” audience was Black Sunday school students (Carby xvi). William Still notes this specific audience in the last sentence of his introduction:

“Doubtless, thousands of colored Sunday-schools in the South, in casting about for an interesting, moral story-book, full of practical lessons, will not be content to be without [*Iola Leroy*]” (63). Harper’s call in the endnote to “embrace every opportunity, develop every faculty, and use every power” feels even more targeted if we assume that “*Iola Leroy* was a novel written for the edification of

black youth: a contribution toward their education in the ethical and moral precepts of intellectual leadership” (Carby xvi).

In this context, it makes sense that *Iola Leroy* would be primarily understood and evaluated as an account of history. For one, the novel is a contribution to the ongoing discursive conflict over the memory of the Civil War and Reconstruction. As Blight explains, in the decades following the Civil War there was an “inexorable drive toward reunion” between North and South, a desire for a “tragedy with a happy ending,” in the words of William Dean Howells (1-2). This desire for reunion and reconciliation, according to Blight, was emphasized at the expense of grappling with the underlying, still ongoing issues of racial inequality that had caused the conflict in the first place.

The memory of slavery, emancipation, and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments never fit well into a developing narrative in which the Old and New South were romanticized and welcomed back to a new nationalism, and in which devotion alone made everyone right, and no one truly wrong, in the remembered Civil War (4).

Iola Leroy, simply by depicting former slaves and their freedom struggle after the Civil War, acts as a counter to this type of narrative. But the novel is also, as both Harper and Still imagine it, a primary source of exposure to this era for those too young to experience it, especially Black youth. In other words, the novel seems to function as both a revisionist and instructive text.

The obvious stakes for the representation of Black history at the turn of the century explain why *Iola Leroy* has been interpreted primarily as an historical narrative, and therefore evaluated according to that interpretation. Criticism or skepticism in this vein has existed since the novel’s initial publication. William Still, for example, a fellow activist and long-time friend of Harper, expresses his initial skepticism in the novel’s

introduction: “I confess when I first learned that Mrs. Harper was about to write ‘a story’ on some features of the Anglo-African race, growing out of what was once popularly known as the ‘peculiar institution,’ I had my doubts about the matter” (61). He admits his fear that a “distinguished” writer like Harper, “at this late date in life” might “make a blunder” in her choice of subject matter and miss an opportunity to “bring...out a work of merit and worth to the race” (61). Still does, however, ultimately endorse the work, believing that Harper had “hit upon a subject so well adapted to reach a large number of her friends and the public with both entertaining and instructive matter” (62).

20th-century critics have generally not been as kind. Foreman describes the “[c]ountless critics of various methodological and ideological persuasions [who have] derided the novel for its seeming historical amnesia” (“Reading Aright” 327). As opposed to Chesnut’s *Marrow of Tradition*, which “has been seen as both artful and oppositional in large part because his mimetic, historical and intertextual referents,” “*Iola Leroy*, supposedly, is disconnected from the ‘real’ concerns of ‘real’ African Americans at the turn of the century” (327). Even critics more sympathetic to the novel tend to view it as a version of history. Campbell, for example, views *Iola* as an expression of “mythic” history.

To be clear, there is no doubt that Harper is offering an alternative or revisionist account of the Civil War and the Reconstruction era that stands against dominant narratives that exclude or vilify African Americans. At the same time, focusing exclusively on this function of the novel, especially on the extent to which the novel presents a “realistic” account, obscures other important functions of the novel. I argue that Harper’s representation of the post-Civil War “Black town” in North Carolina is a

speculative space, highly idealized and “unrealistic” by design. Rather than an accurate depiction of a settlement like this, the space functions as a model for a Black enclave that determines its own destiny outside of white judgment. Harper “remakes” the past of Reconstruction into an image of self-determination that might serve as a viable Black identity at the turn of the century. Harper also recuperates a sense of the Civil War as a necessary conflict rather than a tragedy that needed to be reconciled. Harper depicts the Civil War as an apocalyptic conflict that produced a historical rupture, a rupture that was a necessary condition for a flourishing Black collective. “Remaking” the conflict in this way invites readers to imagine what a similar rupture might look like in the present.

The Civil War as Rupture

In “Frederick Douglass and the American Apocalypse,” Blight summarizes a common 19th-century interpretation of the meaning and purpose of the Civil War. “Following biblical prophecy of the Apocalypse, many Northern Protestants had come to believe by the 1850s that their country was on the brink of...an apocalyptic war that would usher in a new era of peace and freedom” (310). Hence, the Civil War took on significance as a cosmic conflict between what Douglass calls “the eternal conflict between right and wrong, good and evil, liberty and slavery, truth and falsehood, the glorious light of love, and the appalling darkness of human selfishness and sin” (“American Apocalypse”). The war, though catastrophic, served a purpose, based on the popular belief that “[n]ations, like individual sinners, had to experience suffering in order to fulfill their destiny” (Blight 321). In this context, the Civil war was a “cleansing tragedy,” a conflict that was tragic but necessary for national regeneration. Douglass and others’ understanding of the Civil War as a catastrophic but cleansing tragedy “illustrates

the two central tenets of apocalypticism: the cosmic conflict between good and evil, and the historical, divinely rendered break between two distinct ages” (324). Less strictly religious interpretations of the war still recognized the new epoch that it had ushered in. In *Reconstruction*, Foner argues that, despite ongoing regional and racial conflicts after the war, “[a]ll Americans, nonetheless, shared a common sense of having lived through events that had transformed their world” (34). “As Sidney Breese, an Illinois jurist and politician observed, all Americans ‘must live in the world the war made’” (34).

This interpretation endured at the turn of the century, especially for Black Americans, as *Iola Leroy* demonstrates. The novel interprets the Civil War as a rendering of cosmic justice. In the first chapter, the Civil War is described as “the legible transcript of Divine retribution which was written upon the shuddering earth” (72). Iola and Robert characterize the war as punishment for “national sins”: “I do not wonder...that we had this war. The nation had sinned enough to suffer...if national sins bring down national judgments, then the nation is only reaping what it sowed” (159). The novel emphasizes the “cleansing” function of the war as well. Iola describes slavery as “a fearful cancer eating into the nation's heart, sapping its vitality, and undermining its life” (205). Dr. Gresham responds that the Civil War was “the dreadful surgery by which the disease was eradicated” (205). The “dreadful” war in this metaphor “cleanses” the nation’s body of the malignant evil of slavery and provides a “silver lining”: “the redemption of a race and the reunion of severed hearts” (205).

The possibility for the creation of a new social order after a catastrophic rupture is an important component of much of the speculative fiction from this era. An overlooked aspect of Gilman’s *Herland*, for example, is that the society is made possible by a

succession of violent revolts that extinguish all men. Ignatius Donnelly's 1890 *Caesar's Column* centers on an imagined Populist/proletarian revolution: the number of casualties is extremely high, but the effect of the revolution remains unresolved at the end of the novel. In the African American speculative canon, Sutton E. Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio*, the subject of the next chapter, takes the reader to the brink of an apocalyptic race war that fails to materialize.

Because the convention of a catastrophic rupture was common, and because the Civil War was imagined in apocalyptic and world-changing terms, it is surprising that more authors did not use this conflict in their speculative narratives, as Harper does. One intuitive explanation is that Reconstruction, although it had been imagined in some sense as a utopian project made possible by the rupture of the Civil War, had been emptied of that promise by the turn of the century, the era when speculative fiction was most popular. The end and final failure of Reconstruction is conventionally dated at the Compromise of 1877, an informal agreement that resulted in the withdrawal of federal troops from the Southern states. In the 21st century, it is typical to imagine that by the 1890s, the nation and especially Black Americans were cynical about Reconstruction, having witnessed its complete failure a decade earlier.

However, *Iola Leroy* and its initial reception complicate this interpretation and suggest to some extent that the promise of Reconstruction was imagined differently at the turn of the century. In a positive review of the novel, "*The Nation*...observed, 'The present generation can hardly be reminded too often of what slavery was, that they may better be reminded what emancipation is, and what reconstruction should be'" (Robbins xxiii). That hopeful, forward-looking "should be" suggests that the possibilities of

Reconstruction were not completely foreclosed in 1892. At the same time, as Carby notes, although the promise of Reconstruction might have remained, Harper was still beholden to the disappointing historical reality: “Harper wrote her novel as the Jim Crow laws institutionalized the separation of the races and, although her novel reenacts Reconstruction as a utopia, its failure meant that Harper could not represent a fictional moral order in which equality had actually been achieved” (xviii). From this uncertain, ambivalent historical position—disappointed by the current outcome of Reconstruction but hopeful that its promises had not yet been fully foreclosed—Harper is attempting to reinvigorate the imagined world-making potential of the Civil War and extend into the present moment the (yet unfulfilled) utopian potential of Reconstruction.

To do this, Harper establishes two utopian sites. The first is a physical space, a settlement of formerly enslaved people collaborating and experimenting with their newly acquired freedom. The second is a discursive space, the *conversazione*, a Black “counterpublic” (Castronovo) where “thinkers and leaders of the race...consult on subjects of vital interest to [their] welfare” (Harper 224). Although the *conversazione* ostensibly exists during the same period as the physical settlement, the characters’ resemblance to present-day activists and public figures, as well as the discussion topics’ relevance to turn-of-the-century Black politics, make the space feel contemporary in a way that the physical settlement does not. With the first utopian site, Harper depicts a successful rupture from the prior social order and the renewal of an organic Black community. With the second, she provokes the reader to imagine what a similar process would look like in the present moment.

The Settlement

The most conventionally utopian element of *Iola Leroy* is the settlement of freed people that is established by “a number of colored men” joining together, purchasing the plantation of the deceased former master, and “divid[ing] it among themselves” (165).

Robert, who previously lived on the plantation as a slave, returns to the spot to “hunt up his old friends.” He discovers an idyllic scene:

It was on a clearing in Gundover's woods, where Robert and Uncle Daniel had held their last prayer-meeting. Now the gloomy silence of those woods was broken by the hum of industry, the murmur of cheerful voices, and the merry laughter of happy children. Where they had trodden with fear and misgiving, freedmen walked with light and bounding hearts. The school-house had taken the place of the slave-pen and auction-block (165).

This generic description evokes the pastoral mode, particularly the setting in the woods and the sensory impression of the “merry laughter of happy children.” These indications of joyous, thriving people help establish the scene. But this description of the settlement relies just as much on the contrast of what the space *used to be*: a “gloomy,” silent place where enslaved people endured in “fear and misgiving.” In the last sentence, Harper extends the description of the settlement into a broader metaphor about the demise of slavery: “The school-house had taken the place of the slave-pen and auction-block” (165). Significantly, the settlement exists in the place of, or on top of, the site of the freedmen’s previous bondage. Near the end of the novel, Dr. Gresham describes the “work” of Reconstruction, which “is to build over the desolations of the past a better and brighter future” (206). In the case of the settlement, it is quite literally “buil[t] over the desolations of the past.”

After this description of the settlement, we get our first access to something resembling the interior lives of the residents. We overhear a conversation between two anonymous “laborer[s]”: One asks, “How is yer, ole boy?” to which the other responds “Everything is lobly [lovely]” (165). But immediately after this expression of unqualified optimism and joy, Harper moves without transition into this passage, which begins with a summary of the recent past:

Gundover had died soon after the surrender. Frank Anderson had grown reckless and drank himself to death. His brother Tom had been killed in battle. Their mother, who was Gundover's daughter, had died insane. Their father had also passed away. The defeat of the Confederates, the loss of his sons, and the emancipation of his slaves, were blows from which he never recovered. As Robert passed leisurely along, delighted with the evidences of thrift and industry which constantly met his eye, he stopped to admire a garden filled with beautiful flowers, clambering vines, and rustic adornments (165).

For a novel that has been criticized for its sanitized, overly optimistic depiction of history, this passage is unsparing in its description of the extreme devastation and eventual obliteration of the former plantation master and his family. In representing the joy, industry, freedom, and hope of this new settlement, Harper does not elide the conditions that made it possible, one of which was the destruction of the Gundover⁸ family. To emphasize this point, Harper concludes the paragraph with Robert’s observations of the new growth in the settlement. The “evidences of thrift and industry” directly follow the surrender, death, and insanity from the previous sentences. The “garden filled with beautiful flowers,

⁸ Gundover is not a common surname. It stands out in a novel where most characters have conventional/realistic names (Robert Johnson, for example). It is possible that the name is an invention meant as a pun on the phrase “gunned over,” the fate of the family after the arrival of the Union army.

clambering vines, and rustic adornments” grows over the obliterated Gundover past. The extreme fate of the Gundover family is an enactment of the cosmic justice of the Civil War, which “dragged down retribution upon the land” (88). In Harper’s framing, this retribution is both the logical consequence of slavery (which had “so warped the consciences of men”) *and* a necessary condition for the flourishing of a Black collective (72).

That the Gundover family would be brought to justice in the grand scheme of divine retribution makes sense given the popularity of this motif. Moreover, the Gundover family is especially “deserving” of this punishment: Harper depicts the members of the family, particularly the patriarch, as exceptionally cruel to the enslaved. The Gundovers’ behavior contrasts with the more “benevolent” figures, like the mistress Mrs. (Nancy) Johnson, with whom the enslaved have a much more complicated relationship, one that sometimes seems genuinely affectionate. Though Mrs. Johnson does not suffer the same fate as the Gundovers, she is still portrayed as suffering from the rupture of the former plantation family and the transition into a new social order. When Robert meets her for the first time since he escaped from freedom, he observes that she “had aged very fast since the war. She was no longer the lithe, active woman, with her proud manner and resolute bearing. Her eye had lost its brightness, her step its elasticity, and her whole appearance indicated that she was slowly sinking beneath a weight of sorrow which was heavier far than her weight of years” (164).

More than anything, Mrs. Johnson is preoccupied with her misperception of Robert. She had assumed that he and others were content as slaves on the plantation and was shocked when many of them escaped to freedom. “I once thought that you would

have been the last one to leave me. You know I never ill-treated you, and I gave you everything you needed. People said that I was spoiling you. I thought you were as happy as the days were long...Wasn't I always good to you?" In this passage, Mrs. Johnson articulates very clearly what Genovese has called "reciprocal obligation," a framework that the planter class used to obscure the exploitative nature of plantation slavery by reframing the system as one of mutual benefit. In this framework, basically, the slaves provide labor while the planter class in turn provides care, protection, religious instruction, etc. (6). In Mrs. Johnson's view, she treated Robert well, "gave [him] everything [he] needed," even "spoiled" him. She fulfilled her end of the obligation but did not receive Robert's "loyalty" and contentment in return. As both Foner and Genovese describe, former masters and mistresses realizing that the enslaved did not accept this ideology in the same way that they did led to a widespread shock when their slaves escaped to freedom. The shock has been described as a "traumatic" response to this critical misrecognition, which, as Genovese argues, "derived less from the sudden confrontation with the true attitudes of their slaves than from the enforced confrontation with themselves...any change in their perception of the slaves intrinsically meant a change in their perception of themselves" (98).

In many ways, a nostalgia for a restored order of "reciprocal obligation" is what informed turn-of-the-century plantation novels, one of the popular genres to which Harper is responding. Exemplified by writers like Joel Chandler Harris, particularly his 1880 *Uncle Remus*, "plantation fiction emerged in the violent post-Reconstruction era to suggest that slavery had been a more harmonious time" (Mitchell 27). "Iola Leroy was intended as a historical novel that rescued the genre from the romanticization of the

Plantation School writers” (Foster, *Written* 185). Authors in the plantation tradition attempted to evoke a social order of natural hierarchy and harmony that was now tragically obsolete. The “reciprocal obligation” between slave and master was portrayed as a natural and organic relationship, not one constructed in the self-interest of the planter class. *Iola Leroy* is a subversion of this genre and its insistence on a nostalgia for a more harmonious time. The narrative of *Iola Leroy* is a “forcible *no* to the romantic ideal of instinctive loyalty and mutual respect between master and slave” (Robbins xxv). Although Harper portrays complex, affectionate relationships, she reminds readers that the desire for freedom always far exceeded these feelings. In response to Mrs. Johnson’s plaintive question— “Wasn’t I always good to you?”—Robert simply says, "Oh, Miss Nancy...you were good, but freedom was better" (164).

Harper emphasizes that the transition to a life of freedom on the settlement required not only the destruction of the cruel Gundover family but a severance from the more complex attachments to Mrs. Johnson and her family. As Henry argues, the breaking of sentimental bonds is one of the key conditions for a transition into Black citizenship. Viewing *Iola* primarily as a “fictional examination of the historical transition from slavery to black citizenship,” Henry argues that the novel engages with problems of citizenship and “representation,” in particular the tension between private and public selfhood (88). In the first few chapters, Harper experiments with a classical model of citizenship and freedom, in which the condition of freedom is the “liberation from the private realm into the public realm” (103). The enslaved characters are bound most obviously to the private realm of the plantation but are also attached to the private realm of sentiment, which “appears here as another form of bondage” (102). The journey to

freedom necessitates a breaking of these sentimental bonds and a rejection of a relationship with the plantation family. Significantly, then, the “slaves who choose to remain on the plantation, represented most fully in Uncle Daniel and his wife Aunt Katie, [are] thoroughly sentimentalized characters, whose goodness and purity are described in Christian terms, and who seem incapable of deception” (102). The liberation from sentiment and the private realm is articulated most clearly by Robert Johnson as he realizes the Union army will soon come to “offer them deliverance”: “All the ties which bound him to his home were as ropes of sand, now that freedom had come so near” (85). “However, the rest of the novel shifts into a different register, in which the project of freedom and citizenship becomes not breaking sentimental bonds, but re-making them” (Henry 106).

The former slaves make new bonds primarily by renewing maternal relationships, which in *Iola* are extremely important and repeatedly invoked throughout the novel. Nearly every character is described at some point in relation to a maternal figure. Characters’ actions and motivations are explained in reference to their mothers, from Ben, who chooses to remain with his frail mother rather than escape into slavery, to Iola herself, who refuses to marry until she reunites with her mother. “*Iola Leroy* gains specificity as a black woman's perspective...one rooted in maternal and familial dimensions of black experience” (Young 275). “*Iola Leroy* does not merely foreground maternal relationships but prioritizes them among the narrative’s excessive kinship relations” (Fielder 137). Gillman recognizes in this emphasis the mode of the maternal melodrama, which “represents...the reconciliation of the nation through the reunion of dispersed families” (25). Structured by “flashbacks to the slavery past,” *Iola Leroy* and

similar maternal melodramas, “reveal unexpected histories and new collectivities embedded in the aftereffects of slavery” (Gillman 36). The reunions and new collectives are driven and enabled by the “melodramatic will to revelation,” the inevitability of an “occluded past” erupting improbably into the present moment (Gillman 17). Gillman notes that the melodramatic revelation in *Iola* is enacted by “the fragment of a slave song” (17). Iola discovers that one of the men she is caring for is her mother’s brother because she by chance sings “to him that old hymn we used to sing on the plantation,” and the words, ‘I was lost but now I’m found; glory! glory! glory!’ had imprinted themselves on his memory” (193).

The almost mystical narrative device of the slave song is especially significant because, historically, the reunion of families separated by slavery was actually quite rare. In her study of the archive of “Information Wanted” ads, Williams concludes that though the search for family understandably “dominated people’s lives...the sources suggest that reunification took place only rarely” (13).

As Tines Kendricks, a former slave from Georgia told an interviewer, “They was heaps of families that I know what was separated in the time of bondage that tried to find they folks what was gone. But the most of them never get together again even after they set free because they don’t know where one or the other is” (Williams 172).

Though the reunions in *Iola* take place mystically and spontaneously in church meetings, in reality the most dependable method for reunion were “Information Wanted” ads, which were infrequently successful and therefore a risky investment. Although Harper mentions these Information Wanted ads in the novel— “I will advertise for her in the papers” (159)—the method that gets results is the church meetings.

Family reunion is romanticized even further in the novel when lost family members, once they are discovered, are incorporated seamlessly into the new Black collective, without the estrangement that we might expect from the passage of time. In reality (although we must speculate because the archive is not as forthcoming about this issue), those reunited “had to adjust to the new people they found” (Williams 188). “Once the immediate moments of joy passed,” they would need to reconcile with the changes that time had wrought. Parents separated from their children, for example, if they ever reunited, were likely to meet their children as adults and in some cases fail to immediately recognize them. Williams contemplates that, “Far removed from the events, we are left to imagine what their experiences must have been like beyond the shock of recognition, beyond the initial enthrallment, and beyond the moments of ‘the profoundest joy’” (188).

Beyond the reunion of immediate families, *Iola Leroy* invokes broader issues of Black “kin” and “kinlessness.” As scholars like Spillers and Hartman have argued, a fundamental condition of enslaved Black people was the legal inability to establish kin. Kinship undermines the logic of American slavery: “if ‘kinship’ were possible, the property relations would be undermined, since the offspring would then ‘belong’ to a mother and a father” (Spillers 75). “As the legal inheritance of enslavement subsumes or prevents other relationships, kinship itself is imagined to be evacuated by slavery” (Fielder 120). In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass famously describes his (lack of) relationships with his siblings: “We were brothers and sisters, but what of that? Why should they be attached to me, or I to them? Brothers and sisters we were by blood; but slavery had made us strangers. I heard the words brother and sisters, and knew they must

mean something; but slavery had robbed these terms of their true meaning” (39). In the context of kin and kinlessness, Robbins argues that *Iola* “is perhaps best appreciated as a sociological novel that grapples with problems of community, society, and the social contract in post-Reconstruction America” (xxiii). “African Americans had experienced centuries of enforced bondage and limited freedom of association; what voluntary bonds should they now form? Should they give precedence to ties of social class or profession or to bonds of kin?” (xxiii).

Fielder argues that, in *Iola Leroy*, racial identity itself is produced by the answer to this question of voluntary association. In the novel “race is...produced and reproduced not simply through biological genealogies but according to which kinship relations are acknowledged and which are rejected or forgotten”⁹ (137). The ability to acknowledge some kin and reject or forget others is especially important in rejecting the “ersatz” kin enforced by “plantation patriarchy” (137). For example, Harper demonstrates the distinction between acknowledged and rejected kin by “distinguishing emphatically between the figure of the Black mother and that of the Black mammy” (137). The former

⁹ Fielder’s analysis of *Iola Leroy* is a piece of a larger argument that in nineteenth-century America, race was constructed “relationally” and often “follows a queer genealogy” (1). “It is produced not in individual bodies themselves, but, crucially, in the relationships between them—in kinship relations that are not simply direct genealogies of racial inheritance from one generation to the next” (3). Rather than the conventional “downward” inheritance that we typically associate with race at the turn of the century (e.g., a child born to a Black mother is considered Black), Fielder’s “readings of nineteenth-century literature show how race can follow other directions” (3). She gives the example of “Désirée’s Baby”: When Désirée confronts Armand about her child’s resemblance to a “quadroon” boy, he replies, “It means that the child is not white...It means that you are not white” (1). In Armand’s declaration, race travels “backwards,” as it were, and “Armand’s logical shift from characterizing his child’s race to making a statement about Désirée’s illustrates the nonnormative directions in which racial inheritance sometimes flows” (1).

figure is the ethical and ideological core of the novel, the latter a figure of false affection that must be left behind and left outside the limits of the new Black collective. “In this way, the novel exhibits matrilineal Black kinship, rather than plantation patriarchy, as having the ‘social efficacy’ that Hortense Spillers and others have shown is denied under enslavement” (137). In other words, a major ideological project of the book is leaving behind any affection for the white plantation “family” and deliberately choosing kin to (re-)form a new Black family. And in *Iola Leroy*, the process of finding and acknowledging kin is relatively easy.

Iola, in particular, joins the Black collective with ease, despite having spent most of her life as a white plantation mistress. Iola chooses to identify as Black despite all her opportunities to pass and take advantage of the privileges of living as a white woman.¹⁰

¹⁰ Iola’s appearance has been by far the most controversial aspect of the book, and I agree with Mitchell that “the fact the protagonist has blond hair and blue eyes” is “relevant to any responsible reading of the text” (37). The newest version of *Iola Leroy*, the 2018 Broadview Press edition, uses as its cover image a photograph from Du Bois’s *Types of American Negroes* series. The photograph, taken circa 1899, and titled “African American woman...” presents a woman with very light skin and light-colored eyes. The woman, meant to represent Iola Leroy herself, is much closer to Tom’s description of her than the darker-skinned woman on the cover of the Beacon Press edition. Tom says that Iola has “putty blue eyes” and is “jis’ ez white ez anybody’s in dis place” (88). Criticism informed by the Black Arts Movement tends to view white-passing characters as attempts to appeal to white sensibilities, morality, and standards of beauty. Houston Baker’s infamous critique, for example, accuses authors like Harper and Hopkins of “ignoring black southern soundings” and instead “insert[ing] a bright Victorian morality in whiteface.” The “darker masses” in *Iola* are portrayed as unintelligent, the novel’s polemics are an “essentially conservative appeal to white public opinion,” and the novel is a decision to “dream dreams and project visions of a universal white-faced American *noplacé*—a mulatto utopia” (32). McDowell is more nuanced, recognizing the complexity of the trope of white-passing heroines, but still giving an overall negative assessment of turn-of-the-century novels like *Iola*: “color -consciousness was real and pervasive and found subtle, perhaps unconscious, expression in strategies of nineteenth-century black fiction and overt expression in the structures of everyday life that affected those who wrote it” (57).

This decision strikes some contemporary readers as unrealistic, an expression of wishful thinking. It certainly represents Harper's aspirational ethical worldview, a vision of light-skinned Black people who forgo significant privileges so they can dedicate their lives to advancing the good of the race. At the same time, during the time when the second half of *Iola* takes place—the early years of Reconstruction—a light-skinned person who chooses not to pass would have been a recognizable figure. As Hobbs summarizes, the brief period during Reconstruction before Jim Crow fully solidified was a unique period during the 19th-century during which there were “compelling reasons to choose not to pass as white” (74). “This brief period presented an auspicious time, a chance to be a part of a black rebirth” (73). *Iola* is a fictionalized example of a person who “hoped to play a

While we should not disregard the effects of colorism, both conscious and unconscious, the idea that the use of a white-passing character is primarily a strategy to appeal to white sensibilities is reductive, and often prevents a serious engagement with texts from this era. Hazel Carby provides important historical context, critiquing the assumption that light-skinned characters are an “acquiescence to a racist social order” and that authors are primarily attempting to “counter racist images of black people by an appeal to conventions of beauty from dominant white ideologies” (xxi). She argues that this interpretation relies on two questionable assumptions: 1. “that the prime motivation for writing was to counter negative images”; 2. “that social conventions determine the use of literary conventions” (xxi). Carby argues that, rather than a “counter” to negative stereotypes, the “mulatto” figure was a “mediating device” which enabled “two narrative functions”: 1. the “exploration of the social relations between the races, relations that were increasingly proscribed by Jim Crow laws”; and 2. “an expression of the sexual relations between the races, since the mulatto was a product not only of proscribed consensual relations but of white sexual domination” (xxi-xxii). Similarly, Fabi argues that white-passing characters play an important mediating role in African American speculative fiction specifically. As opposed to conventions of white utopian fiction, which typically dislocate the protagonist in time and/or space, the “distinctive literary device that structures” Black utopian texts is “race travel,” the estrangement that occurs when we are dislocated from a white perspective and see the world from the vantage point of the oppressed. *Iola Leroy* is a prime example of a “race traveler”: she grows up believing she is white but is dislocated into slavery and Blackness. Her perspective and identity are radically altered, and “[t]he chorus of visibly black and often dialect-speaking characters comprises the utopian guides who accompany *Iola* the race traveler into the new world of blackness” (Fabi 61).

role in reconstructing a nation where blackness would no longer limit their claims for full personhood and equal citizenship” (73).

Despite Iola’s willful identification as Black, her relationship to slavery, and therefore to Blackness, is still quite complex. Critics tend to describe her narrative in “before and after” terms. Before her father’s death, Iola lived in ignorance, defending the institution of slavery because she had never experienced it. “I had not,” she says, “the least idea of its barbarous selfishness till I was forced to pass through it” (163). But after she is remanded into slavery, she realizes its horrors. And when she is subsequently freed, she vows to devote her life to uplifting her race. In this narrative, her choice to not pass as white, to proudly identify as Black— “The best blood in my veins is African blood, and I am not ashamed of it” (200)—constitutes a definitive break with her past as a white mistress and an embrace of new Black kin. But this before and after narrative does not capture the lingering ties to her past, not only as an enslaved woman but even before that as a plantation mistress. Her ties to the past are best illustrated by her first visit to the new settlement. During the dinner that she has together with Robert, Aunt Linda, Uncle Daniel, and others, Iola experiences “a spirit of restfulness,” and feels that “[t]here was something so motherly in Aunt Linda’s manner that it seemed to recall the bright, sunshiny days when she used to nestle in Mam Liza’s arms, in her own happy home” (176). Iola’s first impression of the possibility of a post-slavery Black collective is described in reference to her life as a plantation mistress before she had any conception of her “African blood.” Her experience of Black kin and maternal affection at this moment is filtered through her memory of “ersatz” plantation kin. Despite her willful identification with the Black community, there is still this unavoidable aspect of her past,

that she spent most of it not as a slave but as an enslaver, benefiting from the care provided by the maternal figure of the Mammy.

Although Harper leaves these complex questions of power, kin, and racial identification unresolved, the trajectory that she imagines for Black community is unambiguous. It consists of a deliberate break from former attachments to white “family” and a restoration of Black kinship—both biological and chosen. In a sense, Iola is simply the most extreme articulation of this break and restoration. Harper posits this movement of rupture and renewal as a central feature of Reconstruction, and she offers readers a space to imagine how that process might manifest in the present day. With the novel’s second utopian site—a deliberative space called a *conversazione*—Harper posits a potential break from the constraints of white paternalism and a reconstruction of Black intellectual and literary identity.

The *Conversazione*

At the end of the novel, in a Chapter titled “Friends of the Council,” the narrative stalls and shifts to a social gathering called a *conversazione*, hosted by Mr. Stillman, whose “object is to gather some of the thinkers and leaders of the race to consult on subjects of vital interest to our welfare” (224). Iola is one of the leaders who form “a select company of earnest men and women deeply interested in the welfare of the race” (226). The other leaders who form the company are, Foreman argues, “transparent references to race leaders” that “acculturated readers would appreciate” (“Reading White Slavery” 90). Jarrett points out that this type of chapter, “a brief yet informative scene of informal political action,” was common in turn-of-the-century African American novels, and that these scenes often illustrate a “collision of political didacticism...and literary

exigency” (84). Specifically, he argues that *Iola Leroy* “stands out for depicting African American elites in racial-uptift activism” (84). Other scholars note the significance of the didactic *conversazione* chapter. For Christmann, the chapter is the book’s “second climax” (after Iola’s reunion with her mother during the church meeting), and it “marks the apex of Iola’s rise from abject slave to race leader and announces the establishment of a vital African-American bourgeois intellectualism” (5). Zamalin argues that this chapter shifts the utopian potential of the novel, which began in the Black settlement, into the “realm of the civic sphere,” a representation of a “privileged nonviolent deliberation about the public good over the necessity of political leadership” (38).

The *conversazione* in the “Friends of the Council” is especially important in comparison with other didactic passages in the novel. It differs in important ways from “Open Questions,” in which characters gather to “discuss the negro problem, as they call it,” with the one-off character Dr. Latrobe (208). The name Latrobe, Ernest argues, would have invoked the prominent Latrobe family in Baltimore, where Harper was born. “In the name Latrobe...Harper finds not only a symbol of the Baltimore society that pressured her family to leave the area after the Compromise of 1850 but also the paradigm of the dominant culture itself” (Ernest 201). The Latrobe character is clearly meant as a representation of Southern white supremacist ideology. He fights against “negro supremacy” and the abandoning of “Caucasian civilization to an inferior race.” He believes that Black people are “ignorant, poor, and clannish” (210) and that “slavery has been of incalculable value to the negro” because it introduced them to “the world’s best religion,” Christianity (212). Latrobe’s most conspicuous characteristic is that he believes he is “clear-sighted enough to detect the presence of negro blood when all physical traces

had disappeared”—in other words, he believes that he can detect a white-passing person (221). But Latrobe “associated with Dr. Latimer for several days, and admired his talent, without suspecting for one moment his racial connection” (221). Realizing his mistake is the last thing Latrobe does before disappearing from the narrative. His sole function is to profess these types of beliefs so that other characters can refute him. As such, his ideology sets the terms of the debate in the “Open Questions” chapter. When Dr. Gresham says, “Ignorance, poverty, and clannishness...are more social than racial conditions, which may be outgrown” (210), he is not challenging Latrobe’s accusation of “clannishness.” When Rev. Carmicle questions why Latrobe would fear “supremacy” from a race that is so far behind in development, he is not questioning assumptions of racial superiority/inferiority that are foundational to Latrobe’s positions (210).

In the “Open Questions” chapter, particularly the dialogue between the white characters Dr. Latrobe and Dr. Gresham, Harper captures and critiques the paternalistic quality of turn-of-the-century debates on the “negro problem.” Voices like Dr. Latrobe assert that there is a problem, the problem of Black people as an entire race, and well-meaning, sympathetic voices like Dr. Gresham respond by affirming the problem and explaining that its cause is a lack of education, development, etc. In the *conversazione* chapter, though, Harper prevents this type of discourse by, quite simply, imagining a space where white voices are absent. “Harper’s critical tactic banishes white Americans from the utopian political activity” of the novel (Berlant 236). Or, as Zamalin puts it, *Iola* “imagine[s] a postracist black politics freed from the fetters of white normative judgments” (39). In other words, the *conversazione* is essentially the discursive version of the Black settlement depicted earlier. Latrobe is obviously not present and, just as

importantly, neither is the sympathetic Gresham. After a second rejection by Iola, Gresham disappears at the end of the novel just like Latrobe. The content of the *conversazione* reflects this absence. The topics of discussion include “Negro Emigration,” “Patriotism,” “Education of Mothers,” and “The Moral Progress of the Race.” The ideas being discussed, even when they are retrograde, demonstrate a constructive rather than a defensive stance. In other words, the *conversazione* represents not a justification of Black existence but a collective vision of a path forward, pointing to what Iola calls the “coruscation of a brighter day” (229).

In fact, what the *conversazione* chapter represents is much more important than its content. For one, the reader is not privy to the content of the papers. The chapter begins with the subject of emigration to Africa. “Bishop Tunster had prepared a paper on ‘Negro Emigration.’ Dr. Latimer opened the discussion by speaking favorably of some of the salient points” (226). But the reader has no way to access Bishop Tunster’s “salient points.” We are only given the responses (all criticisms) to those points. The same goes for all the other papers that the speakers present during the *conversazione*. The only content that the reader has direct access to is “A Rallying Cry,” a revised version of one of Harper’s previously published poems. Because the content of the debates is not fully revealed, the emphasis of the chapter becomes the *form* of the debate. As Zamalin argues, “Much of the concluding dialogue...is articulated through a set of probing questions rather than dogmatic answers, justification and elaboration rather than unquestioned assertion” (38). In a sense, even though this chapter appears didactic on the surface, Harper avoids presenting any firm positions on these topics. What is more important is that the *conversazione* enacts what Harper believes is an important condition for Black

advancement: members of a collective addressing issues outside the gaze or influence of white interlocutors. It “seems less a roadmap for the future of the race than it does an examination of the processes by which such roadmaps are created” (Borgstrom 780). This Black counterpublic, represented by the *conversazione*, is both enabled by the conditions of Reconstruction but also contains the necessary potential for a continually progressing Black community.

Significantly, the *conversazione* chapter directly precedes the famous passage in which Harper advocates the importance of Black authors writing books that come out of their experience. As Iola and Dr. Latimer walk home from the gathering, Iola expresses, “I wish I could do something more for our people than I am doing...now that I am well and strong, I would like to do something of lasting service for the race” (238). Dr. Latimer responds, “Why not...write a good, strong book which would be helpful to them? I think there is an amount of dormant talent among us, and a large field from which to gather materials for such a book” (238). Iola’s response is that she would if she could, “but one needs both leisure and money to make a successful book” (238). Harper is likely expressing this sentiment self-consciously through Iola. Harper published mostly poetry during her career, which she composed in the spare moments between travel and lecture circuits. Harper is also likely feeling a significant pressure to “make a successful book” out of *Iola*. For many readers, *Iola*’s success would reflect not only on Harper’s abilities but the race as a whole. Harper was responsible for “bringing out a work of merit and lasting worth to the race” (Still 61). Iola’s observation that leisure and money are required to write a successful novel could also be read as a broader explanation of the

relative lack of African American literature during this time, a reality that was often cited as evidence of racial inferiority.

Despite Iola's protest, Dr. Latimer insists on the importance of producing literature: "Miss Leroy, out of the race must come its own thinkers and writers. Authors belonging to the white race have written good racial books, for which I am deeply grateful, but it seems to be almost impossible for a white man to put himself completely in our place. No man can feel the iron which enters another man's soul" (238). Dr. Latimer's injunction is one of the most famous passages in the book, as it articulates an emerging ethos for Black literary production at the turn of the century, a politically conscious rallying cry for Black writers to be the foremost voices in representing their experience and debating their most pressing issues. This statement of a literary philosophy is directly aligned with the *conversazione* that has just concluded. The *conversazione* enacted a Black counterpublic collectively addressing the "negro problem," what Harper at the end of the novel pointedly redefines as the "unsolved American problem" (252). This passage is ultimately an expression of the *conversazione's* application to Black literary production.

Together, the *conversazione* and the related declaration that "out of the race must come its own thinkers and writers" represent a viable way out of a limiting relationship with paternalistic white discourse, enacted earlier in the novel by characters like Dr. Gresham. In much the same way that the settlement was enabled by severing ties with the remnants of a previous system of white domination, Harper demonstrates that this second site of utopian potential is enabled by a severance from white domination of a different kind. Harper renders the present moment as a historical juncture, much like the Civil War

and the beginning of Reconstruction, at which a rupture from old systems is both possible and necessary. This section of the novel offers a space to imagine what a self-determined Black discourse and literary tradition might look like, a collective of writers and intellectuals setting the terms of debate for their own issues, not reacting to the restrictive conditions that white discourse has placed on the “negro problem.” In a way, *Iola Leroy* itself enacts this transition from a reactive to a constructive stance. The novel begins as a response to popular white genres (plantation novels, Civil War novels, “tragic mulatta” narratives). But the second half of the novel mostly leaves these genres behind, choosing instead to focus on a more innovative form that emphasizes former slaves’ collective attempts to thrive with a newly acquired freedom.

Ambivalent Results

The *conversazione*’s banishing of white voices is an essential feature of its success. But there are other notable absences from the *conversazione* that are more troubling. Borgstrom and Christmann both notice the perplexing absence of Robert, who up until the final chapters has been a central, mediating figure between characters from different classes. Robert’s absence is difficult to explain. But the absence of the Black underclass, in the context of what the *conversazione* represents, is much easier to explain. It goes without saying that characters like Aunt Linda, not conventionally educated or literate, do not participate among the “thinkers and leaders of the race” who have written papers to share at the *conversazione* (224). Put simply, there are no characters who speak in dialect at the *conversazione*. This becomes even more significant when we consider that there are scenes earlier in the novel that depict didactic conversations between dialect- and standard-English-speaking characters. For example, Aunt Linda and Robert

discuss temperance. Aunt Linda expresses her frustration that some people buy and drink liquor before work: "You jis' go down town 'fore sun up to-morrer mornin' an' you see ef dey don't hab dem bars open to sell dere drams to dem hard workin' culled people 'fore dey goes ter work. I thinks some n——s is mighty big fools" (170). Robert responds, "Oh, Aunt Linda, don't run down your race. Leave that for the white people" (170). This is one piece of a larger exchange that, admittedly, makes Aunt Linda appear somewhat foolish. But she is at least a part of a conversation on the progress and welfare of former slaves like herself, and the exchange is a genuine attempt by Harper to legitimize the perspective of someone like Aunt Linda. The *conversazione*, on the other hand, excludes the perspective of dialect-speaking characters altogether in what some scholars have described as an "ideological displacement of folk culture" (Borgstrom 786).

This exclusion or displacement is the crux of the ambivalent results of Harper's speculative project.¹¹ In imagining a deliberative space outside of the constraints of white discourse, Harper has also imagined a space that excludes the Black underclass from the deliberative process. In imagining a rupture from white paternalism, Harper has also

¹¹ Other scholars have commented on this exclusion as well. Borgstrom argues that the entire novel expresses Harper's own ambivalence about the transition into citizenship and what that transition leaves behind. "Social advancement, the text implies, does not necessarily entail inclusion, and those who were crucial to black society prior to Emancipation may get left behind in the name of progress" (789). Castronovo similarly argues that the *conversazione*'s "reconstruction of citizenship" involves a "paradox of inclusion," which "invites relapses of hierarchy and exclusion. The black bourgeois counterpublic is, at times, as falsely democratic as formal state citizenship itself" (239) "[M]embership hinges on an ethic of inclusiveness that sets up standards of acceptability as conditions for inclusion in the first place. The counterpublic sphere in Iola Leroy includes a variety of blacks...who nonetheless scrupulously adhere to Victorian protocols of primness and respectability" (239).

effectively reinforced a division between an “elite” class and underclass of Black people.¹²

To be clear, it would be unfair to say that Harper was not on some level sympathetic to the conditions of uneducated and illiterate former slaves. Although her perspective was, of course, limited by her own class position, “there is no doubt that her commitment to representing black people with dignity included her portrayal of dialect-speakers” (Mitchell 40). This commitment was also no doubt augmented by Harper’s traveling, speaking, and writing in the South during early Reconstruction, all of which culminated in her 1872 pamphlet of poetry *Sketches of Southern Life*, the themes of which are reflected in *Iola Leroy*. Mitchell notes that “interacting with the recently emancipated likely gave her confidence about creating African American characters that had endured slavery, despite having always been free herself” (19). *Sketches*, like *Iola*, emphasizes separation and reunion, and the character Aunt Chloe, the speaker for most of the poems, is a clear precursor to the Aunt Linda character in *Iola*. Harper’s experience interacting with Black Southern folk during Reconstruction became her poetry collection, which in turn inspired *Iola*.

This commitment to legitimizing the perspective of dialogue-speaking characters like Aunt Linda comes through clearly in the didactic dialogue passages like the one quoted above. But something fundamental shifts when the novel transitions into the more

¹² Historically, this division manifested inescapably along “color” lines. Hobbs explains the conflicts between dark- and light-skinned Black people during Reconstruction: “[I]ntense infighting occurred between mulattoes and blacks who were divided by their goals and by their ideas about who should lead the race” (81-82). “Wealthy and well-educated blacks saw a chasm of social distance between themselves and their darker and unenlightened brothers, and hoped to maintain it” (82).

formal deliberative space of the *conversazione*. Part of the explanation for this shift can be found in an overlooked but crucial passage of the novel, in which the idea of Black people as a “young race” is introduced. After learning about the planned *conversazione*, Iola expresses her approval that it is a serious, intellectual event, not a frivolous entertainment like “a hop or a german” (224). She expresses a sentiment that is consistent in the rest of the novel, that “the times are too serious for us to attempt to make our lives a long holiday” (224). Robert pushes back, telling Iola that she “shouldn't be too exacting” (225). Marie agrees, seeing entertainment’s value and potential for uplift: “human beings naturally crave enjoyment, and if not furnished with good amusements they are apt to gravitate to low pleasures” (225). But what seems like a straightforward didactic exchange becomes more complex when Robert says:

“Some one...has said that the Indian belongs to an old race and looks gloomily back to the past, and that the negro belongs to a young race and looks hopefully towards the future.”

“If that be so,” replied Marie, “our race-life corresponds more to the follies of youth than the faults of maturer years.”¹³ (225)

¹³ The comparison of the “Indian” and the “negro” is even more significant in the context of turn-of-the-century American Indian “boarding schools” and their devastating effects on Indian memory and collective identity. As Cantiello argues, *Iola* “must be studied in the context of the Indian Question” (575). “When Harper writes emphatically about African American education or the future of the race, she is implicitly responding to the situation of Native Americans, a hidden discourse that comes out at the breaks in the text when Indians are mentioned by name” (575). Federal policy toward American Indians at the time “was explicit about its intentions to eradicate indigenous cultures through compulsory schooling,” and Harper uses her novel “to advocate for a different system for African Americans, one predicated on access and community control” (579). “For Harper, the extinction and miseducation of the Indian provides a hypothetical and terrifying counterexample to the survival and uplift of the African American,” and part of *Iola*’s project, Cantiello argues, is to imagine an alternative to that outcome of “miseducation” (588). Cantiello offers an ultimately negative assessment of Harper’s racial comparison, arguing that, although Harper attempts to undermine “social Darwinism, biological determinism, and scientific racism” at many moments in the novel, she subscribes to these ideologies when referencing American Indians, “crafting an ethnic hierarchy that promotes a different educational agenda for her race” (580; 575).

What Robert and Marie are trying to communicate is that the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment instead of duty or obligation is a “folly of youth,” so it follows that a “young race” would be susceptible to it. The racial comparison ends the exchange, suggesting that it is convincing in some way, or at least difficult for Iola to refute. Robert’s introductory phrase “Some one...has said” lends the idea a sense of folk wisdom or common sense, suggesting that it was a recognizable metaphor at the time.

The chapter moves on, and this idea is never reintroduced. It is a brief moment but provides important insight into some of the assumptions informing the project of racial uplift, education, and development. Most obviously, the idea of Black people as a young race (as opposed to an old race like the “Indian”) only makes sense within an evolutionary framework where different racial groups are presumed to be at different “stages” of development. This was, of course, a dominant idea in the social sciences of the time. But even within that framework, why would Black people be presumed to be young, and American Indians old? If we take for granted that dominant theories of

The accusation that Harper creates an “ethnic hierarchy” is slightly overstated, considering the limited references to Indians in the text and the lack of any reference to other racial groups in the U.S. (Asian immigrants, for example). Additionally, as with other turn-of-the-century texts that emphasize Black deliberation and debate, we cannot assume that character statements reflect positions or ideas that Harper endorsed. Regardless of Harper’s belief or not in a “hierarchy,” though, it is fair to say that the context of the “Indian Question” and the consequences of state-sponsored boarding schools would have been important for Harper’s thinking as she continued to envision possibilities for Black uplift and education. Overall, this context is a useful reminder that the complex relationships Black authors had with dominant civilizationist and evolutionary theories of race could never be as simple as the binary comparison of Black vs. white, “savagery” vs. “civilization.” The relational construction of race and racial traits had additional dimensions, as it still does.

evolutionary racial development assigned qualities of savagery and primitivism to African and Indian people alike, why would Robert's piece of racial folk wisdom place them on opposite sides of a spectrum? We might see this moment as a refutation of dominant evolutionary ideas, but this is not completely satisfying because the novel consistently references ideas of African primitivity. In one striking example, Dr. Gresham implicitly blames the depravity of Southern slave-holding culture on the "barbarity" of African people: "The negro came here from the heathenism of Africa; but the young colonies could not take into their early civilization a stream of barbaric blood" (206).

For Robert's racial analogy to make sense in this context, for the "Negro" as a race to be imagined as "young," there would need to be a recent beginning or "birth" for the race. In *Iola Leroy*, this beginning point is the Civil War and Emancipation.¹⁴ Not only do these events present a new set of conditions for the development of a group of people, but they also produce a new race. In many ways, this idea anticipates the concept of the "New Negro," first articulated in 1895: a self-fashioned identity that emphasized outspoken advocacy and resistance against the racial status quo. (Harper anticipates especially Sutton Griggs' explicit use of the trope in his speculative project.) But Robert's analogy takes the idea beyond a constructed group identity and pairs it with dominant ideas of racial development. Schuller points out that this was a common tactic.

¹⁴ A different "racial" beginning or birth that is often invoked, one that contradicts Harper's, is the rupture of the Middle Passage and slavery itself. Toni Morrison articulates how what we call "modernity" or modern life arguably began with slavery: "It's not simply that human life originated in Africa in anthropological terms, but that modern life begins with slavery...From a woman's point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with 'post-modern' problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago. Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability" (178).

“Like other black intellectuals of the era, Harper emphasized the youthfulness of the African American race to stress their ongoing plasticity” (72). In the same year that *Iola* was published, Anna J. Cooper writes in *A Voice from the South* that

the race is young and full of the elasticity and hopefulness of youth. All its achievements are before it. It does not look on the masterly triumphs of nineteenth century civilization with that blasé world-weary look which characterizes the old washed out and worn out races which have already, so to speak, seen their best days (qtd. in Schuller 72).

In essence, the idea of the “negro” as a “new” race (an idea that would soon be articulated in the idea of the “New Negro”) necessitates a break or rupture from a racial past, or an “old Negro.” Harper, intentionally or not, at the same time she posits the historical process as one of rupture and renewal, applies that same logic to racial development, as did many other turn-of-the-century Black intellectuals. The *conversazione* is in many ways simply an enactment of this logic, in which the “new” race leaders point the way forward while the “old” are left behind. Whether Harper portrays the *conversazione* as an endorsement or critique of this logic, it seems clear in hindsight that the process of rupture and renewal has ambivalent results.

Conclusion

In a 1955 interview, Ralph Ellison states:

Too many books by Negro writers are addressed to a white audience. By doing this the authors run the risk of limiting themselves to the audience’s presumption of what a Negro is or should be; the tendency is to become involved in polemics, to plead the Negro’s humanity. You know, many white people question that humanity, but I don’t think the Negroes can afford to indulge in such a false issue. For us the question should be, What are the specific forms of that humanity, and what in our background is worth preserving or abandoning? (qtd. in Parrish 117)

In essence, Ellison is articulating, more than a half-century later, the same problem that Harper confronts in *Iola Leroy*: the limitations of a discourse on Black identity informed by white “presumptions.” In Harper’s context, the epitome of this type of discourse is the so-called “Negro problem,” and she demonstrates, through characters like the actively antagonistic Dr. Latrobe and the well-meaning but paternalistic Dr. Gresham, that discussion within the limiting framing of a “problem” can only ever be reactive, never constructive. While Harper herself does not quite manage to escape the trap of appealing to a white audience, she does offer a crucial and explicit critique and, more importantly, offers an imaginative solution in the form the *conversazione*, a discursive version of the all-Black settlement.

In a speech that Harper delivered at the annual meeting of an organization named in her honor, the Frances Harper Club of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, she presents herself self-consciously as the old guard of African American leadership: “You belong to the living present...I to the dead past, a past we should remember, not with thoughts of revenge, but with thankfulness for deliverance and the dawn of a better day” (qtd. in Mitchell 23). In many ways, Harper established a precedent for imagining Black utopia at the turn of the century, one that subsequent authors would extend and adapt, following her injunction that “out of the race must come its own thinkers and writers.” In *Imperium in Imperio*, the subject of the next chapter, Sutton E. Griggs experiments, like Harper, with the potential of an “apocalyptic” imagination, but in a much different tone, focusing

not on past historical rupture, but on an inevitable catastrophic race war that will materialize if conditions for Black Americans do not improve.

CHAPTER 3

GRIGGS'S *IMPERIUM IN IMPERIO* AS ALTERNATE HISTORY

In August 2019, *The New York Times Magazine* began its influential, controversial “1619 Project,” an “ongoing initiative” “to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative” (“The 1619 Project”). The start date was intentional, the “400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery,” the year that enslaved Africans were first delivered to the English colony of Virginia. The project’s thesis is that “No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the years of slavery that followed.” In the last few years, the 1619 Project has expanded to include audio books, children’s books, events, and other resources, all designed to correct a widespread “miseducation” about our national narrative. The project’s main online site is sleek, image-heavy, and interactive. It offers, between occasional targeted ads, provocative taglines for the project’s collection of essays. “What does a traffic jam in Atlanta have to do with segregation? Quite a lot.” “Why doesn’t the United States have universal health care? The answer begins with policies enacted after the Civil War.” The taglines all affirm, in varied and sometimes unexpected ways, slavery’s centrality to America’s founding, history, and identity.

Directly opposed to the 1619 Project is the 1776 Project, a political action committee that evolved from Trump’s 1776 Commission and its 41-page report. The PAC’s explicit goals are “overturning critical race theory and the 1619 project” and “promoting patriotism and pride in American history.” Rather than a paywall, I get a pop-up with fillable text boxes demanding that I “Report a School Promoting Critical Race

Theory.” Matching the paranoia and bad faith of this pop-up is the PAC’s description of the “growing crisis” of Critical Race Theory, “a radical belief that pushes the idea that America is an inherently racist country and white Americans are stained with the original sin of racism for which they can never be cleansed.”¹⁵ The 1776 Project vows to support any curriculum or school board candidate that “promotes a patriotic vision of America and its history.” The ideology of the 1776 Project and its allies has had serious material consequences. Several states have enacted legislation that restricts the teaching of “critical race theory” in public schools—others seem poised to follow. The legislative victories of the 1619 Project are, as of now, far fewer.

Despite their antithetical positions and the serious stakes for the future of American education that they underwrite, the two projects share at least one belief, which is: the story that we tell about our founding moment informs our present and future as a nation. More specifically, the historical moment that we identify as the beginning of our history—our “origin story,” as the 1619 project anthology renders it—becomes the foundation for our national identity. This assumption, of course, extends far beyond these two projects. I learned in elementary school that 1776 was an important date, but I also memorized the refrain “In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue,” which emphasizes the

¹⁵ If daytime talk shows are any metric, the respective rhetorics of these two projects have set the terms of debate in mainstream discourse. A September 2021 episode of *Tamron Hall* titled “The Heated Schools Halls: Critical Race Theory” invited students, parents, educators, and activists to debate the issue. The main theme for proponents was that the history of racism and slavery has been ignored and whitewashed for too long, and it was time to rethink and reframe the way Americans are taught about race. For opponents, the overriding narrative was that parents did not want their children feeling “guilty” for a “sin” that they did not commit. (A close second was fear from both teachers and students that they would be fired or reprimanded if something “came out wrong” while talking about race.)

initial “discovery” of the continent. Although I always have to look up what year the *Mayflower* landed, my education instilled in me that this moment was the beginning of religious liberty. Some conservative literary histories identify Puritan texts as the beginning of the American canon. In *Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper, an early national mythmaker, attempts to conjure as a founding moment the 1757 “massacre” of the British by the French and their indigenous allies at Fort William Henry. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Civil War, especially in the decades immediately after, was characterized as a beginning of sorts, a catastrophic but “cleansing” tragedy that constituted a national rebirth.

The 1619 project, although it feels somewhat subversive and new in the face of the “patriotic” education that has long been the norm in many parts of the country, is in fact the most recent iteration of an enduring tradition. In African American literature especially, the historical moment when colonists introduced slavery to the English colonies has often been invoked as America’s disgraceful “origin story.” William Wells Brown, for example, begins his Preface of *Clotel* by invoking the moment: “More than two hundred years have elapsed since the first cargo of slaves was landed on the banks of the James river” (46). Later in the novel, Brown imagines that two ships arrived to the “New World” on the exact same day in 1620: one, the *Mayflower*, which “had the embryo elements of all that is useful, great, and grand in Northern institutions”; the second, the first cargo of slaves, “freighted with the elements of unmixed evil” (180).

“These ships are the representation of good and evil in the New World, even to our day. When shall one of those parallel lines come to an end?” (181).¹⁶

Almost 50 years after Brown, Sutton E. Griggs, the subject of this chapter, also dealt with the problem of historical origin in his first novel *Imperium in Imperio*. At the turn of the century, a moment when U.S. imperial adventures in Cuba and the Philippines fomented patriotism on a mass scale, Griggs was writing with and against a discourse of “patriotic” history not dissimilar to our own moment, one in which African Americans occupied a particularly fraught position. On one hand, patriotism in a time of war had always been for some African Americans an alluring opportunity to demonstrate “manhood” and a claim to equality and citizenship. On the other, there was an increasing awareness that the promise of dignity through patriotism had been repeatedly used as a bait and switch, and that African Americans owed no allegiance or affection to a nation that would not protect them. In *Imperium in Imperio*, Griggs expresses this conflict—along with several other fundamental fault lines in Black political discourse—with the co-protagonists Belton and Bernard. Put simply, Belton is a “patriot,” loyal most of all to

¹⁶ The introduction to the 2011 Bedford Cultural Edition argues that by “[e]ncouraging its readers to develop a skeptical relationship to glorified stories of the national past, *Clotel* can be regarded as what Lee Quinby terms a ‘genealogical fiction,’ a text that ‘breaks the hold of official truth and the metaphysics of memory, putting in their place the truth of countermemory” (14). Just as the narrative of Sally Hemings acts as a “countermemory” to an official history that idolizes Jefferson, the insertion of the slave ship “parallel” to the arrival of the *Mayflower* acts as a countermemory to the official narrative of the New World as a place of freedom. In a way, *Clotel* is experimenting with a certain type of “counterfactual.” In addition to being the first African American novel and a “stunning example of literary pastiche” (“Introduction” 7), *Clotel* is also arguably the first sustained use of a speculative mode by an African American author.

his country, while Bernard is loyal to his race, willing to commit treason against the U.S. to ensure their unalienable rights.

Through Bernard, the much more militant co-protagonist, Griggs invokes an American origin story similar to Brown's, which begins with slavery:

When in 1619 our forefathers landed on the American shore, the music of welcome with which they were greeted, was the clanking of iron chains ready to fetter them; the crack of the whip to be used to plow furrows in their backs; and the yelp of the bloodhound who was to bury his fangs deep into their flesh, in case they sought for liberty (141).

Bernard, reflecting his loyalty to his race and their "forefathers," frames their shared history as nearly 300 years of brutal "treatment at the hands of the Anglo-Saxon race," and claims that this history is "traceable to the treatment which we now receive from the Anglo-Saxons" (141).

But the origin story that Griggs is most interested in examining is a much more conventionally "patriotic" one. In contrast to Brown's speculative countermemory, which desacralizes the mythology of the American Revolution and the Founding Fathers, the Imperium in many ways glorifies it. The speculative crux of the novel is the fictional "Imperium in Imperio," an organization of more than seven million Black men, operating secretly in Waco, Texas, that was founded at the same time as the United States and according to the same principles, especially the "teachings of Thomas Jefferson" (130). The Imperium was founded by Benjamin Banneker, a Revolutionary era Black polymath notable for his proximity to Jefferson. It continues into the present day and its current members seem to have a universal fondness for the Founding Fathers and the Revolutionary era. We witness the Imperium "meet[ing] and act[ing] upon the whole question of the relationship of the negro race to the Anglo-Saxons" (138), which is

essentially a debate about whether the Imperium will remain as part of the United States or form a separate state in Texas. The arguments presented for separating self-consciously echo the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence, including a reference to “self-evident truths” and a long list of grievances against the United States government. Griggs’s Imperium is an organization that is overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, indebted to the ideology, rhetoric, and mythology of the American Revolution.

In essence, *Imperium in Imperio* is an experiment in imagining a “New Negro” who claims for himself the same heritage as “Anglo-Saxon” men always have: a “love of liberty” (163) and, significantly, a willingness to die for it. In a speech to the Imperium, Belton suggests that they attempt to convince white Americans “that we are now thoroughly wedded to the doctrine of Patrick Henry: ‘Give me liberty or give me death.’ Let us teach the Anglo-Saxon that we have arrived at the stage of development as a people, where we prefer to die in honor rather than live in disgrace” (163). The American Revolution is a model for their own freedom struggle, a historic milestone that, given enough progress or “development,” African Americans can attain, just as the Anglo-Saxons did.

What Griggs creates in his first novel with the Imperium is not primarily a utopia, but an *alternate history*. The history begins when Banneker founds the Imperium in the Revolutionary era and terminates at the end of the novel when the Imperium is betrayed by one of its members, narrowly avoiding an “internecine war” (175). What is crucial about Griggs’s version of alternate history is that it does not posit any radically different historical narrative. In fact, it does the opposite. It presents a narrative that closely

resembles an already familiar American history: subjects whose government has failed to represent and protect them, whose peaceful appeals have failed, and who feel they have no recourse left but to separate, violently if necessary. The alternate history of the *Imperium* functions to literalize and amplify Black Americans' already existing proximity to the history and ideals of the American Revolution and offers a space to imagine the logical conclusion for an oppressed group of people who are asked to demonstrate loyalty and patriotism toward a country that subjugates them. And the logical conclusion, according to the novel, is that under current conditions, a peaceful resolution is impossible. A catastrophic race war, though it is ultimately forestalled at the end, is the inevitable outcome under these conditions. The alternate history enables an apocalyptic warning to a white audience that they have a "New Negro" on their hands, one who is willing to "die in honor rather than live in disgrace" (163).

Sutton E. Griggs and *Imperium in Imperio*

Sutton E. Griggs (1872-1933) was more well-known during his time as an activist and preacher than as a novelist. His fiction career was productive but short, and he never quite managed to make a living from it. Disappointed with the overall lackluster reception of his novels, in 1908 he turned completely, and somewhat cynically, away from the form and into a prolific nonfiction career. From 1902-1932 Griggs produced dozens of political pamphlets and book-length tracts, with a pronounced emphasis on addressing the "Race Question" ("Publications"). Gruesser, in his "literary" biography of Griggs, presents him as a misunderstood figure, both in his own time and in ours. Gruesser demonstrates the wide range of sometimes directly contradictory qualities that critics have attributed to Griggs:

Robert Bone sees him as an accommodationist; Hugh M. Gloster, David M. Tucker, and Lester C. Lamon deem him a militant; Larry Frazier terms him a radical black Baptist; Rayford Logan calls him a black chauvinist; for Paul Harvey he is a “separatist”; and Addison Gayle, Wilson J. Moses, and Susan Gilman use the phrase black nationalist to characterize him. Meanwhile, Arnold Rampersad regards him as a melodramatic sentimentalist; Stephen Knadler refers to him as a sensationalist; and M. Giulia Fabi, Molly Crumpton Winter, Steven G. Kellerman, and Kali Tali classify him as a utopian or near-futurist (16).

Griggs is especially difficult to pin down because the politics of his fiction vs. his later nonfiction seem to differ dramatically. The most common view of his political trajectory is that *Imperium* [1899], his first novel, presents a militant, separatist vision at odds with the conservatism of his later nonfiction pieces. (An analogous example is Martin Delany, a precursor of Black nationalist speculative fiction, who is a clear influence on Griggs. *Blake*, an earlier work, presents a radical vision seemingly opposed to the more reactionary positions that Delany held later in his life.) Coleman, for his part, disagrees with this interpretation, identifying a thread of “pragmatic conservatism” in all of Griggs’s work, including *Imperium*.

Scholars have written about *Imperium in Imperio* far more often than his other novels (a pattern that this chapter continues, for better or worse). Part of the reason for this lopsided attention is that some scholars perceive the novel as a “first” in multiple respects. Several critics have designated *Imperium* as the first Utopian novel written by an African American.¹⁷ Critic Hugh Gloster dubiously called it “the first American Negro novel with a strictly political emphasis,” a designation that still stubbornly clings (qtd. In

¹⁷ Sargent’s bibliography of Utopian literature counters that *Imperium* is the first only “within a narrow definition of utopia.” Currently, it is more common to consider Delany’s *Blake* as the first.

Gruesser 57). Cornel West, for example, introduces the Modern Library edition as “the first major political novel written by an African American...the first literary portrait of a black revolutionary movement in violent revolt against white supremacist America” (xvi). *Imperium in Imperio* is probably not Griggs’s most ambitious or most developed novel, but it still stands as an important contribution to the Black speculative canon, and despite scholars’ disproportionate attention, we still have not fully appreciated or precisely articulated the unique qualities of Griggs’s speculative imagination.

With this in mind, my summary of the novel downplays some elements in the novel and emphasizes the speculative plot —what I call the “alternate history.” The novel begins with the author Sutton E. Griggs “vouching” for the “truthfulness” of the fictional Berl Trout, the source of the “papers” that make up *Imperium in Imperio* (3). The deceased Trout was the Secretary of State for the Imperium in Imperio (an organization that the reader will not fully understand until the end of the novel) and a friend of Griggs. “Berl Trout’s Dying Declaration” frames the narrative. In the declaration, Trout admits that he is a traitor, but also enigmatically deems himself a “patriot”: “I have betrayed the immediate plans of the race to which I belong; but I have done this in the interest of the whole human family—of which my race is but a part” (6).

Trout’s narrative follows the life events and development of two central characters, Belton and Bernard, who meet as children in a Southern public school in 1867. Both excel at their studies, especially in Rhetoric and the history of the American Revolution. They are both noted for their talent, but the teacher gives the light-skinned Bernard preferential treatment over the dark-skinned Belton. Both develop reputations as skilled orators. They part ways after public school, each attending a university according

to their means. Bernard's wealthy mother sends him to Harvard. A white, liberal newspaper owner, Mr. King, pays for Belton's expenses, under the condition that he never will never regard the entire Anglo-Saxon race as "totally depraved" and that he will always "appeal" to the better side of their nature (37). Belton attends Stowe University, which is most likely a fictionalized version of Fisk University.

The middle section of the novel mostly follows Belton. In addition to graduating valedictorian at Stowe University, Belton notably organizes a secret "combination" of his fellow students who, by staging a demonstration, achieve their demand that a Black faculty member be allowed to use the same facilities as his white colleagues. After college, he struggles to integrate into a racist, segregated society. He secures a teaching position but is fired for publishing a critique of Southern voter disenfranchisement. He finds himself in a "predicament" of labor: Prejudice keeps him out of the professions for which his education prepared him, he is unable to perform skilled labor, and he is unwilling to do menial tasks because he would be "looked upon as an eternal disgrace to the race" (90). In his predicament, he decides to travel and discover "what view the white people were taking of the Negro and of the existing conditions" (90). (He finds that white people are "utterly ignorant of the nature of the Negro of to-day" (92)). This journey leads to a series of escalating incidents, culminating with Belton killing a prominent white doctor in self-defense. A prejudiced jury convicts Belton of murder, but with the help of Bernard and his political connections, he appeals his case and is acquitted.

Before the shift at the end of the novel into the speculative mode, Belton and Bernard both come to a crisis with their respective partners, Miss Nermal and Viola. Both crises are centered around amalgamation anxieties. At a certain point during his

unemployment and traveling, Belton returns home for the birth of his son. “The color of Antoinette was brown. The color of Belton was dark. But the child was white!” (94) Assuming infidelity, he leaves Miss Nermal and returns to his mother’s home, blaming the situation not on Miss Nermal, but on a country that had blocked him from economic opportunity and left him unable to “properly support” his wife (94). (Belton eventually discovers—too late—that the child is his.)

Later in the novel, Bernard proposes to Viola. But, although Viola loves him, she chooses to die by suicide rather than marry him. Her reasoning comes from a book she has read, *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination*. She explains in her suicide letter that, if she were to have children with the light-skinned Bernard, she would be sapping the “vitality” of their race and leading them to “extinction” (118). Viola asks Bernard to promise that he will dedicate his life to keeping the races separate, to which he agrees.

After Viola’s suicide, the book shifts into its speculative mode. Bernard receives a telegram from Belton, urging him to come to Waco, TX or else “make the mistake of [his] life” (121). When Bernard arrives, Belton leads him to believe that he has discovered a “foul conspiracy...being hatched by our people” to take up arms against the United States, and that he wants Bernard’s help exposing them (123). Bernard refuses to be a traitor to his race and is willing to die rather than help expose them. Belton gives him multiple opportunities to recant, but Bernard stands firm in the face of a firing squad. This is actually Belton’s test of Bernard’s loyalty, so rather than being shot he is dropped through a trapdoor, where an “assemblage” of men cheers his arrival (127).

In a chapter titled “Unwritten History,” Bernard learns that he has entered the secret Imperium in Imperio, “Another government, complete in every detail, exercising

the sovereign right of life and death over its subjects” (129). The Imperium traces its history to a “negro scientist” from the “early days of the American Republic,” most likely a reference to Benjamin Banneker (130). The Imperium evolved from a collective of Black “secret societies” and eventually into a “New Government” that settles all “differences between the race” (130). The Imperium has a single branch of Congress that “passes laws relating to the general welfare of our people” and debates any relevant bills that are introduced in the United States’ Congress (132-133). The founding scientist’s wealth has been wisely invested, leaving the organization with \$850 million and a membership of more than 7 million African Americans (133). The Imperium’s constitution states that their first President—their “George Washington”—must be a man “unanimously desired” and elected (134). The Imperium has chosen Bernard for the position, which he eventually accepts. Bernard’s leadership heals “all factional differences” in the Imperium (136).

After Bernard’s election, the Imperium faces two concurrent crises. The first is the “insurrection” in Cuba, which they watch with “keenest interest, as the Cubans were in a large measure negroes” (137). The second is the lynching of the Black postmaster Felix A. Cook and his family, an obvious reference to the lynching of the South Carolina postmaster Frazier Baker. “This incident naturally aroused as much indignation among the members of the Imperium as did the destruction of the war ship in the bosoms of the Anglo-Saxons of the United States” (138). Bernard considers this “the most opportune moment...to meet and act upon the whole question of the relationship of the negro race to the Anglo-Saxons” (138). The Imperium convenes, and President Bernard gives a powerful opening speech. Lasting about 10 pages in the novel, Bernard details their

grievances against Anglo-Saxons, implying at the end of his speech that the only way to secure freedom from the Anglo-Saxons is to take up arms against them and form a separate state in Texas. A brief discussion follows where various solutions to the question are presented, including amalgamation and emigration. But it is clear that the Imperium's sentiment is for "War! war! war!" (152). The Imperium resolves that they "at once proceed to war for the purpose of" "wreaking vengeance" and "obtaining all our rights" (152). The resolution nearly goes to a vote, but Belton intervenes with "one of the most remarkable feats of oratory known to history" (153).

Belton begins with "a word to say in defence of the south" and, in an uncharacteristically deferential speech, defends slavery and white supremacy. He responds to every one of Bernard's points, his main themes being: we should judge Anglo-Saxons "according to the age in which they lived"; we were not paid in "coin" during slavery, but we received the English language, civilization, and Christianity; we weren't ready for freedom in the first place, and even still many of us don't fully understand or appreciate our freedoms and responsibilities as citizens. Belton counters Bernard's resolution, proposing instead to reveal the existence of the Imperium and appeal for their rights, demonstrating to the Anglo-Saxons that they have a "New Negro on their hands" who is willing to die for liberty (163). Only if this peaceful solution fails will they take up arms and defend themselves and their territory in Texas. Belton's speech "calms" the storm of the threat of violence, and his propositions are "adopted in their entirety without one dissenting voice" (165).

However, Bernard conceives in private a more militant plan to infiltrate the United States' military and secede from the country via sabotage. He shows this plan to

Belton, who refuses because he is unwilling to commit treason. In a process that is not entirely clear, Bernard's treasonous resolution wins out against Belton's because of a "secret, formidable combination" (169). Belton—"being no longer able to follow where the Imperium leads"—resigns, the penalty of which is execution (169). Most members of the Imperium respect Belton enough that they hope he will simply escape rather than submit to execution, but Belton is "obdurate" (170). He returns home for one last visit to his family, discovering that he is the father of Miss Nermal's child after all. Belton returns to the Imperium, and, unwilling to see his love for his race and his love for his "flag" "engage in mortal combat," he submits to execution, an American flag "draped around his shoulders" (173). With Belton dies the "spirit of conservatism in the Negro race" (175).

The novel concludes with a brief "Personal" message from Berl Trout, in which he explains his justification for betraying the Imperium: "With Belton gone and [Bernard] at our head, our well-organized, thoroughly equipped Imperium was a serious menace to the peace of the world. A chance spark might at any time...spread destruction, devastation and death all around...I was determined to remove the possibility of such a catastrophe" (176). Trout ends with a plea that "all mankind will join hands and help my poor down-trodden people to secure those rights for which they organized the Imperium, which my betrayal has now destroyed" (177). He warns that "liberty is such an inventive genius, that if you destroy one device it at once constructs another more powerful" (177). *Imperium* ends with the rhetorical question, "When will all races and classes of men learn that men made in the image of God will not be the slaves of another image?" (177).

The reviews of *Imperium in Imperio* (which are much more accessible since the publication of Gruesser's recent literary biography) shed a great deal of light on its publication and reception history. Although Griggs "had difficulty selling copies of his first book at least in part because of the firm that published it," the book actually received "substantial reviews" from both Black and white publications (Gruesser 66). The influential *Colored American* magazine promoted its next issue by teasing a "review of a new book that threatens to startle the literary and political world" (qtd. in Gruesser 63). The positive review was written by the prominent John Wesley Cromwell, who concludes that "on the whole it is a work that deserves to be read for its very broad and comprehensive treatment of the burning question of the relations between the races and its deep philosophical insight" (qtd. in Gruesser 64).

Reviews published in white publications were more mixed. The New York *Sun* published a review that was positive but bemused: "Whether his purpose be to extol or to decry the negro race in his negro romance or tract... there can be no doubt that Mr. Sutton E. Griggs values rhetoric and oratory highly" (qtd. in Gruesser 65). A review in the *Norfolk Landmark* praises Griggs as a writer but disagrees with the ideas, writing that the "book contains many examples of perverted judgment, and is in many cases extremely unjust to the Caucasian" (qtd. in Gruesser 63). A negative review in the *Virginian Pilot* gives Griggs a "backhanded compliment," claiming that *Imperium* is "well written, in an unpretentious style (a rare merit in an educated negro)" (qtd. in Gruesser 63). The reviewer also argues that the novel is "designed as a political prophecy" (qtd. in Gruesser 64). A short *Publishers' Weekly* review significantly misrepresents the plot: "Imperium in Imperio is the name of a secret government

supposed to have been organized among the better-informed colored people after the Civil War, by which the unruly, ignorant blacks were kept from destroying the whites whom they so dangerously outnumbered” (qtd. in Gruesser 68).

This last review perfectly captures *Imperium*'s intended effect: suggesting that a destructive race war is the inevitable conclusion if conditions for Black Americans do not change. And it more generally captures attitudes and anxieties that were fairly common at the time. Frederickson describes the resilience of American notions about racial extinction:

Although the act of emancipation did not result either in race war or in a decline in the black population, prophecies of extermination did not cease with the coming of the postwar era. In fact they were given new impetus and greater respectability by the intellectual currents set in motion by the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 (230).

Griggs embodies these fears in the character of Mr. King, Belton's benefactor, who also functions as a surrogate for a liberal white audience. King publishes a newspaper that the white people in the south "regard...as ultraliberal" (33). He is a "man of the broadest culture," has "given the negro problem most profound study," is opposed to voter suppression, and denounces lynching in the "most scathing terms" (33). "In short, he was an outspoken advocate of giving the negro every right accorded him by the Constitution of the United States" (33). But what we soon discover about King is that he is not primarily motivated by charity or benevolence. Despite his liberal politics, he does not support Belton for any benevolent or noble reason: he is motivated by the fear of an impending apocalypse. Mr. King foresees an inevitable race war. Although he believes it would be "a foregone conclusion in favor of his own race," he fears the "awful carnage" "always attendant upon a struggle between two races that mutually despise and detest each other" (34). He reasons that Black people as a race, just as the Anglo-Saxons had

done a century before, will eventually “yearn for freedom” and be willing to lay down their lives for it (34). “[H]is ear was to the ground, expecting every moment to hear the far off sounds of awakened negroes coming to ask for liberty, and if refused, to slay or be slain” (34). After reading one of Belton’s impassioned speeches, King realizes that “the flame of liberty was in his heart,” that he was a representative of an impending threat (34). Seeking to avoid the “carnage” of a race war, he persuades Belton to make a promise in exchange for a free education. “I have only one favor to ask of you. In all your dealings with my people recognize the fact that there are two widely separated classes of us, and that there is a good side to the character of the worst class. Always seek for and appeal to that side of their nature” (36-37).

Griggs portrays this type of anxiety in the novel, but he also provokes it. There are many moments in the novel that function as apocalyptic warnings to a white audience. For example, at the end of the novel, readers realize that they have been reading a “history” of the Imperium, which is the story of a crisis narrowly averted, an “internecine war” that would have materialized but for the conservative, steady influence of Belton and Trout (176). But a threat still lingers, because “love of liberty is such an inventive genius, that if you destroy one device it at once constructs another more powerful” (177). As Wallinger argues, the warning is clear: “beware of the time when even a Booker T. Washington may no longer be able to quell social unrest and rebellion!” (200). Gillman, provocatively pairing Griggs’s apocalyptic imagination with Thomas Dixon’s, argues that both authors “cultivate the conspiratorial exposure of what they both fear and desire, both the betrayal and the reincarnation of a revolutionary past that prophesies a possible apocalyptic future of race war” (201). Griggs invites readers to

imagine 1. A large, well-organized, well-funded, and increasingly restless organization of Black people; and 2. This organization's proximity to white America's own violent, revolutionary past. Based on these premises, the conclusion, especially for a white audiences, is that, unless drastic measures are taken, some version of a revolutionary race war is inevitable. Whether or not Griggs actually "desires" this outcome, as Gillman claims, is difficult to say, but Griggs certainly wants to make white audiences aware of the existence and political implications of a "New Negro" who will no longer "kiss the smiting hand" (Griggs 175). In many ways, *Imperium's* tone is closer to a dystopia than anything else, a dire warning of a dark future that is the end result of the current trajectory.

What is remarkable about *Imperium* is not necessarily its prophecy of apocalypse, which has always been a popular mode of speculative fiction, and which expressed itself often in turn-of-the-century fiction. A notable example is Donnelly's 1890 *Caesar's Column*, with which Griggs was likely familiar. *Caesar's Column* envisions a populist uprising that, though it is not explicitly a "race war," is arguably coded as such. Rather, what is remarkable is Griggs's explanation of the origin of the apocalypse; in other words, the *specificity* of his prophecy. Griggs's apocalypse is not just an inevitable consequence of the subjugation of an underclass, although it is that. It is more specifically a subjugated underclass who have drawn inspiration from a familiar and sacred American historical narrative: the revolt of the colonists against the oppressive English monarchy. By linking white fears of race war directly to white reverence for a violent revolutionary past, Griggs gives his apocalyptic vision its force and credibility. Griggs articulates this link in two primary ways. The first is the more subtly speculative project of imagining a

“New Negro” who has taken inspiration from Revolutionary ideals, an identity he expresses through the co-protagonists Belton and Bernard. The second, more obvious speculative experiment is the Imperium, the outcome of an alternate history that traces its lineage to the Revolutionary era, and whose members are “New Negroes” like Belton and Bernard, inspired by the ideals of that era.

“A New Negro on His Hands”

As I discuss in the introduction, the trope of the New Negro was operative several decades before the Harlem Renaissance and was “a major discursive cornerstone of racial representation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Gates & Jarrett 2). Griggs offers a speculative exercise in imagining a “New Negro”¹⁸ whose identity is primarily rooted in Revolutionary principles and ideals. *Imperium* uses the term “New Negro” explicitly in two important moments, both involving Belton. The first is when Belton organizes a secret society to stage a protest, demanding that a Black faculty member be allowed equal access to facilities and accommodations at the school. In a

¹⁸ Gabriel Briggs argues that, for Griggs, the “New Negro” is a fundamentally “Southern” idea. Unlike most prominent African-American writers from this era, who lived in Northern states, Griggs always remained in the South. Briggs argues that, although Griggs is concerned with the national plight of African-Americans, he is particularly interested in addressing the “Negro problem” in the context of the Southern states. Belton is a representative “New Negro,” an educated Black man who is willing to stay in the South and fight white supremacy from within. In this formulation, Waco, TX signifies the South. The Imperium existing and remaining in a Southern state is a rejection of migration, to the North or anywhere else. For Southern New Negroes, migration constitutes an act of abandonment. While I disagree that the choice of Texas primarily signifies the South, I think it is important to keep in mind Griggs’s regional attachments, which help explain, among other things, Belton’s unusual “defence of the South” at the end of the novel.

coordinated action, all the students refuse to leave the room, and hold up signs reading “Equality or Death” In response,

the white teachers were all struck dumb with fear. They had not dreamed that a combination of their pupils was possible, and they knew not what it foreboded... They felt like hens who had lost their broods. The cringing, fawning, sniffing, cowardly Negro which slavery left, had disappeared, and a new Negro, self-respecting, fearless, and determined in the assertion of his rights was at hand (46).¹⁹

The second usage has a similar tone. At the end of his final speech to the Imperium, Belton resolves that they “pull the veil from before the eyes of the Anglo-Saxon that he may see the New Negro standing before him humbly, but firmly demanding every right granted him by his maker and wrested from him by man” (163). Both moments emphasize the reaction of the “Anglo-Saxon” to this “New Negro” more so than what it means as a collective Black identity. The figure of the New Negro is imagined as a shock to a white audience who had previously been “utterly ignorant of the nature of the Negro of to-day with whom he has to deal” (92). In line with Belton’s promise to Mr. King, his imagined “New Negro” is an “appeal to” the “good side” of the Anglo-Saxon character, an opportunity for them to peacefully cede some of their privileges.

¹⁹Griggs’s conceptualization of a “New Negro” exemplifies the paradox discussed in the introduction, in which a self-willed creation is at the same time a self-negation. “The cringing, fawning, sniffing, cowardly Negro which slavery left, had disappeared, and a new Negro, self-respecting, fearless, and determined in the assertion of his rights was at hand” (46). Here, there is no sense of process. Instantaneously, the old is negated—“disappears”—and the new is “at hand.” In some ways, the limitations of New Negro as a political and cultural identity are the same limitations as a conventional utopian narrative: they exist outside of time and history: “[J]ust as Utopia signifies ‘no-place,’ so did ‘New Negro signify a ‘black person who lives at no place,’ and at no time” (Gates & Jarrett 4).

Griggs's figure of the "New Negro" functions to undermine dominant turn-of-the-century ideologies about Black inferiority. And, perhaps more than any other author I examine, Griggs chooses not to critique these ideologies directly, but to tentatively "accept" their premises and then follow them to their logical conclusions, conclusions that are clearly unpalatable or even catastrophic. Put another way, Griggs is turning white supremacist logic against itself.

Griggs applies this strategy against two important assumptions. The first is the idea that Black people are fundamentally dependent on white "civilization" and in some way owe white people a debt. Belton articulates this idea throughout the novel in several of his speeches. For example, early in the novel he delivers a speech titled "The Contribution of the Anglo-Saxon to the Cause of Human Liberty" (27). Additionally, in an important moment at the end of the novel, he delivers a conciliatory speech to the Imperium:

Our President alluded to the fact that the negro was unpaid for all his years of toil. It is true that he was not paid in coin, but he received that from the Anglo-Saxons which far outweighs in value all the gold coin on earth. He received instruction in the arts of civilization, a knowledge of the English language, and a conception of the one true God and his Christ (155).

This is an extreme articulation of a politics of submission and dependence, one that Griggs almost certainly did not endorse, but it provokes the reader to consider what the consequences would be if members of the Imperium took this idea at face value.

The assumption of Black dependence on white culture also expresses itself in a slightly different way, in the belief, commonplace at the turn of the century, that freed Black people were largely "incapable of freedom" and not fit "to function as republican citizens" (Roediger 144). "Many Southern whites assumed that blacks confronted the

demise of slavery entirely unprepared for the responsibilities of freedom”

(*Reconstruction* 77). What the historical record makes clear is that Black people were not “incapable” of freedom, but rather did not practice it in ways deemed legitimate or appropriate (78). In other words, they did not have “a conception of freedom tethered to (white) national subjecthood” (Harper 17).

Nevertheless, Griggs takes this belief at face value as well. The Imperium operates for most of its history under the assumption that most Black people are not prepared for or capable of freedom. During slavery, the Imperium limited its membership to “free negroes,” because “those who were yet in physical bondage were supposed to²⁰ have aspirations for nothing higher than being released from chains, and were, therefore, not prepared to eagerly aspire to the enjoyment of the highest privileges of freedom” (130). Even after emancipation, the Imperium only “cautiously” extended membership to those they believed understood what “real freedom” is (131). Andy Harper is correct that the Imperium, because it accepts members only after an education in the “republican language and ideology” of Jefferson and other Founding Fathers, is fundamentally flawed, because it forecloses any other conceptions of liberty²¹ (16-17). However, the

²⁰ Belton’s brief, subtle editorializing here—the phrase “supposed to” (i.e., “believed to”)—articulates a critical distance between the Imperium as it exists in the present and the assumptions with which it was founded in the early American past, suggesting perhaps a growing uncertainty about the Imperium’s relevance in the era of the “New Negro.”

²¹ Even though the Imperium ultimately forecloses any alternatives, the novel occasionally contemplates them. For example, Griggs at times invokes the political structure of African maroon communities, which share features with the idea of a “secret society,” a fundamental feature of the Imperium. Harper argues that not only is the secret society of the Imperium a defining aspect of Griggs’s utopia, but of the Black utopian imagination more generally. As opposed to the “closure” and separation from greater

Imperium's policy in this case is not necessarily articulating a viable political agenda. Rather, it is functioning as a thought experiment, asking the question: What would it mean if Black people *were* prepared for freedom, if they *were* educated in "legitimate" concepts of liberty, like Jefferson's?

Griggs undermines the assumption of Black dependence by embracing it. He posits a "New Negro" who both understands and cherishes the white ideological legacy of the American Revolution—most significantly, that equality and freedom are ideals worth dying for, that "Give me liberty or give me death!" is an honorable and sacred slogan. The disturbing but inevitable conclusion for Griggs is that people who are neither equal nor free, who are educated in those concepts, and who have appealed for them, will have no choice but to violently rebel.

The second central assumption that Griggs takes at face value in his construction of a "New Negro" is the validity of evolutionary theories of racial development. As Gates and Jarrett argue, the New Negro trope itself was dependent on evolutionary ideas of development and civilization, particularly that different racial groups were at different

society that often defines the white utopian novel, "the under-theorized Black utopia is defined, rather, by the secret society" (2). Harper identifies two main "intellectual antecedents" of the Black utopian secret society: 1. the increasing numbers of white fraternal organizations at the turn of the century, and 2. the "antebellum history of marronage" (3). The history of marronage has a direct link to Martin Delany's *Blake*. Griggs, for his part, frames the creation of secret societies as a racial characteristic, writing, "the negro has been a marvelous success since the war, as a builder of secret societies" (132). But, though the Imperium has harnessed to some degree the political potential of secret Black organization, the integrationist goals of the organization—being afforded the same rights and privileges as white citizens—preclude any significantly different political imaginations that might derive from the history of marronage and secret societies.

stages on a spectrum of progress. An 1895 speech compares the progress of Black people with that of the Anglo-Saxon: “Thirty years of freedom is scarcely enough to take the first steps in the arts of peace. It required centuries for the Anglo-Saxon to reach his present commanding position. The Negro's present days of infancy and of small beginnings are no criterion to measure his future by” (Bowen 32). Griggs states multiple times throughout the novel that Black people had just recently experienced the same “fire” of liberty that motivated the progression of Anglo-Saxon history, implying that a journey toward civilization had also begun. In the context of racist discourse on civilization, the “New” of New Negro emphasized a rejection of the traits of an “Old” type, but it also signified the relative newness (the “days of infancy”) of the African American’s aspiration toward (white) civilization.

Imperium is saturated with popular evolutionary ideas of racial development and civilization. Moses writes that “Griggs...was steeped in the theories of Darwin and other evolutionary theorists...His novels represented a merger of archaic social science and sentimentalism, an attempt to create a humane theory of biological and social evolution within the framework of a national literature” (27). In particular, *Imperium* continually presents the idea that different racial groups are at different stages in their development, and that the “Negro” is at a relatively early stage, but always progressing. For example, after Belton stages his successful demonstration, Griggs presents it as a transitional moment: “Ye who chronicle history and mark epochs in the career of races and nations must put here a towering, gigantic, century stone, as marking the passing of one and the ushering in of another great era in the history of the colored people of the United States” (46). In *Imperium*, evolutionary development is a direct outcome of the actions of great

men. The achievements of Belton, a “future leader...of [his] race” (47) and “representative...of all that was good and great in the race” (128), are responsible for “ushering in another great era.”

Evolutionary ideas of race in *Imperium* support an aspirational worldview, a belief in the capacity for change and progress. They also, at times, function as the opposite: a justification for mistreatment and prejudice against Black people. In his conciliatory and “calming” speech to the Imperium, in which he gives “a word to say in defence of the south,” Belton says: “While all of the other races of men were behind the ball of progress rolling it up the steep hill of time, the negro was asleep in the jungles of Africa” (155) He follows this with a list of white men’s accomplishments that contributed toward the “bright light of civilization” (155). After others had toiled so hard...it was hardly to be expected that a race that slept while others worked could step up and at once enjoy all the fruits of others' toil” (155). Why Belton departs so radically from his previous, less conciliatory positions is unclear. (Equally unclear is why the Imperium, which had minutes before been calling for all-out war against the Anglo-Saxons, would be convinced in any way by Belton’s speech.) But his arguments reflect a mainstream ideology linking racial groups’ subordination to an evolutionary underdevelopment and corresponding lack of civilization.²²

²² While Griggs turns this idea against itself, some Black authors more directly critique or disprove it. For example, Pauline Hopkins, the subject of the next chapter, marshaled evidence suggesting that Africa was actually the origin of all civilization, countering the idea that Black people had not contributed to human progress.

Most importantly, Griggs links an evolutionary worldview with the ideals and rhetoric of the American Revolution. As part of Belton's resolution that the Imperium "humbly, but firmly" demand their rights from the Anglo-Saxons, he proposes

That we earnestly strive to convince the Anglo-Saxon that we are now thoroughly wedded to the doctrine of Patrick Henry: 'Give me liberty or give me death,' Let us teach the Anglo-Saxon that we have arrived at the stage of development as a people, where we prefer to die in honor rather than live in disgrace (163).

This familiar revolutionary moment marks a shift into a new era. In this way, it is not dissimilar to the transition in the beginning of the novel from a "fawning, cowardly" race to a "new Negro." Griggs implies that the American Revolution was itself part of the development of civilization, a transitional moment for the Anglo-Saxon race.

The intended effect on white readers is clear. The speculative space that allows for a secret organization of Black people to discuss the ideals of the Founding Fathers also presents readers with the possibility of a continually progressing racial group, and therefore (according to the discourse of the time), a logic of evolutionary development. Extrapolating this logic onto a less developed group—the "latest comer upon the scene of modern civilization" (164)—readers must confront the implications: that an evolving group will eventually reach its own moment of crisis in which they are willing to lay down their lives for the ideal of "liberty." When Belton resolves that he wants to let the Anglo-Saxons know they have a "New Negro" on their hands, this is partly what he means. Not only are Black people as a group unwilling to tolerate further subordination, they will soon reach a phase of development in which a freedom struggle and revolutionary violence are all but inevitable.

Griggs's image of a "New Negro" is a direct result of evolutionary progress: a passionate student of the American Revolution who has "caught the fire of liberty" to the extent that he is willing to die for it (162). Griggs portrays this male ideal through the co-protagonists Belton and Bernard. Two exemplary Black men with equal talent and ambition, sharing the same educational upbringing, and often competing head-to-head, they might easily be mistaken for one another, if not for the repeatedly emphasized differences in class and skin color. Belton and Bernard are interchangeable in many ways but opposed on a more fundamental level. Scholars often read this duo as a representation of a "divided self," or a conflict at the heart of the African American persona. Perhaps the most famous articulation of this conflict is Du Bois's concept of "double-consciousness": "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (*Souls* 9).

Belton and Bernard, as Griggs's embodiment of his experimental "New Negro" ideal, function in several important ways in the novel. They are obviously meant to be aspirational to some extent, exemplary models for what Black leadership might look like. But, more importantly, their character arcs demonstrate the many obstacles that prevent even the most exemplary and exceptional Black men from succeeding under current conditions in the United States. Belton's experiences, especially, represent the many ways that anti-Black racism manifests at the turn of the century. He is fired from a position for publishing an article about voter suppression, demonstrating white Southerner's deep commitment to Black disenfranchisement. His "color debar[s] him"

from work that he is qualified for (90). Emasculated by his inability to provide, he comes to believe that the white child that his wife gives birth to is not his own, reasoning that “his failure to properly support her had tempted her to ruin” (94). After he leaves his family, he experiences the most extreme instances of racism, surviving a lynching and a subsequent experimentation on his body.

Bernard is more conventionally successful during the course of the novel, thanks in part to his lighter skin and his influential white father. But Bernard, like Belton, is also denied the happiness and comfort of a domestic life. In a traumatic incident that changes Bernard’s trajectory and steers him toward his discovery of the Imperium, Bernard’s betrothed, Viola, dies by suicide. In her suicide letter to Bernard, Viola explains that she has just read *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination* (an actual 1868 text). The book alleges a version of the white “race suicide” narrative, that amalgamation is diminishing the strength and leading to the eventual extinction of white people. But Viola reads the book and comes to an opposite interpretation: “That book proved to me that the intermingling of the races in sexual relationship was sapping the vitality of the Negro race and, in fact, was slowly but surely exterminating the race” (118). Viola becomes convinced that, for the good of her race, she cannot marry Bernard because his father is white. But she is also convinced that, because she loves Bernard so much, she could not continue living without marrying him. In her suicide letter, Viola requests that Bernard dedicate his life to preventing interracial relationships, and he vows to do so: ““The races, whose union has been fraught with every curse known to earth and hell, must separate. Viola demands it and Bernard obeys”” (120). Ostensibly, it is Bernard’s vow to Viola that leads to his militant leadership in the Imperium and his insistence on a separate state.

Gaines sees this moment as “perhaps the ultimate literary expression of gendered black ideals of racial purity,” Viola making a “sacrifice” for the good of the race rather than intermingle with white blood (124). Winter argues that his moment “shows how the prevalent racial theories of the day, when taken for truth by the American public in general, become ingrained in the psyche of black Americans and can become a part of their worldview as well” (108).

It is clear that Griggs is very concerned with detailing the manifold manifestations of turn-of-the-century racism, albeit sometimes in a slightly exaggerated or melodramatic way. And Griggs wants to make clear that it is Belton and Bernard’s experience of these conditions—not necessarily their unique qualities or temperaments—that leads them to joining the Imperium. Griggs describes Belton’s ordeal as “the tragic experience that burned all the remaining dross out of Belton’s nature” (109). Similarly, when Bernard is invited to the Imperium after Viola’s suicide, he “feel[s] grateful for something to divert his thoughts and call him away from the scene where his hopes had died” (122). The image of Belton and Bernard is not two men who seem to have a strong desire to join something like the Imperium, but rather two men who have exhausted every other option. And when we first encounter the Imperium, we must assume that many of its members have joined recently based on similar experiences.

Despite Belton and Bernard’s similarities—they are both exceptional Black men driven by desperation to a radical political organization—the duo is also clearly also meant to function as a foil. Scholars tend to emphasize the ambiguity and lack of resolution between their positions. More broadly, there is a consensus that ambiguity is an essential element of Griggs’s work. Gruesser notes that 3 out of Griggs’s 5 novels

have endings that readers must “resolve” themselves. He posits that these divergent interpretations stem from a failure to appreciate the “dialogic methodology” of Griggs’s fiction. “Griggs uses multiple characters to voice a range of positions on US race relations and overseas expansion, mixes narrative and polemic, and in three out of five cases leaves the conclusions of his novels open so that readers must decide how to resolve them” (16). Writing about *Imperium*, Curry argues that the reader encounters “an extended figuration of the arguments over the form and function of black politics,” but that the presentation of the novel “casts doubt on limited and limiting options in order to both challenge and enable readers to resolve the plot themselves” (23). Veselá goes further, framing *Imperium* as an early example of what Tom Moylan famously calls a “critical utopia,” “a utopia that is critical both of the status quo and of the traditional utopia itself” (287). *Imperium* “differ[s] from traditional utopias in that [it] feature[s] an active protagonist and, as in Moylan’s critical utopia, portray[s] imperfect, multiple, and ambiguous ‘better worlds’” (287). As a “marginal work,” *Imperium* anticipates these conventions by “engag[ing] with the utopian genre’s insufficient and problematic treatment of race” (287). While I think this overstates the case, I agree that Griggs’s presentation of contested dialogue within the *Imperium* is in opposition to a traditional utopia, in which a bemused narrator is methodically guided through the utopian society and convinced of all the ways it is superior to his own. The importance of discussion and ambiguity in *Imperium* was also recognized at the time it was published. The *Colored American* Cromwell review argued that the novel would “lead to an earnest discussion by thinkers of both race[s]” (qtd. In Gruesser 64).

The ambiguity is further complicated by the varied interpretations of the central conflict between Belton and Bernard.²³ The terms of the debate in the *Imperium*—“the whole question of the relationship of the negro race to the Anglo-Saxons” (138)—would conventionally set up an “assimilation vs. separation” debate, which is how many critics have read it. Especially common is comparing Belton’s beliefs to those of Booker T. Washington. To be sure, this binary is an aspect of the debate: for example, there are those in favor of emigration to the Congo, opposed by a single person in favor of amalgamation (who receives a “storm of hisses and jeers”) (150)—two extreme poles of the debate. But this is not the fundamental opposition between Belton and Bernard, who in fact share a good deal in common on this front. Bernard advocates a separate state in Waco, TX and Belton tolerates this as an option if the *Imperium*’s written demands for full rights and citizenship in the United States are rejected. Hebard rejects the ending of *Imperium* as a struggle between assimilationist and separatist ideas (68). He agrees with Levander that “both of these options are in fact proposed and rejected in the narrative” (68). Hebard posits that Belton and Bernard’s conflict is between “two different versions of territorial sovereignty” (68). “The question that Bernard poses to the members of the *Imperium* is not just a general ‘question of the relationship of the negro race to the Anglo-Saxons’...but also the more specific sovereign question of whether to declare war on the United States” (63).

²³ To be sure, trying to locate only one fundamental opposition between these foil characters reduces some of the complexity of their positions, a complexity that reflects the many contested issues in Black politics at the turn of the century. But Griggs’s presentation of two “great men,” often in debate with one another, certainly lends itself to these types of binary interpretations.

Belton and Bernard's fundamental opposition could also be their differing conceptions of "patriotism."²⁴ They certainly differ in their willingness to commit "treason"—Belton is executed by the Imperium because he will not betray the union, and he dies "shrouded in an American flag" (174). Knadler follows this line, arguing that patriotism—not assimilation vs. separation—is the main theme of the book. In the 1890s, U.S. imperial adventures necessitated an attempt to foment patriotism on a mass scale. "Most of the modern rites and rituals of an expressive style of U.S. patriotism...grew out of patriotic movements beginning in the 1880s and 1890s" (Knadler 675). These efforts coincided with a shift in popular ideas about the source and function of citizenship. Against a model of citizenship that emphasizes rational deliberation and participation in the public sphere, a theory of "organic citizenship" emerged (679). Championed by public figures like Teddy Roosevelt, "organic citizenship" emphasizes the sentimental force of patriotism and "asserts the citizen's primordial and inevitable allegiance to the country in which he or she was born" (679). This model supported and enabled nativist animosity toward the large influx of immigrant groups, who white Americans perceived as lacking an affective attachment to the United States, which prevented them from assimilating and embracing a normative American culture.

Within this web of discourse on patriotism, African Americans occupied an especially fraught position. Assigned racialized traits like loyalty and sentimentality, African Americans were thought to be naturally inclined to patriotism. Accommodationist rhetoric often capitalized on this association. Booker T. Washington,

²⁴ Variations on this word ("patriotism," "patriot," "patriotic") occur thirteen times in the short novel.

for example, argued on many occasions that “the primitive emotionalism of the African American soldier and citizen gave him a greater instinct toward patriotic loyalty, self-discipline, and obedience,” an idea that led to the trope of “Citizen Tom.” (Knadler 679). Knadler argues that Belton is a representation of this type of patriotism: “Nowhere is his allegiance clearer than at the end of Belton’s story when, despite his former advocacy of radical protest, he insists that he cannot deny his inborn, and hence organic, patriotism after all” (687). Bernard, the more radical and militant foil to Belton, willing to commit treason to establish a separatist state, is obviously not motivated by the same attachment to the United States or its flag. However, Knadler argues, Belton’s “innate loyalty and allegiance” to the flag is not so different from the “racial chauvinism” that motivates Bernard as president of the Imperium. They are both forms of “sentimental loyalty” that rely on a similar affective force. “Both models of sentimental loyalty, whether to the abstract nation or to racial separation, can close off (with a paranoid horror) other competing associations, exchanges, and affiliations” (692). According to Knadler, Griggs, rather than simply staging a separation vs. assimilation debate, is more directly critiquing the dangers of “sentimental loyalty,” and attempting to offer a space for imagining alternatives.

I completely agree that Griggs uses the Belton and Bernard foil as a means to explore various fault lines in Black politics. And the different binaries that scholars have identified are all valid interpretations. In other words, there is not necessarily a “correct” reading of what these two characters represent. And, further, none of these binaries are truly discrete issues. There is a great deal of overlap, for example, between the debate about assimilation and the debate about Black “patriotism.” Considering all of these

issues together enhances our understanding of the incredibly complex ideological terrain on which Black leaders and intellectuals attempted to construct the image of a “New Negro.”

However, there is an additional perspective that I think further clarifies the aim of Griggs’s speculative project: Belton and Bernard represent two possible outcomes for a country in which a “New Negro” has been born who takes seriously the heritage of the American Revolution. To reduce the debate to its essentials: Belton wants to appeal peacefully for the rights that Jefferson articulated in the Declaration, and Bernard wants to do so violently. Crucially, the end of the novel seems to suggest that *neither* of these are viable solutions, Belton’s because it is impossible under current conditions, and Bernard’s because it would lead to unthinkable carnage. Griggs dramatizes the tension between these two unworkable positions within the space of the Imperium, an organization that makes Griggs’s “New Negro” into a collective, but which notably *fails* to sustain itself by the end of the novel.

The Imperium as Alternate History

Griggs’s more subtly speculative experiment of imagining a possible ideal of the “New Negro” culminates in the section of the novel that is justifiably the most famous: the Imperium in Imperio, a secret organization of 7.5 million Black men operating out of Waco, Texas. In a sense, the Imperium is simply a collective version of the individual identity that Griggs has articulated up to this point. It is clearly the crux of the novel, and therefore it is important to understand the precise nature of the speculative perspective that it offers. *Imperium* has often been called the first Black “Utopian novel.” The Imperium is technically a Utopia, in the sense that it is a significantly better system of

government: Bernard thinks that it is “well nigh perfect in every part and present[s] a form of government unexcelled by that of any other nation” (135). But *Imperium* does not imagine the leap in time and/or space that normally characterizes a Utopian novel from this era. Nor is the *Imperium* radically different than actually existing United States government. In fact, it could actually be characterized best by its *similarity* to the United States government rather than its radical difference: “Except in a few, but important particulars, the constitution was modeled after that of the United States” (132). The only major change that is discussed is a response to “one serious flaw in the Constitution,” which is, basically, the outsized power and authority of individual States in relation to the federal government (123). *Imperium* does present a nominal utopia, but that is not the most precise or useful way to describe the speculative project of the novel.

Some critics have called *Imperium*—even more broadly—“science fiction.” Bould, for example, argues that the novel is one of the “precursors” to “Black Power Sf” of the 1960s and 1970s (53). While this might, again, be technically true—in the sense that *Imperium* presents a counterfactual reality—this category is even more misleading than “Utopian” fiction. *Imperium* does not have any of the generic expectations of science fiction (future societies, technological advances, time travel, etc.). I think this imprecision in describing *Imperium* demonstrates a lingering incapacity for thinking in nuanced ways about different forms of the “speculative.”

I agree with Lambert, the only scholar I know of who explicitly calls the novel an “alternate history,” situating it in a broader tradition of “Black-Atlantic counterfactualism” (291). The initial counterfactual proposition in *Imperium* is: What if the famous Black scientist Benjamin Banneker started an organization that operated in

secret until the present day? Which leads to the broader counterfactual: What if there existed a wealthy, powerful association of Black people capable of forming a self-sufficient, separate state? *Imperium* is a unique version of an “alternate history” in which the counterfactual outcome from the past does not lead to an actual “alternative” present or future—it leads to a United States that the reader recognizes, with the significant and impossible difference that the Imperium exists in secret. The emphasized similarity between the alternate history and the present functions to literalize and amplify Black Americans’ already existing proximity to the history and ideals of the American Revolution and offers a space to imagine the logical conclusion for an oppressed group of people who are asked to demonstrate loyalty and patriotism to a country that subjugates them.

The alternate history amplifies this proximity by imagining a society literally founded by a Black Revolutionary era leader. Despite Bernard’s invocation of 1619 as the moment “our forefathers landed on the American shore,” the Imperium is formed much later, “in the early days of the American Republic” by “a negro scientist who won an international reputation by his skill and erudition” and “enjoyed the association of the moving spirits of the revolutionary period” (130). This unnamed scientist is probably an allusion to Benjamin Banneker, an 18th-century African American naturalist who corresponded with Jefferson and whose achievements have acquired a mythological quality. Yaszek asserts that Griggs, by invoking the famous Banneker, “creates a deep history for the Imperium that would have been familiar to turn-of-the-century African American readers” (19). After selling one of his scientific books, this “wealthy negro secretly gathered other free negroes together and organized a society” (130). The society,

as the founder conceived it, had a “two-fold object”: “The first object was to endeavor to secure for the free negroes all the rights and privileges of men, according to the teachings of Thomas Jefferson. Its other object was to secure the freedom of the enslaved negroes the world over” (130).

The Imperium’s founding is notable for its proximity to the Founding Fathers, especially Jefferson. It seems necessary that Banneker had “association” with the major figures of the Revolution. Without this association, he would not have acquired the means to start the Imperium because his work ostensibly would not have received notice. Nor would he have been exposed to the ideas and “teachings of Thomas Jefferson” that provide an intellectual foundation for the Imperium’s two goals. Griggs envisions that the Imperium is “the creation of a single technoscientific genius,” founded by a semi-mythical figure from the Revolutionary era (Yaszek 19). This has double-edged implications for a shared Black history. On the one hand, it reasserts an unmistakable Black presence in the nation’s founding narrative, staking a claim equal to white counterparts’. On the other, it suggests the dependency on the “Anglo-Saxon” described earlier, the impossibility of a self-governed Black society existing without their intellectual resources.

The influence of Jefferson and the Revolutionary era is not limited to the Imperium’s founding moment. It underwrites the ideology and political goals of the society before and after the Civil War and into the present moment. One of the Imperium’s strategies is to secretly appoint people to teach in Southern schools who “would take especial pains to teach the negro to aspire for equality with all the other races of men” (131). These teachers “were instructed to pay especial attention to the history of

the United States during the revolutionary period” (131), suggesting a belief that American revolutionary history can be a model for the Imperium’s similar freedom struggle, a point of reference for the two goals of the Imperium: to secure freedom for the enslaved and the privileges of citizenship for free people.

The account given of the Imperium then transitions into more recent history. The Imperium’s “campaign of education” continued with success, and “the negroes gained political ascendancy in many Southern states” (131). But through “force” and “fraud” they were eventually “hurled from power” (131). Looking to the federal government for “redress,” they received the reply ““Take care of yourselves, we are powerless to help you”” (131). In the face of Jim Crow era oppression, the Imperium decided to do “what the General Government could not do” because of the aforementioned “defect in the Constitution” (132). “They decided to organize a General Government that would protect the negro in his rights” (132). To do this “quickly and successfully,” they made use of political structures already in place, Black people having “been a marvelous success since the war, as a builder of secret societies” (132). A Government was formed with participation from the already existing secret societies, and this Government, whose main function is to provide the protection that the U.S. government is unwilling or unable to, endures into the present day. And Bernard discovers that this government has unanimously chosen him to be its first President, its “George Washington.” Despite its reverence for Banneker and the founding moment of their society, the Imperium is still able to recognize the organization has exceeded the utility of its initial goals. They are able to act quickly and marshal resources in response to a new threat, progressing past the limiting assumptions of an early American free Black man.

Once the history of the Imperium has been rehearsed up to the present moment, the rest of the novel presents the organization in a moment of urgent deliberation. The Imperium must discuss how they will respond to two concurrent crises: The first is the “insurrection” in Cuba, which they watch with “keenest interest, as the Cubans were in a large measure negroes” (137). The second is the lynching of the Black postmaster Felix A. Cook and his family, a clear reference to the real lynching of the South Carolina postmaster Frazier Baker and his family.

The insurrection in Cuba and the United States’s declaration of war against Spain is a particularly difficult moment for the Imperium to respond to. As discussed earlier, Black men’s relationship to the United States military was a major fault line in Black political discourse. Some staunchly pro-imperialist Black voices saw in American intervention abroad an opportunity for Black men to prove their patriotism and worthiness for citizenship, to “win respect from whites and therefore enhance [their] status at home” (Gatewood 25). Similarly, they argued that during “a moment of national crisis,” it was improper to “seek to redress grievances” rather than supporting the cause (27). Edward E. Cooper, for example, argued in *Colored American* that Black Americans should embody the same “true blue variety” of patriotism that they had demonstrated “from Bunker Hill on” (qtd. in Gatewood 28).

On the other side, vocal anti-war voices questioned how imperial adventures could promote racial justice at home, considering them “an expression of Anglo-Saxon supremacy and as a perverted ordering of national priorities” (Gatewood ix). One of the fundamental themes of anti-imperial rhetoric, especially as Black people became disillusioned with the intervention in Cuba, was the hypocrisy of a nation that purported

to fight for oppressed people in other countries but could not secure the freedom and safety of their own citizens. This hypocrisy is exemplified by the second crisis that the Imperium confronts: the lynching of Frazier Baker, an incident that, as Griggs renders it, “naturally aroused as much indignation among the members of the Imperium as did the destruction of the war ship [the *USS Maine*, the sinking of which triggered the Spanish American War] in the bosoms of the Anglo-Saxons of the United States” (138).

But this perception of hypocrisy was complicated by a sense of racial solidarity with Cubans, whose war for independence was viewed as a freedom struggle against the Spanish. “The conflict between the desire to promote their own self-interest and their sympathy for the aspirations of their colored cousins overseas resulted in a potpourri of ambivalent, often contradictory, attitudes” (Gatewood x). African American conceptions of group loyalty, race pride, and self-help were extended to Afro-Cubans, something that the debate in the Imperium reflects. Not only is the Imperium extending sympathy toward the struggle, but they also see in it a source of hope for their own freedom struggle. From this perspective, Griggs’s conception of the Imperium reflects this revolutionary hope. Kramer goes as far as to view *Imperium* as an attempt to rewrite this 1898 war, an “attempt to recover or recoup lost discursive terrain” about the war that official histories have whitewashed (4).

These two incidents set the tone in the Imperium for the broader discussion that results. They frame the debate in stark terms of life and death and, more specifically, the heavy question of what is *worth* dying for. At the same time that Black men are being asked to offer their lives to a country that does not protect them, they are witnessing a Black insurrection based on ideals similar to their own, and one that might act as a model

for their own freedom struggle. And it is within this context that the Imperium debates the central political question of the novel: “the whole question of the relationship of the negro race to the Anglo-Saxons” (138). This question means, in essence, how shall we relate to a country that refuses to protect us or treat us as equals? More concretely, they are asking whether Black people should remain as part of the nation at all. It is a question that demands an answer and immediate plan of action. During the debate, Imperium members offer several answers: we amalgamate; we declare war; we emigrate; etc. Belton and Bernard’s answers, which are the only ones given real consideration, are, respectively, 1. to peacefully demand rights and citizenship and, if denied, to form a separate state in Texas; 2. to infiltrate and sabotage the U.S. military in the interest of securing a separate state in Texas. Belton and Bernard’s solutions are actually quite similar. They only fundamentally disagree on the means: Belton insists on pursuing a peaceful path while Bernard does not.

Belton argues that if Anglo-Saxons “surrender what belongs to” African-Americans, then violence will not be necessary (163). He resolves, adding a sense of urgency, that the Imperium spend four years trying to convince the Anglo-Saxon of this. Not only is this solution an incentive for the Anglo-Saxon to avoid war, but Belton also frames it as beneficial in terms of racial pride:

[I]t would be the grandest contribution ever made to the cause of human civilization...if every Negro, away from the land of his nativity, can by means of the pen, force an acknowledgment of equality from the proud lips of the fierce, all conquering Anglo-Saxon, thus eclipsing the record of all other races of men, who without exception have had to wade through blood to achieve their freedom (164).

The potential for this “grandest contribution” is a promising message, but it also implies for the Anglo-Saxon reader a volatility to the situation. If no other racial group in human

history has peacefully acquired their rights, then the threat is imminent, requiring immediate attention if a peaceful resolution is desired.

Bernard defends his more severe, militant plan with a speech that is clearly structured on the same rhetorical beats as the Declaration of Independence. It begins with a long list of grievances that Black people have suffered at the hands of the Anglo-Saxon, from 1619 to the present, including the conditions of slavery, the inferiority of their education, the lack of Civil Rights in a segregated society, the bias of the justice system, and the prevalence of mob violence and lynching (140-147). The Anglo-Saxon race is likened to a monarch: “Our kings, the Anglo-Saxons, speak for us, their slaves”; “each Anglo-Saxon regards himself a petty king” (147). Going further, and combining this rhetoric with the racist thinking prevalent in the novel, Bernard posits that “the monarchial trait seems not to have left their blood” (147). In this unilateral relationship, Black people lack (in the language of the Declaration) “Representation”: “Thus our voice is not heard in the General Government” (147). And Bernard ends by implying that, under these conditions, war is just and even inevitable: “In olden times, revolutions were effected by the sword and spear. In modern times the ballot has been used for that purpose. But the ballot has been snatched from our hands. The modern implement of revolutions has been denied us. I need not say more. Your minds will lead you to the only gate left open” (148). Not only does this passage mimic the Declaration’s “duty to throw off such Government” section, but it also explicitly draws on the past in which it was drafted, an “olden time” of revolution. Without any “modern” recourse, the only available option is to emulate what was done in the past.

Even though Belton gives a superior speech and “his propositions were adopted in their entirety without one dissenting voice” (165), it is ultimately Bernard’s more militant plan, conceived in private, that goes forward because of a “secret, formidable combination” that supports it (169). But Bernard’s plan is ultimately foiled as well, as the Imperium is betrayed by Berl Trout, narrowly avoiding the race war that Bernard seems to desire. The ending of the novel certainly leaves the reader with a deep, unsettling sense of ambiguity. However, despite the importance of ambiguity to the novel, critics sometimes confuse the obvious lack of resolution between Belton and Bernard’s ideologies for an invitation to the reader to choose one or the other, to “resolve the plot themselves” (Curry 23). In reality, the plot has *already* resolved. The Berl Trout frame story assures us that the Imperium has already failed, that we are reading an account of its history.

Additionally, the end of the plot does not represent any concrete political choices that a reader could make. I agree with Knadler that, “the plot of Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* hardly makes sense as a political statement or even a realistic representation of social problems” (684). In contrast to Griggs’s later *Dorlan’s Plan* (the ending to the novel *Unfettered*) in which the protagonist explains a detailed solution to the “race problem,” *Imperium* is clearly not proposing a separatist state in Waco, TX as a solution. Though the debates within the Imperium reflect a recognizable present moment, the existence of the Imperium is impossible. The Imperium operates in tandem with a concrete reality, with no rupture in time or space, but, at the same time, the Imperium is premised on the idea of a secret society of Black men that has existed since the Revolutionary era, a radically speculative alternate history at odds with the real issues

and events that they discuss in the novel. The “proposals” to the race problem that the Imperium presents are always already foreclosed by the impossibility of the Imperium in the first place. In other words, *Imperium in Imperio* is not a speculative “choose your own adventure.” Although Griggs is surely rehearsing ideological conflicts, he is not asking readers to choose between siding with Belton and patriotically dying for their country or following Bernard and infiltrating the U.S. Navy to commit treason.

Rather, what the ambiguity at the end of the novel seems to suggest is that, under current conditions, *neither* plan is a viable way forward, which Griggs symbolizes by the Imperium’s failure to sustain itself. Belton’s peaceful plan is almost laughably naïve in juxtaposition to his experience of racism detailed earlier in the novel. Despite his exceptional skills, his rhetorical ability, and his promise to “appeal to” the “good side” of white people’s nature, he could not manage to build a successful, dignified life in the United States. In reality, Griggs seems to suggest, peaceful pleas and rhetorical appeals have been long since rejected by white America. Another “four years in endeavors to impress the Anglo-Saxon that he has a New Negro on his hands” (163) seem unlikely to make a difference. Emphasizing this point, Belton literally dies at the end of the novel, and Berl Trout remarks pointedly that “the spirit of conservatism in the Negro race, fell with him” (175). If “conservative” solutions to the “Negro problem” were ever an option, they have by now been completely foreclosed.

Meanwhile, Bernard’s plan, even though it was betrayed, seems to be the only plausible one remaining. A white audience would ostensibly want to avoid the outcome of that plan, but the ending of *Imperium* makes clear that this is the only realistic path under current conditions. Griggs’s ideal of a “New Negro,” a Black man who has evolved

to the point where his political imagination reflects the mythology of the Revolution, and who is willing to die for its principles, will not continue to have his freedom deferred. The Imperium, the result of an alternate history in which Black people founded an organization on those principles, further illustrates these threats. At the end of the novel, in the debris of a terminated alternate history, the reader is left with a much different speculative exercise than attempting to resolve Belton and Bernard's positions. Instead, they are asked to contemplate: given the premise of evolutionary racial development, and given our own race's milestone of revolutionary violence, can we not expect the same from a "poor downtrodden people"?

Conclusion

"In this male-centered novel," Bentley writes, "the survival and transmission of black life and identity is figured not through the generational time of marriage, birth, and death but through the catastrophic time of warfare and its logic of liberty through death" ("Fourth Dimension" 290). This "logic of liberty through death" comes from a counterfactual imagination that locates a shared history in the American Revolution. This logic of catastrophe is dominant in the novel, not only in its broader political imagination, but also in the domestic lives of Belton and Bernard, both of whom fail to happily resolve their marriage plots. Belton, especially, even when given the opportunity to escape the demands of the Imperium and reunite with his wife and child, chooses a sacrificial death instead.

In Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*, the subject of the next chapter, Hopkins renders a tragically failed marriage not dissimilar to Bernard's, but offers the protagonist a different opportunity for marriage, relocating him from the United States to Africa. For

Hopkins, the “survival and transmission of black life and identity” is not figured in the generational cycles of birth and death, but on the grand scale of human history and civilizations.

CHAPTER 4

HIDDEN HISTORY IN HOPKINS'S *OF ONE BLOOD*

Though it is not a familiar category today, one of the most successful subgenres of speculative fiction at the turn of the century was the so-called “lost race” romance. Texts in this tradition, rather than speculating about leaps into the future, instead imagine radical alterity in the form of an undiscovered society or civilization that has remained hidden from the rest of humanity. Reflecting a world in which most of the globe had already been explored and “discovered,” these “lost race” narratives often locate undiscovered civilizations in remote locations like Antarctica. Or, more fancifully, underneath the surface of a “hollow earth,” as in Mary Bradley’s *Mizora*. Some authors opted for slightly more plausible locations, and the African continent was a popular one. The novel *She: A History of Adventure*, by the English writer H. Rider Haggard, in which a group of English treasure seekers are captured by a “savage tribe” in central Africa, is an archetypal example.

These novels tend to follow a formulaic arc. A white adventurer or group of adventurers stumble on a “previously unknown civilization in an exotic, hard-to-reach local” (Fiorelli 454). The undiscovered civilization is typically experiencing a civil war in which the adventurers participate to an extent. And these narratives typically end with the protagonist claiming and marrying a “native princess” (454). As is probably apparent from even this very schematic outline, the logic of these narratives was generally an imperialist one, and the genre “served as a hothouse for some of the less attractive consequences of the sometime marriage between Fantastika and Imperialism, its texts

promulgating an astonishing array of racist arguments and assumptions” (Langford et al.).

These narratives often functioned, in particular, as occasions to speculate about how a civilization or race might evolve if left to its own devices in isolation. Many of these imagined civilizations implement some version of eugenics, leading to a society that is paradoxically ancient in origin but also far more advanced than any existing nation because they were able to deliberately pursue the perfection of the race without interference from the outside. Conversely, in many narratives, before the white adventurers come into contact with the “lost race,” they also interact with a primitive indigenous group who are imagined to have devolved or degenerated from the ancestors of the lost race and, typically, have no memory of or connection at all with their progenitors. In a way, this trope is a peculiar riff on the idea that African people are “unhistorical.” But rather than completely denying them a history, these narratives posit a history that they have “lost” in some sense, and therefore no longer have a claim to.

And in many of these fantasies, those who do end up having a claim to the “lost race” are the white explorers themselves, who realize that they are *also* the descendants of this lost race. The discovered lost race is conceived as what Fiorelli calls a “site of racial origin,” the manifestation of a “glorious Anglo-Saxon past” upon which a future might be built (454). In the marginal American novel *Yerbah the Dorado*, for example, explorers discover the lost city of Atlantis, whose inhabitants are very explicitly imagined as being “pure-blooded Aryan.” In discovering this lost city, the explorers have also discovered a racial past and a possible racial future. “The prospect of racial survival in lost-race romance depends on establishing both a great ancient past and a way to

reproduce racial lineage into the future,” a reproduction that necessitates something like the “native princess” resolution (454). As Rieder argues, “Lost-race fiction...derives its fundamental ‘mythic power from the way it negotiates the basic problem of ownership by simultaneously reveling in the discovery of uncharted territory and representing the journey as a *return* to a lost legacy, a place where the travelers find a fragment of their own history” (40). Overall, the lost race genre functioned simultaneously as a justification for imperial conquest and a means of reasserting, through an imagined history, the dominance and superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race.

It would seem that this subgenre would be extremely difficult to refashion for anti-racist purposes. Yet, the basic formula of the lost race novel is what Pauline Hopkins adapts for her final novel, *Of One Blood: Or, the Hidden Self*. What begins as a somewhat conventional melodrama (albeit with mystical and Gothic elements) about a mixed-race, passing man diverges crucially in the second half into the contours of an adventure novel, in which the protagonist Reuel Briggs travels to Northeast Africa in search of treasure and discovers instead a Black utopia, the hidden city of Telassar, a technologically advanced civilization descended from the inhabitants of the ancient city of Meroe. In many ways, this section of the novel is a “signifying inversion” of the lost race novel (Sundquist 570). Rather than a white explorer, the protagonist is mixed-race. And rather than discovering a white lost race from whom the primitive and savage African people had degenerated, Reuel discovers that Black people themselves are the origin of Western civilization.

The most important trope that Hopkins inverts is the idea of a “racial origin.” Hopkins uses contemporary archaeological discoveries to posit not an ancient white race

from which all others had degenerated, but the opposite. She frames “Ethiopia” as the origin of Western civilization. As one character says, “It is a *fact* that Egypt drew from Ethiopia all the arts, sciences and knowledge of which she was mistress...I have even thought...that black was the original color of man in prehistoric times” (87). In this formulation, when Reuel discovers the ancient city of Telassar and marries its “native princess” Candace, he is ostensibly returning to an originary Black identity from which he had previously been estranged because of the American stigma of “black blood.” Hopkins, by reconstructing a glorious Black past, is clearly attempting to offer a source of racial pride for her Black readers.

But what Hopkins’s speculative space ultimately offers is not simply an inversion of the type of racial origin story that reinforces racial hierarchies. More fundamentally, Telassar is a speculative experiment that offers a way of imagining racial identity completely outside of the framework of turn-of-the-century racial science. In particular, Telassar exists outside of the ideology of racial “purity,” a concept that “became an obsession in Anglo-Saxon America” (Smedley 239). Hopkins engages in the “cultural fictions concerning race and blood, the reinforcements, as it were, propping up the color line and maintaining white supremacy” (McDowell viii). What Hopkins ultimately offers with her reconstruction of a semi-mythical African past is a way of imagining Black identity not in terms of blood or any other category of racial science, but according to a more fundamental and mystical connection of collective memory, one that transcends space and time. The utopian city of Telassar enables the estrangement of racial science and opens an imaginative space in which to imagine these alternatives. At the same time, the outcome of the novel demonstrates, intentionally or not, of the limits of a Black

identity rooted only in a liberatory, semi-mythical, glorious African past, a type of political imagination that would continue to gain currency at the beginning of the twentieth century. The tragic death of Dianthe—Reuel’s fiancé, who he leaves behind in America when he travels to Africa—is a direct result of an attempt to suppress her past. Paradoxically, Hopkins’s clear desire to imagine a more liberatory source of racial identity exists alongside an equally clear warning against suppressing or otherwise ignoring a traumatic past.

Pauline Hopkins and *Of One Blood*

Pauline Hopkins (1859-1930) was among the most prolific turn-of-the-century Black writers. She transitioned into a writing career out of an early performance life, a change that biographer Lois Brown attributes to her participation in the antilynching debates and protests of the 1890s, in which she “confront[ed] the unpalatable and often unspeakable histories of concubinage, enslavement, and lynching” (2). She is associated most with the periodical *The Colored American Magazine (CAM)*, where *Of One Blood* was published serially in 1902-1903. *CAM*, beginning with its initial May 1900 issue, positioned itself as a “Race Journal,” “devoted to the higher culture of Religion, Literature, Science, Music and Art of the Negro, universally.” While *CAM* demonstrated an aspiration toward refinement and “higher culture” typical of Black middle-class racial uplift politics, the magazine also communicated a radical position. The editors wrote in *CAM*’s first issue:

What we desire, what we require, what we demand to aid in the onward march of progress and advancement is justice; merely this and nothing more...[n]ot a justice tempered with policy, or trammled with prejudice, neither a justice semi-hoodwinked, that discriminates invidiously or with unequal balances constantly throwing the weight in one direction, but justice, simple, pure, unbiased, unabridged, unadulterated, and undefiled.

Brown argues that “editorial statements such as these established the monthly journal as a resource for the increasingly mobilized African American organizations that were rallying to end lynching and institutionalized racism and inequality” (267). Along with other like-minded “race journals” of this era, *CAM*’s pages were collaborative spaces for critiquing social conditions (Foster 42).

Hopkins, along with Mary Ann Shadd Cary and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, was among the very small number of 19th-century Black women who held a powerful position on a periodical. Hopkins’s authorial and editorial contributions were essential to *CAM*’s political vision until 1904 when the notice came that she was retiring because of ill health. Most scholars agree that Booker T. Washington surreptitiously bought *CAM* and that his supporters pushed Hopkins out because they disapproved of her more radical positions (Gruesser 7). In addition to numerous stories, nonfiction pieces, biographical sketches, and other short form writing, Hopkins’s published four novels, three of them serialized in the pages of *CAM: Contending Forces*, a romance about a post-Civil War African American family; *Hagar’s Daughter*, a romance with elements of a detective novel about a passing, formerly enslaved woman; *Winona*, a romance with Black, indigenous and white characters set in antebellum Kansas; and *Of One Blood*, which adopts similar romantic conventions, but notably departs from them in the second half. The novels share core characteristics: along with their similar melodramatic conventions, they all center “passing” characters, and they all contain a climactic lineage reveal that dramatically changes characters’ lives.

The passing protagonist in *Of One Blood* is Reuel Briggs, a melancholic and suicidal but ambitious young scientist. He is a student of the “absurdities” of the physical

world, eager to pursue and prove the claims of mysticism, a pursuit which he views as a path out of poverty. His appearance is mysterious and ambiguous to his acquaintances—some guess that he is Italian, some Japanese. Even though Hopkins does not reveal until much later in the novel that Reuel is a passing Black man, “most readers familiar with generic treatments of mixed-race characters would have been quite confident” of this fact from the beginning (Murphy 137). In the first chapter, we are also introduced to Reuel’s friend and colleague, Aubrey Livingston. Reuel is honorable while Livingston has several unsavory characteristics: he is a womanizer, he is wealthy and idle, and he seems given to vice. The juxtaposition immediately establishes the contours of a melodrama.

Reuel and his friends see a performance of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, an African American ensemble. Reuel is especially drawn to the soloist Dianthe Lusk, a light-skinned woman whose performance expresses all the combined, repressed legacies of slavery. Later, Reuel is called into the hospital late at night to find Dianthe unconscious. The doctors want to pronounce her dead, but Reuel begs to be allowed to attempt magnetism on her, a procedure he has been secretly practicing on the corpses of dogs and cats. The procedure brings Dianthe back to consciousness. For the next several weeks, Reuel continues to tend Dianthe, oblivious to his own growing popularity and the credence he has lent to the practice of magnetism and other unconventional practices. Dianthe comes back to health, but has no memories or recollection of her identity, including the Black “blood that flows” through her (she passes as white), and her ability to sing has gone with her memory (54). In the process of rehabilitating her, Reuel falls in love and eventually proposes. Because he wants to avoid the scandal of marrying a

“Negress,” he determines to prevent anyone, including Dianthe, from discovering her forgotten racial origins.

During their engagement, Livingston informs Reuel of an open position on an archaeological expedition to Ethiopia. The expedition is a way out of poverty for Reuel, but it is also secretly an opportunity for Livingston to separate the couple and take Dianthe for himself. Intending to marry Dianthe when he returns from the expedition, Reuel decides to take the position, despite Dianthe’s protest (“If you knew how weak I was you wouldn’t leave me”); and despite his fears that Dianthe’s past identity may emerge while he is gone (“do you know that sometimes I have visions of the past and I try to grasp them but they slip away”) (64-65). Dianthe’s identity eventually does emerge, which Livingston is able to weaponize against her and her engagement to Reuel: he convinces her that Reuel will not accept that she is a “Negress” and, as the only one who knows her secret, he is the only person who can love and protect her.

The plot shifts to the mode of an adventure story as it follows Reuel’s expedition in Africa. On their journey to the ancient city of Meroe, the company finds a chart with a prophecy addressed “to the student who, having counted the cost, is resolute to once more reveal to the sceptical, the ancient glory of hoary Meroe” (95). After a deceptive letter informs him that Dianthe has died, Reuel loses all ties to home, and decides to pursue the dangers that the manuscript spoke of. As he explores the pyramid, he is drugged and brought into the undiscovered, ancient city of Telassar.

From here, the novel shifts into a distinctly utopian mode. Reuel explores the city of Telassar, which was once the “zenith” of civilization. Reuel is a typical bemused utopian protagonist, and his guide, Ai, notes his “ill-concealed amazement” and

“astonishment at the size and splendor of the palace that had sheltered him over night” (117). He is informed that this ancient world is far advanced from the world he knows and that “in many things your modern world is yet in its infancy” (119). Yet, apart from the hidden city of Telassar, the ancient Ethiopian civilization fell away from the worship of the one true God and were punished: “Great were the sins of our fathers, and the white stranger was to Ethiopia but a scourge in the hands of an offended God” (123). To return to its former glory, it is necessary for Ethiopia to “atone,” be purged of idolatry, and accept Christ. It is revealed that Reuel is the long-awaited “King Ergamenes,” a messiah figure with a prophesied mission to guide the civilization back to its original status. After Ai gives an account of Telassar’s religion, Reuel introduces them to the Christian “Son of Man,” an idea that is immediately accepted: “Your belief shall be ours; we have no will but yours. Deign to teach your subjects” (132).

Reuel soon falls in love with Telassar’s current monarch, Queen Candace, whose “loveliness was absolutely and ideally perfect...she seemed the embodiment of all chastity” (137). Queen Candace resembles Dianthe so much that it brings tears to Reuel’s eyes. With her, Reuel is to “work together for the upbuilding of humanity and the restoration of the race of our fathers” (142). With the help of Ai, Reuel quickly “progresse[s] in the knowledge of Infinity” necessary to do this work.

Using a scrying pool, Reuel discovers that Dianthe is still alive and married to his duplicitous friend Livingston. The action then shifts back to the United States. Through a series of plot reveals, the three central characters of the melodrama—Reuel, Dianthe, and Livingston—discover that, not only do they all have Black blood, but they are all actually siblings, an outcome of the sexual violences of slavery. They are all literally “of one

blood,” which is one explanation of the novel’s title. However, it is used in a significantly different way during the novel’s prophetic climax:

The slogan of the hour is ‘Keep the Negro down!’ but who is clear enough in vision to decide who hath black blood and who hath it not? Can anyone tell? No, not one; for in His own mysterious way He has united the white race and the black race in this new continent. By the transgression of the law He proves His own infallibility: ‘Of one blood have I made all nations of men to dwell upon the whole face of the earth,’ is as true today as when given to the inspired writers to be recorded. No man can draw the dividing line between the two races, for they are both of one blood! (178)

The novel ties its loose ends very quickly, and haphazardly. Livingston poisons Dianthe, and Reuel briefly reunites with her before she dies. Ai hypnotizes Livingston, who kills himself. Reuel leaves behind the United States and returns to Telassar to spend the rest of his days instructing the people there about modern culture and ideas. Although Reuel seems to have made a clean break, the book ends on an uncertain note, with Reuel concerned about America and the powerful nations of Europe slowly creeping toward this newly discovered civilization. “‘Where will it stop?’ he sadly question. ‘What will the end be?’” (193). The novel ends with a final prophetic statement: “He will prove His words, ‘Of one blood have I made all races of men’” (193).

Blood and Purity

The declaration that all races are “of one blood” (repeated no less than five times in the short novel), can only be fully understood as a response to the idea of racial “purity,” and particularly the value of “pure” “white” “blood,” the pursuit of which “became an obsession in Anglo-Saxon America” (Smedley 239). There were varying articulations of this idea of purity, but most of them employed the oversaturated and unstable signifier of “blood.” For example, the decision of the infamous *Plessy vs.*

Ferguson case employs the signifier, apparently self-conscious about its indeterminacy: “It is true that the question of the proportion of colored blood necessary to constitute a colored person, as distinguished from a white person, is one upon which there is a difference of opinion in the different states.” But “blood” far exceeds its legal implications. As Salvant argues, “Race and blood are two of the most richly signifying terms in our vocabulary.” As opposed to skin color, for example, the connotations of “blood” far exceed a simple description of racial features and “make a substantive difference in the ideology of race” (12).

For one, “blood” was an important tool in the construction of white American identity. Salvant traces the uniquely American history of rhetorically linking blood and race. Blood did, of course, figure into formulations of race in Europe. But the American rhetoric of blood as “sacrifice” for the founding of the nation—as in Jefferson’s turn of phrase, “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants”—ensured that “blood” took on a connotation of national identity in addition to its racial meanings. 19th-century Americans constructed an imaginative lineage that carried them back to an originary sacrificial spilling, allowing them to construct a coherent identity around it. Of course, this identity construction excluded non-white blood and was therefore an essential element, Salvant argues, for theories of racial purity and racial contamination. Goyal similarly notes that “one of the most common rhetorical moves of white supremacist narratives of the era was to suggest that racial difference was a matter not simply of skin color, but of something internal to the body, that is to say, of blood” (35). After several imaginative leaps, one could link American identity directly with white blood and, conversely, render non-white blood a signifier of the foreign.

Using such a helpfully vague signifier, most anxieties about racial purity boiled down to the “possibility that some black ‘blood’ might contaminate the white race and cause the deterioration of all that was noble, pure, and superior” (Smedley 237). One of the clearest expressions of this fear comes Louis Agassiz who wrote during the Civil War: “How shall we eradicate the stigma of a lower race when its blood has once been allowed to flow freely into that of our children?” (qtd. in McDowell xi). These anxieties were exacerbated in America because “the United States alone created a system based on racial absolutism, the idea that single drop of African blood, or varying percentages of Asian or Native American blood, could taint the purity of someone who might otherwise be presumed to be European” (Wilkerson 121).

Therefore, at the turn of the century, the separation of “black blood” from white was imagined as a social good, and the ambition of securing a society against racial contamination had a clear expression in reality with the creation and maintenance of a “color line” in the United States. We can see this logic clearly in the famous 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, the “grotesque apogee” of the legitimation of racial classification and racial segregation (Hartman 192). The commonsense view, in hindsight, is that *Plessy* was a “bad” decision, one of the worst in Supreme Court history. However, as legal scholar Charles Lofgren makes clear, there was nothing unusual, unreasonable, or sensational about the case when it was decided in 1896: the public met the decision with apathy (5). Regardless of the more technical question of whether the case upheld or contradicted the language and spirit of the 14th amendment, the decision was based in a reasonable and mainstream discourse of Black racial inferiority. In other words, the

Plessy case met the “reasonableness” standard often applied to legal decisions. Lofgren summarizes six basic assumptions on race that would have been dominant at the time:

(1) Blacks are significantly different from whites. (2) These differences result in black inferiority, especially in moral and mental characteristics. (3) Change in these respects will occur very slowly, if at all. (4) Given inbred racial differences, race mixing is deleterious to both whites and blacks, and at best produces a hybrid inferior to the former. (5) Race antipathy is inevitable, especially if blacks intrude themselves on the superior group. (6) Therefore, an integrated society is impossible in practical terms (115).

Plessy v. Ferguson was a response to the perceived threat against white racial purity that emancipated Black people represented. According to Saidiya Hartman, the case epitomizes “the identification of the health and comfort of the populace with white supremacy” (199). After the Civil War, it became common to view formerly enslaved people as an “alien” or insurgent presence (Hartman 164). George Washington Cable, for example, a proponent of racial equality, described the “Negro problem” as “six million debased people” having been “grafted into...the citizenship of one of the most intelligent nations in the world” (qtd. in Hartman 165). Charlotte Perkins Gilman expresses something similar when she pontificates in 1908 that “We have to consider the unavoidable presence of a large body of aliens, of a race widely dissimilar and in many respects inferior, whose present status is to us a social injury” (78). According to the logic of racial purity, “The wholeness of the social body was made possible by the banishment and abjection of blacks, the isolation of dangerous elements from the rest of the population, and the containment of contagion” (Hartman 199).

The “color line,” the manifestation of an obsession with purity, obviously had very real and dangerous day-to-day consequences for Black Americans, particularly those

living in the Southern states. But the discourse about and rationale for the color line was often quite abstract, and, in many cases, highly speculative. In a sense, it was speculative by necessity. Many anxieties about racial purity—for example, what will be the outcome if we allow races to “amalgamate”—can only be articulated on relatively large time scales, over several generations. A popular speculative exercise was to imagine what a “future American” might, or more often *should*, look like. For example, the most infamous American white supremacist of the time, Tom Dixon, in his novel *The Leopard’s Spots*, repeats ad nauseam various iterations of the question, “*Shall the future American²⁵ be an Anglo-Saxon or a Mulatto?*” *The Leopard’s Spots* is a “history” or “romance” of the Reconstruction era in which the actions of the Ku Klux Klan are portrayed as necessary and noble, and one of Dixon’s primary justifications for their actions is an appeal to a hypothetical racial future.

Based on the speculative nature of racial anxieties, it is not surprising that utopian novels became a popular vehicle for expressing them. As discussed in the introduction, by the turn of the century utopian novels “had become an important playground for the racialist, eugenicist, and segregationist discourse of white writers” (Fabi 45). But the

²⁵ Although the idea of a “future American” was a fairly common theme at the turn of the century, Dixon’s rhetoric was likely a response to Chesnut’s 1900 “The Future American,” which is also a highly speculative exercise. In a series of essays, Chesnut predicts what was perhaps Dixon’s greatest fear: that non-white blood would be “absorbed” by the white, resulting in a single, undifferentiated future American race (Ferguson 97). Catering to the biases of his white readers, Chesnut describes the inevitable outcome of complete “amalgamation” in the United States:

That it must come in the United States, sooner or later, seems to be a foregone conclusion...a hard pill, but one which must be swallowed. There can manifestly be no such thing as a peaceful and progressive civilization in a nation divided by two warring races, and homogeneity of type, at least in externals, is a necessary condition of harmonious social progress (107).

impulse toward purity and elimination of racial contaminants arguably existed long before this “golden age” of utopias, and it informs what is usually called the first American utopian novel, Mary Griffith’s obscure 1836 *Three Hundred Years Hence*. In the novel, a time-traveling narrator, Hastings, experiences the vastly improved world of the United States in the year 2136. The premise of the novel is that the future society’s existence is predicated on women’s emancipation and resulting ability to effect social change. Griffith presents a huge catalog of improvements, most of them associated with contemporary American women’s reform movements. Antebellum concerns about race receive little attention. Even so, the sparse attention they are afforded illuminates incipient utopian anxieties about interracial relationships. Addressing the increasingly partisan conflict of slavery, Griffith employs a version of the “Liberia solution”: former slave masters are reimbursed and formerly enslaved people willingly expatriate to Liberia. The mass migration is not coerced, though, resulting in a small group of freed people who choose to remain. “Those that remained” are of great interest to Hastings, who asks, “Did [they] ever intermarry with the white population, and were they ever admitted into society?” The short answer is *no*, because when “their bodies were unshackled, their minds became enlightened, and as their education advanced, they learned to appreciate themselves properly.” Following this enlightenment, they “saw no advantage” in intermarrying, and took it as a point of pride that they married within their own race, to the extent that it became a great insult to suggest or imply intermarriage.

The Liberia “solution” was, of course, quite popular at the time, and its rendering in the novel appears relatively benevolent, if naïve. What is unique about Griffith’s approach is that she speculates about Liberian colonization not just as a political solution

to a particular “problem,” but additionally as a starting point in a chain reaction leading to a utopian future. Pfaelzer describes Griffith’s imagined cause and effect bluntly: in *Three Hundred Years Hence*, “white women developed their full potential only when the state solved the ‘race problem,’” the problem in this case being the possibility of racial contamination (333).

Projections into the future like Griffith’s novel exploded as a genre at the turn of the century. But nearly as popular were “lost race” novels. These narratives were especially productive as spaces to fantasize about the impact of eugenicist policies, whose outcomes could only be speculated about or “observed” on a relatively large time scale. Rather than projecting into the future, lost race novels imagined the development of a civilization that began at an ancient origin point and continued into the present. For example, in Mary E. Bradley’s *Mizora*, an explorer discovers an all-female, feminist utopian society at the center of the earth. This society, on its way toward perfection, enacted a form of eugenics that—in addition to eliminating “idiots,” “lunatics,” “deformity,” and “disease”—eliminated those of a “dark complexion,” creating an Aryan race (104). *Mizora* is a precursor to Gilman’s more well-known 1915 *Herland*, which is also a lost race novel, even though it is no longer typically thought of in those terms. Even though Gilman is not as explicit about race, her imagined society does implement “negative eugenics,” a policy that Egan interprets as “a method of purification fed by nineteenth-century science” (77). This practice results in desirable physical and cognitive traits among the women, many of which seem to be coded as white. Indeed, turn-of-the-century appeals for (white) women’s independence were often bound with visions of

“race perfection.” Put very simply, if utopianism is “social dreaming,” then many American utopian authors were “dreaming of a white future” (Pfaelzer 325).

So, when Hopkins invokes the mantra “of one blood,” this is the forbidding horizon to which she is responding. Hopkins’s speculative vision is operating against the fantasy of a pure, uncontaminated all-white future that has always been a constitutive element of the imagined American nation. The repetitive declaration that “all races of men” are “of one blood” is an ironic, undercutting answer to the anxious, repetitive questions of people like Dixon: “What shall the future American be?” Shall the future American be an Anglo-Saxon or a Mulatto? But, Hopkins replies, because God “in His own mysterious way...has united the white race and the black race in this new continent,” the pursuit of “purity” is already an impossible one.

In this context, it makes sense that readers might see Hopkins’s repurposing of the “lost race” genre—in which her protagonist discovers a hidden, undisturbed enclave of Black people—as a true “inversion” of the genre. In the formulation of an inversion, Telassar, the discovered “site of racial origin” demonstrates not an Anglo-Saxon foundation, but a glorious Black one, and a point of access to a purity of Black blood that has been lost. The plot even resolves with Reuel marrying native royalty. Queen Candace, who “seemed the embodiment of all chastity” (*OOB* 137), arguably embodies the potential for a “new version of racial reproduction” untainted by the polluted, degrading legacy of slavery (Fiorelli 464). From a certain perspective, *OOB* would seem to substitute one harmful version of purity for another, an inversion that lays bare the “mental gymnastics required to project this kind of homogeneity” (454). This is perhaps the most controversial and baffling aspect of the novel for critics, as McDowell

summarizes: “If we are all ‘of one blood,’ critics ask, how can the novel logically conclude, as it does, with a recuperation of distinct bloodlines, one the source of an ‘originary’ African identity, existing in its own state of imaginary purity before Anglo-Saxon contamination” (xv).

The central contradiction, expressed in the novel’s title, between the conviction that all people are “of one blood” vs. the idea of a “hidden (racial) self,” is very difficult to resolve (by design, I would argue). However, I disagree that Hopkins is simply inverting the formula of a “lost race” story, and therefore substituting one form of purity for another. Similarly, I disagree that her notion of a “hidden self” correlates with notions of purity or bloodlines at all. In fact, as I will argue, Hopkins suggests the opposite: that a collective Black identity or “hidden” self exists (or should exist) outside of Western racial discourse altogether. Hopkins paradoxically repurposes the trope of racial origin to reject that concept altogether. While she does recuperate Africa as a site of racial pride, the utopian space of Telassar functions as something fundamentally different than tracing a literal lineage back to Africa. Against the interpretation of Telassar as a positive desire for the recuperation of a “pure” African bloodline, I suggest viewing the utopian site instead as an imaginative exercise in estranging the stigma of “black blood.” This estrangement, in turn, opens imaginative possibilities for imagining notions of Black identity outside of the racial hierarchies established by concepts of purity and contamination.

The African Enclave and “The Unclassified Residuum”

The intrusion of a utopian/speculative narrative in the second half of *Of One Blood* is a significant departure from Hopkins’s other fiction, which is much more

conventional or realistic. In general, critics have found this difficult to reconcile, and traditional interpretations tend to emphasize utopian narrative's ineffectiveness or irrelevance. Sundquist, for example, calls the "back-to-Africa" plot "patently escapist fiction" (569). Tate is much harsher:

Thus, instead of finding urgent social problems dramatized in a somewhat realistic fictional setting, we find the remote landscape of science fiction. Although it can be argued that much of this genre provides critical observations and predictions about the real world, in Hopkins's case, however, her science fiction novel seems almost entirely gratuitous. *Of One Blood* is, nonetheless, an extremely intriguing, imaginative, and provocative novel ("Pauline Hopkins" 62).

In this formulation, *OOB* succeeds *despite* its utopian foray. Even if Tate cautiously accepts "science fiction" as a legitimate means for social critique, she believes that Hopkins failed in some crucial way to create a science fiction narrative that comments on the real world. For Tate, Hopkins's abandonment of realism is also an expression of the end of a "racial optimism that dominates the 1890s [black Victorian love] novels" that is "ultimately suspended in death-like dissolution in this last novel" (207). "Rather than reinvigorate the disheartened desire [for racial justice], the novel suspends it in hibernation" (207). Bruce similarly argues that "*Of One Blood* is the obverse of Hopkins' earlier novels, an indication of her awareness that her effort to escape the ambivalences of American society by turning to fantasies of interracial kinship and marriage could not be wholly effective" (155).

To be sure, it is significant that Hopkins ends *Of One Blood* outside of the United States altogether. There is certainly a sense that Hopkins felt she could not express her vision for Black pride and solidarity fully within the American context at the time. However, I think the transition from a realistic to a utopian space is misinterpreted as an

escape from racial justice activism. But how Telassar functions is not as wish fulfillment in the face of despair. Rather, it functions to estrange the racial hierarchies and notions of purity that had led to the despair of the “color line” in the first place.

Perhaps the most obvious and straightforward way that Telassar operates to foster a sense of racial pride is in creating an “ennobling and romanticized black history”²⁶ (Brown 291). Hopkins anticipates Schomburg’s famous injunction that “the Negro must remake his past in order to make his future,” and “remakes” the dominant image of Africa. She takes this stereotypical image—a primitive negative space, outside of history and culture—and, using contemporary scientific discourse and evidence about Africa as

²⁶ This attempt to create an ennobling history of Africa is consistent with her demonstrated a commitment to recovering and recording factual histories, expressed most clearly in her “Famous Men...” and “Famous Women of the Negro Race” series in *CAM*. In these biographical profiles of famous Black people, Hopkins enacted what Arthur Schomburg would later describe as the race’s “definite desire and determination to have a history, well documented, widely known...and administered as a stimulating and inspiring tradition for the coming generations” (qtd. in Brown 287). The sketches were in the tradition of what Lois Brown calls a “liberation historiography,” fostering a sense of racial pride through an “ennobling and romanticized black history” (Brown 291). A representative example of this is a passage from her biography of Toussaint L’Ouverture: “If the Negro race were judged by the achievements and courage in war of this one man, by his purity of purpose and justice in times of peace, we should be entitled to as high a place in the world’s relation of facts respecting races, as any other blood in the annals of history” (qtd. in Brown 297).

Hopkins reconstructed history to “ennoble” and, relatedly, to provide what William Still called “testimony in support of the ability of the race to surmount the remaining obstacles growing out of oppression, ignorance and poverty” (Hopkins, “Famous Women...” 212). She quotes Still extensively in her portrait of Harriet Tubman, including his biblical injunction that “The race must not forget the rock from which they were hewn, nor the pit from whence they were digged. Like other races, this newly emancipated people will need all the knowledge of their past condition which they can get” (212). Hopkins’s biographies blend facts with hagiography in an impassioned rhetorical style, constituting “sermons on racial salvation” (Brown 297). Hopkins would later expand the scope of history as racial salvation in her self-published “A Primer of Facts Pertaining to the Early Greatness of the African Race and the Possibility of Restoration by Its Descendants,” a combination of contemporary scientific discourse and Biblical evidence about the Black diaspora’s achievements and its imminent redemption.

the origin of civilization, remakes Africa into an object of Black racial pride. Reuel himself represents the change in perspective from the stereotypical image of Africa to a more accurate one. He “noticed that this was at variance with the European idea respecting Central Africa, which brands these regions as howling wildernesses or an uninhabitable country” (134). Additionally, Hopkins repeatedly links the appearance and customs of Telassar to ancient Mediterranean cultures, demonstrating by association that it is similar to the civilizations that are revered by Western culture. Reuel remarks that, “Used as he was to the improvements and luxuries of life in the modern Athens, he could but acknowledge them as poor beside the combination of Oriental and ancient luxury that he now enjoyed” (115). At another point, Reuel remarks that he is served meals “on curious golden dishes that resembled the specimens taken from ruined Pompeii” (116).

In many ways, this aspect of the story is actually most similar to the lost race novels that Hopkins is repurposing. Even though Hopkins is contrasting the technologically and culturally advanced civilization of Telassar against the stereotypical primitivity of Africa, she is paradoxically reinforcing this primitivity by suggesting that one needs to return to a distant past in order to find any worthwhile culture. Before Reuel discovers Telassar, he reflects on a “dirty Arab town” on the outskirts of Meroe:

Here there was no future. No railroads, no churches, no saloons, no schoolhouses to echo the voices of merry children, no promise of the life that produces within the range of his vision. Nothing but the monotony of the past centuries dead and forgotten save by a few learned savans (93).

To be fair, Hopkins seems to be, on some level, critiquing the Western imperial gaze that views Africa in this way. At the same time, Hopkins does not offer an alternative image of contemporary Africa. Because of moments like this in the text, scholars have debated whether Hopkins’s appropriation of Africa as a site of utopian hope and racial pride for

African Americans constitutes a colonial project. Like other important concepts in *OOB*, Hopkins's ideas about African civilization and primitivity are sometimes ambiguous or contradictory.

To be sure, Hopkins never advocated for a literal colonization or emigration to Africa. Her perspective became more international in her later work, and she advocated for “fostering race pride and an international friendship with the Blacks of Africa,” but she insisted that African Americans were not “obliged” to emigrate. “Friendly intercourse and mutual aid and comfort,” Hopkins writes in 1905, “are all that are necessary at the present time” (“Primer” 345).

The accusation of a colonialist mindset is typically linked Hopkins's view of Africans as ignorant and primitive, and of the African continent as *terra nullius*. Gaines, for example, sees the climax of the utopian plot—Reuel being crowned king of Telassar and teaching the inhabitants about Christianity—as a variation of the “civilizing mission” with which Christian missionaries justified their work. In this scheme, ancient African civilization does not represent an actual recoverable past, but rather “a blank page for imaginary conquest” (435). It is still a “reclamation of an ancient African civilization as a refuge from contemporary domestic and imperial oppression of colored peoples” (Gaines 445) but based on an “imperial knowledge” of “the primitive” (434).

Similarly, Japtok argues that, despite attempting to critique imperial ideologies, Hopkins falls into the “Darwinist trap,” the fallacy of equating technological achievements with the worth of a culture or a civilization. After all, the civilization of Telassar, even though it is ancient, is not “primitive” in any sense, and Hopkins values it because it demonstrates that Black people have indeed contributed to the progress of

humanity. Japtok sums up a fundamental contradiction of the book: “*Of One Blood* reflects a Darwinist outlook on history at the same time that it opposes and undermines a racism deeply informed by Darwinism” (406).

Opposite Gaines and Japtok, Ahmad makes a strong claim against *OOB* as a colonial fantasy. She places the novel in an “anti-colonial utopian” tradition. Texts in this tradition, she argues, employ the conventions of canonical utopian novels, but reject their ideology of “developmentalism” and its correlated teleological, evolutionary view of history that “disparages any form of primitivism and sees little of value in the past” (6). “Replacing the evolutionary understanding of Bellamy and Gilman is [*Of One Blood*’s] nostalgic vision that uses a recovered past to create a better future” (132). I agree with this claim. However, to be a bit reductive, while I agree that Hopkins generally rejects the *temporal*, “progressive” assumptions of utopia, she does not fully reject the *spatial* assumptions of utopia: particularly that Africa and its inhabitants constitute *terra nullius*, a site for renewal and redemption, upon which African-Americans can imaginatively stake out a source of identity.

For one, Hopkins demonstrates throughout her work a strong commitment to the Christian rhetoric of the Messiah and of redemption, making it unlikely that she did not desire this on some level for African people as she viewed them. Additionally, I agree with Goyal that it is anachronistic to infer or expect a fully articulated Black anti-imperial critique in 1902-1903. As Goyal argues, although a sense of pan-African solidarity was certainly emerging in this historical moment, “the language of cultural survivals, and of black internationalism” were not yet available as concepts (55). “Created out of the swirl of racialized narratives of the era, the available avenue for imagining a nation (as a means

of autonomy, self-determination, and freedom) was by way of an imperial appropriation of an African past” (55).

The extent to which Hopkins’s imagination overlaps, consciously or not, with the imperial imaginations of lost race novels is debatable. However, where Hopkins unambiguously rejects their logic is in her insistence *against* the possibility or desirability of racial purity. Contrary to what some scholars argue, the “hidden self” that Hopkins invokes is not exclusively paired with a “pure” bloodline. Reuel does not simply abandon a degraded past to reunite with an unpolluted bloodline, and there is no evidence that the hidden racial self depends on the affirmation of purity. In fact, Hopkins subtly insists on the opposite. “The men beside him were strangers, and more unreal than the vast chamber. Dark-visaged, he noticed that they ranged in complexion from a creamy tint to purest ebony” (113). This passage highlights not the “purity” of the people of Telassar but their lack of it, the range of appearances that make up the group. The description of the people of Telassar fits the range of appearances that would be called “black” in the United States at the time and echoes language used in the beginning of the novel: “They range at home [in the South] from alabaster to ebony” (12). In other words, Hopkins is not simply inverting white supremacist purity discourse, matching the purest African identity with the purest ebony.

There are many unsettled and unsettling things about the back-to-Africa plot. We might easily argue that the discovery of a hidden African city in need of redemption is an imperialist fantasy; or that a mystical racial identity is escapist. However, the novel’s melodramatic conventions, the threat that hidden lineages will reveal themselves at any moment, seems a clear warning against the pursuit of purity. Just because *OOB* is steeped

in contemporary scientific debates does not mean that it reproduces all their assumptions. It does not follow that Hopkins reproduces or repurposes purity discourse just because she emphasizes and celebrates Black racial distinctiveness and achievement.

Rather than conceptualizing Hopkins's utopian space as an expression of desire for a pure, redeemed bloodline, it is more productive to characterize Telassar negatively, as a desire for an absence of a specific social evil. As Jameson argues, the Utopian imagination, by definition, articulates a "solution so obvious and self-explanatory that every reasonable person will grasp it" (11). The Utopian imagination encourages "oversimplifications," and, therefore, "the Utopian remedy must at first be a fundamentally negative one, and stand as a clarion call to remove and to extirpate this specific root of all evil from which all the others spring" (12). He defines the space that allows for this elimination an "enclave," a "pocket of stasis within the ferment and rushing forces of social change...within which Utopian fantasy can operate" (15). More's *Utopia* is an enclave that eliminates money; Morris's *News from Nowhere* imagines a world where alienated labor is unthinkable; *Herland* eliminates men; etc.

We might think of Hopkins's Telassar as a world prior to, an enclave protected from the discourse of racial purity and the resulting stigma that attaches to "black blood." Telassar, where the ideology of white supremacy is not dominant or even existent, is a space where an expression of unambiguous pride in Ethiopian blood estranges the notion of stigma, as when Reuel says, "it is a deep disgrace to have within the veins even one drop of the blood you seem so proud of possessing" (129). The enclave is not a positive desire but a means of providing an alternative to contrast with reality. A standard account of the Utopia genre locates the source of value in this contrast, a value that "lies in the

walls it allows us to feel around our minds, the invisible limits it gives us to detect by sheerest induction, the miring of our imaginations in...the mud of the present age in which winged Utopian shoes stick, imagining that to be the force of gravity itself” (Jameson, qtd. in Daniels 148). In this sense, *Telassar* is indeed a nostalgic return to the past, “a nostalgic vision that uses a recovered past to create a better future” (Ahmad 132). The second half of *OOB*, a romance, conjures a “nostalgia for some other time (or, one might add, place) that undermines the social ideals of the here and now” (Fuchs 6): in this case, a distant, mythical memory of society before Western racial constructions and hierarchies. Importantly, it is a nostalgic return as an imaginative exercise, not as wish fulfillment or an abandoned project of racial justice.

Using the speculative enclave of *Telassar*, Hopkins hopes to offer an imaginative space to imagine forms of Black identity that exist entirely outside of the dominant discourse of racial science. Hopkins generic and temporal “dislocation” displaces the Realist project of critiquing racial ideology that informed her earlier novels onto a more “experimental” or “fantastic” form” (Daniels-Rauterkus 126) As Daniels-Rauterkus argues, “By foregrounding African American characters and utilizing more romantic and speculative devices, Hopkins [is] able to reimagine black experience outside of the contexts of turn-of--the-twentieth-century racial violence and discrimination” (127). Additionally, as Black political consciousness evolved toward a more diasporic outlook, rather than a nationalist one, Hopkins’s estrangement of racial science also provided the space to imagine a Black identity that transcended geography.

As I will demonstrate, what Hopkins substitutes for an identity hampered by the limits turn-of-the-century racial science is a far more capacious one. In essence, Hopkins

attempts to explore a form of unconscious, Black collective memory. She is especially interested in aspects of Black experience and memory that have been suppressed or occluded in some way by the dominant racial group. Importantly, this occluded history, conceived in *OOB* as a “residuum,” is dangerous in some way. It is not inert. It is not an object that can be “dug up” and studied, à la Schomburg. Nor is it strictly in the empirical domain. In *OOB*, the residuum of an occluded past threatens to erupt at any moment, as it does when Dianthe rediscovers her identity, contrary to Reuel’s intentions. Hopkins conceives of history as against what Walter Benjamin describes as an “‘eternal’ image of the past,” an image or object that can be studied, unaltered, at any moment (262). Hopkins anticipates Benjamin’s anti-historicist critique, that “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’...It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (255). In *OOB*, history imposes itself whether or not it is solicited: when Dianthe’s performance of “Go Down, Moses” invokes to a white audience “the awfulness of the hell” of slavery (15); when a later performance reawakens Dianthe’s hidden identity; even when Reuel stumbles upon Telassar, unexpectedly uncovering a distant African past. After Dianthe rediscovers her identity, she is led by unseen forces to a passage from Luke: “For there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed” (73). This mantra is not only a narrative promise that animates the melodrama, but also an assertion about history. And, like a melodrama, the “revelation” of history is rarely deliberate or planned, emerging as it does, improbably, in moments of instability and danger.

Hopkins establishes the narrative possibilities of an erupting past in several ways and locates the past particularly in the realm of the supernatural. It is established in the

beginning that Briggs is a student of “absurdities,” or what we might also call the supernatural or the mystical (*OOB* 2). Our introduction to his interior life establishes his affect of melancholy, which is situated around his reflections on a book he has just finished called “The Unclassified Residuum” (2). Other scholars have identified this title as a reference to a review essay by William James published in *Scribner’s* about a book on hysteria. (The review essay is titled “The Hidden Self,” a likely inspiration for the *OOB*’s subtitle.) As James renders it, any science, any “-ology,” has a tendency toward categorizing and classifying every phenomenon into a comprehensive, “closed and completed system of truth” (James 248). Any phenomena that do not fit into that system are considered “unclassified residuum,” and are ignored as absurdities. “No part of the unclassified residuum has usually been treated with a more contemptuous scientific disregard than the mass of phenomena generally called mystical,” James argues (248). Hopkins appropriates “residuum” as a capacious category that contains any phenomena, history, or discourse that a dominant Western explanatory framework cannot accommodate. The “residuum” includes mysticism and trance states—phenomena that Reuel studies—but it also includes other unclassifieds: African civilization outside of Africa’s classification as primitive; histories of racial mixing outside a classification of racial “purity.” Even Reuel himself, as a “black genius,” constitutes the residuum of a segregated scientific community (Posnock 65). In other words, Hopkins “recasts” James’s concept of the unclassified residuum “as the legitimate epistemological domain of Western science’s racial and sexual Other” (Schrager 200).

Hopkins is especially interested in the narrative possibilities of the “trance state.” She quotes James’s essay almost verbatim:

We know a non-hysterical woman who in her trances knows facts which altogether transcend her *possible* normal consciousness, facts about the lives of people whom she never saw or heard of before. I am well aware of all the liabilities to which this statement exposes me, and I make it deliberately, having practically no doubt whatever of its truth (*OOB* 3).

By quoting this directly, Hopkins is attempting to frame trance states and hidden consciousness as a site of legitimate inquiry—supernatural but authentic. But more importantly, Hopkins is establishing a plausible vehicle for the novel’s characters to “transcend” “normal consciousness,” to access unknown or hidden information. To be sure, this kind of access is a convenient plot device: things are revealed or communicated through supernatural occurrences to forward events and establish character relationships. However, there is a larger thematic goal, which is to give characters access to repressed pasts and identities. When Reuel replies to Livingston’s ridicule, “you know as well as I that the wonders of a material world cannot approach those of the undiscovered country within ourselves—the hidden self lying quiescent in every human soul,” he is speaking generically about hidden mysteries for which contemporary science cannot account. But throughout the book and throughout Reuel’s journey toward self-understanding, Hopkins reveals that this hidden self contains a hidden racial identity, a hidden racial consciousness.

Hopkins also establishes this link to a racial past in a more conventional way with her inclusion of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. This musical group, as Daphne Brooks describes, was incredibly popular at this time in the transatlantic world: the Singers were “what we might call the first black ‘cross-over’ musical act,” and had a sizable, “rabid fan base of white admirers” (297). Hopkins describes the effect on the fictional white Boston audience when Dianthe steps forward and performs “Go Down, Moses”:

“Spell-bound they sat beneath the outpoured anguish of a suffering soul. All the horror, the degradation from which a race had been delivered were in the pleading strains of the singer’s voice. It strained the senses almost beyond endurance. It pictured to that self-possessed, highly-cultured New England assemblage as nothing else ever had, the awfulness of the hell from which a people had been happily plucked” (*OOB* 15)

As Hopkins imagines it, the performance’s effect on the audience is like that of a slave narrative or an anti-slavery speech on an earlier generation of sympathetic whites: an ostensible understanding of the “degradation” of slavery and a contained moment for empathy and recognition. For example, as William Lloyd Garrison describes his reaction to one of Douglass’s anti-slavery speeches: “I think I never hated slavery so intensely as at that moment; certainly, my perception of the enormous outrage which is inflicted by it, on the godlike nature of its victims, was rendered far more clear than ever” (4). The key difference, of course, is that much of the audience for the Fisk Jubilee Singers is removed from the historical memory of slavery, and they are not witnessing a direct testimony but a conjuring of the past. As Paul Gilroy argues, The Singers were “imagined to be the angels of history for white audiences,” providing a conduit to a vicarious but visceral evocation of the past (qtd. in Brooks 298).

In this performance (at least as far as the audience perceives it), Dianthe transcends her own identity, becoming a “suffering soul” by somehow containing the entire collective experience of slavery in her voice. This performance is Dianthe’s last, after which she enters the services of a “traveling magnetic physician—a woman” (38). Dianthe seems to transition from one type of “medium” to another. As a singer, communing with and resurrecting the memory of a horrific past; as a mesmerist, more literally resurrecting life. Characteristically for Hopkins and for this novel especially, *OOB* proliferates possible conduits for resurrecting or reviving a past. Trance states,

artistic performance, mesmerism, archaeology, Voodoo: in the novel, all of these enact a communion or connection with the dead. To be sure, these conduits vary in perceived credibility, and Hopkins is certainly attempting to juxtapose different epistemologies and complicate the claim that only empirical knowledge is valid. But whether Hopkins “believes” in the claims of mesmerism (or whether the reader does, for that matter) is beside the point. All these practices are more important for what they represent: an expansive network of attachments that tether the Black Diaspora—both individually and collectively—to the past.

Perhaps the most significant “claim” that the past makes on the present in *OOB*, and the claim that is the most dangerous, is the revelation at the end of the novel that the three characters of the melodramatic triangle are all related. They are literally “all of one blood” as Aunt Hannah—Reuel, Dianthe, and Livingston’s grandmother, and the novel’s last link to the living memory of slavery—explains. This lineage reveal is, importantly, basically impossible to predict. Unlike Dianthe’s rediscovered identity, the reader has no prior knowledge of the siblings’ relationship; and unlike Reuel’s identity as a mixed-race man, there are no obvious genre conventions or descriptions to foreshadow the reveal. As a result, the reader’s perception and expectations for these characters, and the possibilities and limitations of the plot more broadly, are radically altered by this revelation.

The Limits of a Liberating Past

With Dianthe, the reader might “stagger” (177) at this revelation, shocked that this eruption of an illicit past has permanently foreclosed the possibility for romantic resolution. And with Dianthe, we might be speechless because “[t]he sacrilege of what had been done was too horrible” (178). And Hopkins does indeed frame the unintended

incestuous relationship as an outcome of “slavery’s moral catastrophe” (Sundquist 572). As she describes the situation: “Such havoc is wrought by evil deeds” (178). Because of Dianthe and Reuel’s hidden familial relationship, it was always a narrative impossibility that their romantic relationship could resolve. Extrapolating this logic, there is no possible resolution for a nation tainted by the “havoc” of slavery, and Reuel’s relocation represents an imaginative escape from the hidden dangers of slavery’s legacy, one that Dianthe is not able to make.

This final revelation is perhaps the ultimate expression of the “danger” inherent in a Black identity rooted in a repressed or forgotten past. It is also, I argue, a representation, intentional or not, of the limits of a Black identity rooted only in a liberatory, mythical, glorious African past, a political imagination that would continue to gain currency at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Jalondra Davis argues, viewing Black identity only in terms of an African past frames the characters who are not able to escape the United States as degraded and condemned. Slavery and its “disorganizing effects” can only be “a dark past from which to rise” (Davis 8). Dianthe is especially vulnerable. For Reuel to make a clean break and restore his African identity, “Dianthe cannot be allowed to survive. Removing her body from the narrative also removes the possibility of her reproducing the sexual shame of slavery” (10). This reading is based in a liberatory rupture between past and present, and “critics have overwhelmingly accepted the logic that ‘pure’ African identity acts in opposition to a post-slavery subjectivity irrevocably tied up with the sexually violated black female body” (9). And critics accept this logic, Davis argues, despite the novel’s insistence that Dianthe’s repressed past attempts to make itself known, that her “voice struggles[s] to

free itself throughout the novel,” and that Reuel and Livingston willfully ignore and suppress it (19).

Scholars have described Dianthe and her character arc as tragic. For Tate, Dianthe is an example of Hopkins’s tendency in her serial novels to “decenter the heroine’s prominence” and “silence the discourse of female agency” (*Domestic* 208). Tate implies that Dianthe is a “tragic mulatta,” a heroine with a “proverbial drop of black blood” whose “function is to incite the sympathy of the reader for their racial plights” (208). Goyal echoes this point, arguing that although Hopkins avoided the archetype in most of her work, “Dianthe carries out the role of the doomed mulatta to the letter” (33). For Ammons, Dianthe represents the “awful truth” of Black women artists’ silencing at the beginning of the 20th century: “In *Of One Blood* the black American woman artist has a past. It is ancient, potent, brilliant—full of voice. What she does not have is ownership of that past or a future” (qtd. in Brooks 310). In this formulation, Dianthe’s final performance with The Fisk Jubilee Singers is a “tragic swan song” before she ultimately descends to the “depths of patriarchal control and manipulation” (Brooks 310). The direct effect of her silencing and lack of agency is her inability to escape the repetitive sexual violence of slavery. Unlike Reuel, she is not able to escape to Africa, and so is doomed, like her mother and grandmother, to submit to the sexual violence of the white Southern patriarchy, as embodied by Livingston. Dianthe is caught in the cycle whereby “time in the United States repeats itself” (Goyal 33). Or, as Aunt Hannah says when revealing that the three central characters are all related: “Dese things jes’ got to happen in slavery” (176).

Dianthe's inability to escape this repetition and the related inability to find closure and happiness in a domestic partnership—as the passing heroines of Hopkins's other novels find—contributes to what Tate calls the “racial despair” of the novel (*Domestic* 19). Against a general racial optimism characterizing the plots of 1890s “Black Victorian” romances, *OOB* notably fails to resolve its domestic plot, suggesting that Hopkins had become cynical about the domestic plot and its latent expression of “political desire.” Hence some scholars' characterization of *OOB* as attempting to stretch beyond the limits of literary Realism by finding articulations of Black identity, community, and political power outside of the domestic plot and outside of the United States altogether. If this is the case, Dianthe is not only a tragic but a sacrificial character, the embodiment of a degraded and violated womanhood that Reuel must break away from to guarantee a racial future with Candace, the “embodiment of all chastity” (*OOB* 137). As Davis argues, “critics have overwhelmingly accepted the logic that ‘pure’ African identity acts in opposition to a post-slavery subjectivity irrevocably tied up with the sexually violated black female body” (9). To be sure, this is not an incorrect or implausible reading. *OOB* is clearly an attempt to imagine a more liberatory Black identity that triumphs over “the white rape of black women...the historical primal scene of slavery's moral catastrophe” (Sundquist 572). But, paradoxically, Hopkins's clear desire to imagine a more liberatory source of racial identity exists alongside an equally clear warning against suppressing or otherwise ignoring a traumatic past. Dianthe is not inevitably doomed by a cyclical history, but by the attempts of the other two characters of the melodramatic love triangle to suppress her memories.

When Reuel expresses his desire to marry Dianthe, Livingston suggests that it would be a detriment to his career and a scandal to be “married to a Negress” (43). Reuel replies, “I have thought of all that. I am determined. I will marry her in spite of hell itself! Marry her before she awakens to consciousness of her identity. I’m not unselfish; I don’t pretend to be. There is no sin in taking her out of the sphere where she was born” (43). Reuel’s sentiment and rhetoric about marriage at first seem in line with domestic genre characterizations of love: pursuing a partnership despite any differences in background or related obstacles. Reuel’s intent, however, is misdirected and knowingly “selfish.” He is not marrying her “in spite of” scandal but in spite of the possibility that she might regain an awareness of her identity. The success of the marriage is based on Reuel’s calculated attempt to prevent this. He insists that taking Dianthe out of her “sphere” is harmless, despite his apparent understanding to the contrary. Although Reuel is able to bring Dianthe back to physical health, “Memory remain[s] a blank to the unhappy girl” (53). Additionally, he hopes against a restoration of her memory despite it being connected to her identity as an artist and performer: “The grand, majestic voice...was pinioned in the girl’s throat like an imprisoned song-bird. Dianthe’s voice was completely gone along with her memory. But music affected her strangely, and Reuel watched her anxiously” (55).

The contours of the (“failed”) domestic plot of *OOB* are contrary to a typical romantic melodrama of hidden lineage. In a more conventional rendering, the protagonists would pursue marriage even *after* essential truths about one or both of their identities are revealed. In *OOB*, Reuel prevents these essential truths from surfacing, resulting in tragedy for Dianthe. Although Dianthe’s tragic ending might be partly a

manifestation of Hopkins's growing cynicism about the domestic plot, it is significant that it is not the plot *per se* that fails, but Reuel who fails the plot in not playing by its rules. Reuel opposes a fundamental narrative logic of the racial melodrama, a logic that repeats as a Biblical, prophetic mantra in *OOB*: "all will be revealed." Against all probability, lineage and origin always emerge, condemning some characters and absolving others; invalidating some marriages and legitimizing others; dissolving some bonds and strengthening others.

In *OOB*, Dianthe, inevitably rediscovers her identity as a Black woman and artist. But in the conditions that Reuel unwittingly creates by 1. attempting to ignore or suppress her identity and 2. leaving Dianthe in a state of vulnerability—"No I'm not strong!...If you knew how weak I was you wouldn't leave me" (64)—her identity becomes much more of a liability than it would have otherwise been. She regains her memory after singing "Go Down, Moses" in something akin to a trance state, "a strange rigid appearance...that was unearthly" (67). But although the performance gives her access to "memory" in some form, she is unable to make sense of it: "I try to recall the past, but all is confusion and mystery," she tells Livingston (68). What she is lacking is a narrative, which Livingston, the unknown villain in whom Dianthe and Reuel have misplaced their trust, eagerly provides: "[T]here is a story in your life! I can save you" (68). Livingston leads her to believe that Reuel is unaware of her identity, and he promises to keep it a secret, for the price of her devotion and love for him.

This transaction, becoming "a puppet in the hands of" Livingston (69) to hide her identity, is only imaginable under the regime of the color line, a fact that Livingston exploits. But Reuel, in his shame and fear of social consequences, is complicit. Reuel

realizes this later in the novel. Confronted by Ai about his “isolation from [their] race,” Reuel realizes with a “flush of shame” that “he had played the coward’s part in hiding his origin,” and, by extension, Dianthe’s (129). As Ammons argues, “there is a level at which Reuel, the black man, tragically abets the white man's evil by his silence— as Reuel in the end recognizes” (82). The arc of Reuel’s self-discovery is a piece of a broader project to foster racial pride and counter the stigma of “black blood,” and it is aligned with her linking Black identity to a glorious African past. Hopkins is also presenting a subtler commentary on the importance of historical memory being dictated by Black voices. Similar to her contention that Black people must represent themselves in their own fiction—“*No one will do this for us*”—Hopkins recognizes the danger of a narrative or “story” of historical memory being imposed from the outside. With Reverend Still she agrees that “people will need all the knowledge of their past condition which they can get” (“Famous Women” 212), but she is wary of the source of that knowledge. Livingston, a representative of the former planter class, demonstrates the ease with which history can be weaponized. Racial shame—which causes Reuel to obscure his and Dianthe’s identity—is one of many obstacles on the path toward a self-actualized, self-narrated history.

Because Hopkins frames this reveal in the rhetoric of disaster and catastrophe, it is understandable why some critics view Dianthe as a figure sacrificed for Reuel’s redemption²⁷, a liberatory future made possible by rejecting a degraded, compromised

²⁷ Yet another way to view Dianthe’s function and fate in the novel is to afford her a redemption arc of her own, albeit one that ends in death. As Brown argues, Dianthe’s deathbed scene “provide[s] closure for three generations of African-descended women: Hannah, her daughter Mira, and her granddaughter Dianthe. Hopkins performs both a textual and a historical reclamation of Dianthe, the woman who believes herself to be an

past. However, following Jalondra Davis's lead in tracing "other potentialities that Hopkins also embeds, however deeply, in her novel" (19), there is an alternative to this reading—not necessarily counter to the redemptive reading, but *in addition to* it. The implications of the reveal abruptly shift from interpersonal catastrophe to a far more expansive commentary on the nation's entangled past and future. Hopkins quotes a stanza of John Greenleaf Whittier:

*The Laws of changeless justice bind
Oppressor and oppressed;
And close as sin and suffering joined,
We march to Fate abreast.*

She follows this poem with the notorious "black blood" passage quoted earlier: "He has united the white race and the black race in this new continent" (178). Just moments after a salacious "thrill of discovery," Dianthe's lineage reveal becomes incorporated into an almost routine articulation of a mutual destiny that binds races together. The unspeakable "sacrilege" of this revelation is simply a thread in a national tapestry. The rhetoric of catastrophe and the rhetoric of mutual destiny, both applied to this discovery, are not necessarily opposed. Hopkins, while recognizing the horror and "havoc" of a traumatic racial past, also seems to suggest that the nation must come to terms with that trauma to move forward. A path forward consists of an acknowledgement rather than a repression or forgetting, even if that acknowledgment erupts "in moments of danger," as it does in *OOB*'s final melodramatic twist.

irredeemable pariah. She accomplishes this restoration in a passage that recalls the heart-wrenching deathbed scene that her ancestor Susan Paul recorded in her pioneering 1835 memoir of James Jackson, a gifted freeborn child of color" (398).

Although the novel ends with Reuel, now Ergamenes, living in and ruling in Telassar, he has not completely severed ties with the legacy and aftermath of slavery. Aunt Hannah accompanies Reuel in Telassar, symbolically linking an American past with a recovered, mythical one, ensuring that, although the Utopian site of Telassar looks toward the future, it also incorporates the living memory of a past that has not been and should not be left behind. As Brown argues, Aunt Hannah is one of the “individuals who facilitate the recovery of long-buried Southern histories and reify the connection between Africa and its far-flung descendants” (392). And although Reuel has been ostensibly redeemed, the last insight that the novel gives to his interior life is one of deep ambivalence:

“United to Candace, his days glide peacefully by in good works; but the shadows of great sins darken his life, and the memory of past joys is ever with him. He views, too, with serious apprehension, the advance of mighty nations penetrating the dark, mysterious forests of his native land.

“‘Where will it stop?’ he sadly questions. ‘What will the end be?’” (193).

The ambiguous “dark sins” could refer either to the unspeakable history that led to an incestuous relationship or to his more direct culpability in manipulating Dianthe, who clearly figures in his “memory of past joys.” Telassar, if it ever was a protected enclave, is now exposed to the forces of imperialism. His sad query—“What will the end be?”—echoes his existential torment in the beginning of the novel when he struggled to comprehend the “riddle of whither and whence” and questioned “to what use” all his efforts were directed (1). In short, Reuel is still animated by a melancholy like the one he carried at the beginning of the novel, suggesting not complete liberation but a continuation of a past life.

The affect and ambivalence of the novel's ending encapsulates Tate's ultimate assessment of the novel: that it marks the end of the racial optimism of the 1890s and "suspends" the desire for racial justice. It is certainly not a completely liberatory ending like some scholars have suggested. And, as discussed earlier, *OOB* fails to happily resolve its domestic marriage plot, something Hopkins's other novels achieve. However, although *OOB* is in a different register from Hopkins's more conventional melodramas, its melancholy does not necessarily imply an abandonment of racial justice, but a shift in imagining how to approach it. As Luciano argues: in *OOB* "melancholia operates not only as a critical condition directing attention to the psychic impact of racial segregation and silencing, but also, paradoxically, as a generative force shaping a revisionary engagement with black cultural history" (149). Hopkins expresses this "revisionary engagement" forcefully in the final paragraph of the novel. We shift away from Reuel's interior monologue to an omniscient, didactic voice:

To our human intelligence these truths depicted in this feeble work may seem terrible,—even horrible. But who shall judge the handiwork of God, the Great Craftsman! Caste prejudice, race pride, boundless wealth, scintillating intellects refined by all the arts of the intellectual world, are but puppets in His hand, for His promises stand, and He will prove His words, 'Of one blood have I made all races of men' (193).

This moment, *OOB*'s final word on the traumatic past of slavery and its afterlives, is similar to Dianthe's realization that she is related by blood to Reuel and Livingston. It is preceded by a personal encounter with a haunting past: Dianthe cannot speak in the face of the "havoc...wrought by evil deeds" (178); the "shadows of great sins darken [Reuel's] life" (193). But a catastrophic personal history quickly shifts to a much broader view that insists on confronting that history, acknowledging the unfathomable but essential past of

amalgamation. The “psychic impact” (Luciano) of this history is redirected as an attempt to engage with and confront it, even if the endpoint is not visible.

Conclusion

The last detail of the plot that needs to be resolved before Reuel/Ergamenes can take his place on the throne is for Livingston to answer for his crimes. In the logic of the melodrama, this justice must be strict and retributive: Livingston must lose his life in return for the death that he has caused. Curiously, the method for achieving this is Ai hypnotizing Livingston, convincing him to kill himself. After the hypnosis, but before Livingston’s body is found comes this exchange:

Charlie Vance spoke, “Is justice done?” he sternly queried.

“Justice will be done,” replied Ai’s soothing tones.

“Then I am satisfied.”

But Reuel spoke not one word (192).

This short passage of dialogue receives little attention, perhaps because it is seen as an inartful component of a plot resolved too quickly and anti-climactically. But it is an essential insight into Hopkins’s perception of the pursuit of racial justice at the turn of the century. “Is justice done?” is the query of the restless activist, desiring redress for centuries of “evil deeds.” Ai’s response, the future-oriented language of prophecy, demands patience and hope in the master plan of a “Great Craftsman” (193). Reuel in turn is caught between them, speechless against the uncertainty that this language demands. Although Reuel’s apprehension and melancholy might represent the affect of the end of “racial optimism,” Hopkins may ultimately settle closer to Ai, trusting in the events of the past to reveal a path forward.

The distinct mode of temporality operating here is an example of what Gillman names “occult time.” Occult time is the combination of a future-oriented, prophetic

perspective with a Benjaminian conception of the past as history erupting in a moment of danger (Gillman 205). An exemplary articulation of occult time is Du Bois's famous introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk*, "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line." She writes, "'What other simple present tense than his *is* could have both recognized the past and foretold, but not foreclosed, the future?'" (206). Occult time foretells or comments on the future by uncovering an "occluded" past. For politically motivated writers like Hopkins, this eruption of the past is a broader commentary on the arbitrary, irrational, and unstable regime of the color line, a regime that cannot possibly sustain itself much longer. The eruption of the past into the present, then, suggests or foretells the inevitable destruction of this fundamental injustice. For Hopkins, the soon-to-be-revealed past is made up of the entanglements of Black and white blood, a revelation that will make the color line obsolete. This contrasts with a more strictly progressive or teleological view, which would insist on continuous moral, spiritual technological improvement without reference to an unresolved past. In pursuit of purity, articulations of the white utopian imagination assert a complete rupture from a racial past, the possibility and desirability of leaving it buried and inert. Hopkins's *Of One Blood*, for all its contradictory elements, insists very clearly on the opposite: that an occluded past, especially a racial past, is an essential element of any future of racial justice. In history, as in melodrama: "all will be revealed."

CHAPTER 5

EDWARD JOHNSON'S *LIGHT AHEAD FOR THE NEGRO* AS A HISTORY OF THE PRESENT

The previous novels, despite their substantially different speculative projects, all engage to varying degrees with a “prophetic” imagination, a way of looking with anticipation toward the future. In *Iola Leroy*, the prophetic imagination is fiercely hopeful. At one point we observe Iola with “a rapt and far-off look in her eye, as if she were looking beyond the present pain to a brighter future for the race” (208). The novel’s subtitle, “Shadows Uplifted,” describes the happy fates of the characters at the end of the novel when “the shadows have been lifted from all their lives” (251), but it applies just as well to Harper’s own optimism for the future, which she expresses in her poem that closes the novel: “There is light beyond the darkness, / Joy beyond the present pain” (252). In contrast, the prophetic voice in *Imperium in Imperio* is nearly the opposite, expressing a warning rather than a longing. Enacted by the frame narrator Berl Trout, the prophetic voice describes a crisis narrowly averted, a threat that will continue to exist unless “all mankind will join hands and help my poor down-trodden people” (177). The end of the novel is an open question: “When will all races and classes of men learn that men made in the image of God will not be the slaves of another image?” (177). *Of One Blood* deals with the prophetic the most extensively by far, and the prophetic voice has multiple sources in the novel. Prophecy is enabled by mystical access to the “hidden self,” as when one of Aubrey Livingston’s slaves enters a “trance state” and foretells the destruction of the Civil War (51). Prophecy is not just a type of speech act but a language in itself: Reuel discovers in the ancient city of Telassar that the “record of the wisdom and science of his ancestors” is literally written in the “language of prophecy” (141-142).

In a broader sense, as I argued in the previous chapter, the prophetic structures the novel's orientation to the future but more importantly to the past, as encapsulated in the conviction that "there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed" (73).

The final novel that I explore, Edward A. Johnson's *Light Ahead for the Negro*, also, unsurprisingly, engages with the prophetic imagination. The title on its own suggests something prophetic, a hope or prediction that a path forward exists, and the title echoes Harper's conviction that "there is light beyond the darkness" for "the race." The novel's premise seems to offer itself to the prophetic imagination as well. A protagonist time travels 100 years into the future to discover that the "Negro problem" has been solved. Compared to the other three novels, the premise and form of the novel conforms most closely, by far, to the structure of a conventional, future-oriented turn-of-the-century utopian novel. Yet, paradoxically, despite being the most conventionally utopian, it is arguably the *least* invested in envisioning a future for Black Americans. Johnson is ultimately quite skeptical of the prophetic imagination. Johnson does not use the speculative conceit of future time travel primarily to make predictions. And although the novel does use the conceit to estrange readers' understanding of the present, it is not in the conventional sense of contrasting the present moment with a radically strange and other future world. The 2006 United States that Johnson imagines is in most ways quite similar to his 1904 present. *Light Ahead* shares many formal similarities to a conventional future utopia, but its primary function is fundamentally different, as I will argue.

Like the other novels that I have examined, *Light Ahead for the Negro* is often grouped into the categories of proto-Black SF or proto-Afrofuturism, which tends to flatten out the unique approaches and productive differences between different authors'

speculative projects. *Light Ahead* suffers from this flattening effect even more so, for the simple reason that very little has been written about it. When it is referenced at all, *Light Ahead* is almost always described as an early example of Black science fiction. (One critic calls it the *only* true African American utopia!) Speaking for myself: this common description, combined with my initially superficial understanding of the premise (A Black author writing about a 2006 future United States) led me to believe that *Light Ahead* was obviously an early Afrofuturist text. But, as I explain later, I do not think the novel fits very easily in this framework. I would venture that I am not alone in initially misunderstanding the genre and content of this obscure novel.

In this chapter, I examine the unique speculative project that Johnson offers and differentiate it from other turn-of-the-century Black speculative imaginations. The task of differentiation is easy, because *Light Ahead* is very noticeably different from the other three novels. Influenced as much by Bellamy as by Du Bois, intended primarily (if not exclusively) for a white audience, and by all appearances devoid of any speaking Black characters, *Light Ahead* is certainly an anomaly. Yet despite its very different orientation, the novel is still ultimately attuned to the basic project of the other novels: reflecting on the meaning and making of Black history. Johnson's unique contribution is investigating the present moment—the turn-of-the-century Jim Crow South—not as the present but as a contested moment of *history*. Johnson utilizes the future time travel premise not primarily to make predictions, but to imagine the present moment as a historian would. Johnson demonstrates the ongoing efforts at revisionist histories of the Reconstruction era and then applies those same methods from the vantage point of an imagined future. What Johnson offers us, in the end, is a revisionist history of the present, one that

functions to estrange white turn-of-the-century readers' understanding of the so-called "Negro problem."

***Light Ahead for the Negro* and its Reception History**

Edward A. Johnson (1860-1944) was a businessman, historian, educator, lawyer, and politician. He is perhaps most famous as the first African American member of the New York state legislature. Although he was not primarily a literary figure, he published a handful of books in different genres. In addition to *Light Ahead for the Negro* (1904), he published two children's textbooks—*A School History of the Negro Race in America* (1890) and *History of Negro Soldiers in the Spanish-American War* (1899)—and much later in his career he published *Adam vs. Ape-man and Ethiopia* (1931), in which (echoing ideas that Hopkins explored) he argues that Ethiopians were the first group to create a recognizable civilization. *Light Ahead for the Negro* is quite different from his other books, none of which contain fictional elements. Published by Grafton Press, an outlet that was often a last resort for authors who had difficulty finding a publisher and "where an author assumed the costs of printing and binding" (Babb 256), the novel was always overshadowed in Johnson's lifetime by his other work, especially his textbooks, which were relatively successful.

Light Ahead for the Negro begins in the year 1906. The protagonist, Gilbert Twitchell, decides to take a flight on a friend's dirigible airship before he is scheduled to arrive in Georgia, where he has an appointment with the "Union Missionary Association" to be a teacher in "one of their Negro schools" (2)²⁸. There is an accident and Twitchell

²⁸ All citations refer to the Project Gutenberg "E-text" version of the original 1904 text, which I accessed on <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/56972/pg56972-images.html>.

loses consciousness as the airship loses control and ascends too high. He is awoken by Dr. Newell and his daughter Irene in the year 2006, coincidentally in Georgia, where Twitchell had his 1906 teaching appointment. Dr. Newell and Irene function as Twitchell's utopian guides throughout the novel.

Dr. Newell is "intensely interested in the 'Negro question' and "divine[s] that [Twitchell] might have a message from another age for him on that subject," so Twitchell is "called upon to deliver a written account of [his] recollections of the past, especially in reference to the Negro question" (14). Twitchell's "recollections" take the form of a lengthy written "statement," presented at the beginning of chapter 4, "Now and Then." Twitchell begins his statement by mentioning that "Many changes considered well nigh impossible one hundred years ago have taken place in almost all phases of the so-called Negro problem" (22). But his statement describes the contemporary problem itself rather than the "changes" he has observed. Twitchell describes several aspects of the problem, and he emphasizes the role that newspapers play in enforcing a racial hierarchy through a "wholesale assassination of Negro character" (23). He summarizes the problem as an accumulation of adverse conditions that keep Black people subjugated:

With 30 per cent of the Negro population illiterate, with a criminal record double that of any of the emigrant classes...with the News Distributing Bureau against it, with no political or social standing—pariahs in the land—with Northern capital endorsing serfdom, with their inability to lose their race identity, on account of their color—we realize how heavy the odds were against the Negro race at that time (28).

Twitchell then briefly describes a wide range "proposed solutions," including the ideas of Thomas Dixon, Bishop Turner's emigration advocacy, Washington's industrial education, and ending with white advocates who "propos[ed] *justice* and *equality*" (34). Twitchell writes that despite all these proposed solutions, there was never a legitimate

political effort to solve it: “The politicians proposed no measures of relief for the great mass of ignorance and poverty in their midst” (34). Twitchell ends his statement by describing the Ku Klux Klan’s racial terror and intimidation.

When Twitchell finishes, Dr. Newell hands him a “paper belonging to [his] grandfather” titled “Reconstruction and Negro Government.” (55). The paper is essentially a very brief revisionist history of the Reconstruction era, and it attempts to puncture what Johnson perceives as the myths of Reconstruction, particularly that Black leadership was responsible for its “failure.” The paper’s thesis is that “The evils of reconstruction were due to the general demoralization which followed the Civil War, rather than to the Negro. War is ‘hell’ and so is its aftermath” (61).

After reading this paper, Twitchell confirms its accuracy, and then asks Dr. Newell how the “Negro problem” was ultimately solved—“how was it all done?” (70). Newell’s response mostly involves how they solved the related “labor question” by allowing Black people into unions: “The eyes of the Southern white laboring men began to see this point and a change of base took place, and now they are and have been for a long time, seeking to elevate the Negro laborer to their own standard to keep him from pulling them down—a most intelligent view of the matter!” (74). The chapter then moves to a varied selection of opinions on “Negro Disfranchisement” at the turn of the century (83-93). It finally ends with Dr. Newell describing how “The National Government...buying up the cotton lands and parcelling them out to young Negroes at a small price, accompanied with means and assistance for the production of the crop” was “a great help in the solution of the Negro problem” (96). Altogether, these statements,

conversations and excerpts make up Chapter 4, “Now and Then,” which comprises nearly half of the novel.

The rest of the novel is made up of a few other descriptions of how the 2006 society differs. Most prominently, the functions of government have been taken from elected representatives and given to a system of “Bureaus” like the “Bureau of Public Utility.” “The American people have found out there is no necessity for either king, president, parliament or congress, and in that respect we may be able sooner or later to teach the mother country a lesson” (101). Twitchell guesses correctly that this new system of government was essential for solving the Negro question, and he states that “Under our political system, such as I knew it to be, these results could not have been reached in a thousand years” (101). The novel ends abruptly, with Twitchell remaining in the year 2006 and marrying Irene.

When I began research on *Light Ahead for the Negro*’s reception history, I suspected and hoped that Johnson’s text was a candidate for scholarly recuperation: a text that was well-received and influential when it was published but fell out of favor as audience tastes changed. Unfortunately, this is not the case. *Light Ahead* has never been prominent. It is most accurate to say that the novel received some moderate attention when it was published, but, with a few notable exceptions, did not sustain it.

The Colored American Magazine (CAM) was by far the novel’s biggest supporter upon its publication. A short but positive CAM review frames it primarily as a response to white supremacist solutions to the “Negro problem.” “[*Light Ahead*] completely refutes the ideas of Thos. Dixon in ‘Leopard Spots,’ and those who claim that it is necessary to use shot guns in settling the Negro problem. It is a work of high literary merit” (“Political

Outlook”). *CAM* promoted the book heavily in the next several issues. Two years later, in 1906, *CAM* offered the novel as a “Special Offer to Subscribers,” in combination with one of Johnson’s earlier texts, “School History of the Negro Race” (“Advertisement”).

Light Ahead received attention in other prominent Black periodicals as well. The short-lived but influential *Voice of the Negro* published a review that mostly summarizes the plot, but also offered some mild, generic praise: “The chapters on the Negro’s past, present, and future are especially interesting. So are those treating on Reconstruction in the Southern States” (“Another Problem Solver.”) The reviewer, although not necessarily criticizing the novel, does express a weariness with its subject matter: “‘Light Ahead for the Negro,’ like most of the books written by Southern people, either white or black, is a prescription.” The title of the review, “Another Problem Solver,” indicates the perceived oversaturation of books attempting to “solve” the “Negro problem.”

The most substantial review that I have been able to find, both in terms of word count and the extent to which it engages with *Light Ahead* as literature, comes from the *Indianapolis Freeman*, another Black periodical. The review is even-handed and positive overall. The author calls attention to the lack of originality in the premise, noting that it is “something on the order of Bellamy’s ‘Looking Backwards’” (“Our Journalists”). They also criticize that Johnson includes “a woman [character] on the scene” but does not give her a “conspicuous part.” But the author concludes that “The volume sheds light on the racial situation, the result of research and studious effort.” The author, while finding the premise unoriginal, is insightful about how this premise functions for the reader: “The writer is able to contrast the past and the then present condition. The past as he pictures it is no more than the very present which is evident to all.”

The book seems to have made some small impression beyond the sphere of Black periodicals. “The book was listed in the ‘Books of the Week’ section...of the Outlook Magazine, although it was not reviewed” (Bibler 61). It also received a brief mention in the *New-York Tribune* as a notable book in the “Sociology” category.

As I scoured periodicals for references to this novel, I found far more advertisements than actual reviews, which is not unusual. These ads are rarely illuminating, and they usually have boilerplate copy (this book is great “vacation reading,” etc.). An exception is an “Agents Wanted” announcement recruiting people to sell the book. This announcement was published several times, in slightly different forms, in both *CAM* and the *Freeman*. The first sentence is generic: “The latest and most interesting story yet published on the NEGRO PROBLEM” (“Agents Wanted”). The next part of the copy, though, is much more specific: “A young Southern lady espouses the Negro’s cause and revolutionizes Southern sentiment in the Negro’s favor.” (The advertisement then returns to the generic: “Romance, love and marriage,” all aspects of the novel that Johnson insists in the Preface are “subordinate to the discussion of facts, and not paramount” (vi)). The advertisement’s emphasis on a “young Southern lady” who “revolutionizes Southern sentiment” is surprising for at least two reasons. For one, this emphasis gives no indication that this novel is set 100 years in the future. In fact, nothing in this advertisement indicates that—with the possible exception that it mentions a “Trip in an Airship,” but even that could be interpreted as occurring in the present day. Secondly, Irene Davis, the “young Southern lady,” is not *Light Ahead*’s focal point. As the author of the *Freeman* review notes, she does not play a “conspicuous part.”

AGENTS WANTED: \$20 a week for Selling
"LIGHT AHEAD FOR THE NEGRO"
 By **E. A. JOHNSON**, Author of "The History of the Negro Race," "History of Negro Soldiers in the Spanish-American War."
 The latest and most interesting story yet published on the NEGRO PROBLEM. A young Southern lady espouses the Negro's cause and revolutionizes Southern sentiment in the Negro's favor. Romance, love and marriage.
 Some subjects treated: Trip in an Airship; The Story of Re-Construction; Success of Governments Created by Negro Votes in the South; Color Line Abolished in Labor Unions; The Kind of Education the Negro Needs; Southern Plantations in the Hands of Negroes; Negroes in the Courts; John Temple Graves, Tom Dixon, Vardaman and Tillman successfully answered.
PRICE \$1.00, Postpaid.
Address: E. A. JOHNSON, Cor. West and Lenoir Sts., RALEIGH, N. C.

Figure 1. *Colored American Magazine* promotion for *Light Ahead for the Negro*, Oct. 1904.

(<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83027091/1904-10-22/ed-1/seq-6/>)

References to the novel drop off significantly after 1905-1906, but it is mentioned occasionally in the decade after its publication. Most significantly, the historian Albert Bushnell Hart references *Light Ahead* in his 1910 academic book *The Southern South*. He quotes the novel to corroborate the idea that “[Southern] politicians keep the negro question alive in the South to perpetuate their hold on public office” (160). “How does this feeling strike the Negro?” Hart writes. “Let an intelligent man, Johnson, in his ‘Light Ahead for the Negro,’ speak for himself. He complains that the newspapers use inflammatory headlines and urge lynchings—a wholesale assassination of Negro

character” (160). This acknowledgment of *Light Ahead*, though brief, indicates that the novel maintained some credibility. At the very least, it was taken seriously as a primary source that documented a Black man’s perception of conditions in the South.

However, there is also some indication that the novel was not taken seriously as literature. In a 1914 survey of recent African American literary production—subtitled “What a Prominent Critic Says of Our Literary Productions”—the “prominent critic” “Charles Alexander” (most likely the white educator and critic Charles Alexander McMurry) regards Johnson’s work as contemptible. He sums up his output in a sentence: “Lawyer Edward A. Johnson made money out of several very poorly ‘put together’ books known variously as ‘Light Ahead For the Negro,’ ‘The Negro In the Spanish-American War’ and ‘A School History of the Negro Race’” (“Authors and Their Works”). Whether or not Alexander intended it this way, his description of Johnson’s work is ironic considering the persistent criticism throughout *Light Ahead* that Southern newspapers and politicians capitalize on keeping the “Negro problem” alive. Alexander seems to suggest that Johnson is also profiting from the problem, in a different way.

After this point, *Light Ahead* seems to fully disappear. Johnson’s 1944 obituary in *The Journal of Negro History* confirms that the novel’s impact was minimal. The obituary describes the significant impact of Johnson’s textbook *History of the Negro Race* before briefly mentioning *Light Ahead* as one of Johnson’s “later certain works which did not become so widely known” (“Edward Austin Johnson” 506).

Although the archive indicates that *Light Ahead for the Negro* had a minimal impact in terms of the quantity of reviews and responses, it did receive notable attention from an important figure: W. E. B. Du Bois. In his short article for the *Dial*, “The

Southerner's Problem," Du Bois describes the increasingly aggressive and blatant calls for the "survival of the white race by means of the annihilation of all other races," which he describes as "the new barbarism of the twentieth century" (317). He offers Johnson's novel as a credible response to this threat:

This is the new barbarism of the twentieth century, against which all the forces of civilization must contend. Can the world conquer it as it has already partially conquered caste and religious persecution and feuds? Mr. E. A. Johnson, author of the volume entitled 'Light Ahead for the Negro,' recently published, believes that we can. His little book, written by a man of Negro blood, is curiously yet not unattractively pieced together in the form of semi-fiction, and contains the prophecy of a century hence. His hero has asked, in this millennium, of the fate of such books as Mr. Dixon's [and others that justify Southern white supremacy].

Du Bois then gives Johnson the final word, quoting the novel at length, including the passage where Irene Davis denounces writers like Dixon as "false prophets whom history had not forgotten, but who lived on in ridicule and as examples of error" (318). Du Bois is much better attuned than other contemporary reviewers to Johnson's speculative exercise: estranging topical present-moment debates by rendering them from the perspective of historians in an imagined future.

Not only did Du Bois give the novel public attention in the *Dial*, he referred to *Light Ahead* in a 1905 letter to Max Weber, who had just concluded a tour of the Eastern United States in Oct.-Nov. 1904 (Chandler 194). Weber had expressed interest in Du Bois's work, writing, "I am absolutely convinced that the 'colorline' problem will be the paramount problem of the time to come, here and everywhere in the world" (qtd. in Chandler 197). In response, Du Bois referred to *Light Ahead*, along with two other books, as "recent publications...on the Negro problems" (qtd. in Chandler 202). To be sure, simply naming the novel among "recent publications" is very modest praise. But the

inclusion still indicates that Du Bois found some sociological value in Johnson's novel. Du Bois did not continue to engage directly with *Light Ahead* after *The Dial* article and his Weber correspondence, but he did include it in a 1909 bibliography published by Atlanta University, titled "A Select Bibliography of Efforts for Social Betterment Among Negro Americans."

In more recent decades, there have been scattered references to the novel. Most engagement with *Light Ahead* simply mentions its existence, categorizing it as some variation of proto-SF or proto-Afrofuturism. For example, in his influential essay "Racism and Science Fiction," Samuel Delany describes Johnson, along with Sutton Griggs, as one of the "black writers whose work certainly borders on science fiction." He describes *Light Ahead*'s plot as "a black man transported into a socialist United States in the far future" (which is a slight distortion of the novel).

There are a few more substantial analyses, though. In 1978, Reilly dedicated about four pages to it. He describes *Light Ahead* as "The only work of Afro-American fiction that might be categorized as a literary utopia because of its formal construction" (59). Reilly is claiming this in the context of a still ongoing debate about what does or does not constitute the expression of a utopian impulse. Reilly views the novel as an absolute failure: "it is neither literature—for it does not render facts into illuminating relationships—nor, except for its shell, is it utopian" (62). But much more significant than his evaluation of the novel is the cause to which he attributes the failure:

Consideration of the failure...takes us well beyond any question of Johnson's inadequacy as a writer. Like its accommodationist rhetoric, the novel's failure to present a comprehensive view of a utopian society with Blacks as fully integrated participants, derives less from Johnson's lack of literary craft than it does from history, which is both the stimulus of the utopian imagination and the source of its frustration. Able talents than

Johnson's have found it as difficult as he did to convert their resistance to American racism into a redemptive utopia (62).

He continues, stating his thesis even more plainly: "It might be said that the utopian impulse in Afro-American literature is under compulsion to face historical forces so powerful that the impulse must spend itself on imagining the removal of oppression, rather than on utopian life afterwards" (63). In other words, for Reilly, *Light Ahead* is Exhibit A in the case that African Americans were unable to produce utopian fiction because the oppressive conditions in which they lived. This is an idea that has until recently been "regarded as a critical commonplace"²⁹ (Fabi 44).

Fabi, on the other hand, does not categorize *Light Ahead* as the only African American literary utopia, but she does find significance in the novel's "anomalous status within" the African American utopian tradition (65). The novel is distinct from other African American utopian novels because it does not "deploy race travel as [a] structuring device" (65). "Race travel," Fabi argues, is a device unique to African American utopian fiction, enabled by the trope of a white-passing character. The basic idea is that, as opposed to more conventional white utopian fiction that radically

²⁹ That this dissertation is even possible suggests that this idea is no longer the critical doxa, and I think it is beside the point to refute it yet again. I include Reilly's argument more so to demonstrate how *Light Ahead* has been (mis)used in discourse on Black utopian fiction. However, I will include another scholar's forceful refutation for good measure:

"That an oppressed people could be reduced to such a state of abjection as to lose the power to imagine a better future seems hard to believe. It is especially hard in the case of African Americans, a nation within the nation with a long history of political and cultural resistance and with a narrative tradition that has characteristically thrived on the subversive revision of popular literary modes. And because the utopian novel was popular at the turn of the century, it is also hard to believe that African American authors would not have engaged with this genre, notably because it had become an important playground for the racist, eugenicist, and segregationist discourse of white writers" (Fabi 45).

dislocates a protagonist in time and/or space, African American utopian novels instead dislocate the protagonist's racial identity, "foreground[ing] explicitly the epistemological and experiential impact of being black in the United States" (65). In other words, the protagonist travels from a white to a Black subject position, "dramatiz[ing] with great immediacy the differences between a normative white and a subaltern black subject position" (65). The clearest example of a "race traveler" would be Iola Leroy, who lives as a white mistress until she is forced into slavery, which radically alters her understanding of Blackness. Iola's entry into Blackness is also her entry into the utopian potential of the novel: "The chorus of visibly black and often dialect-speaking characters comprises the utopian guides who accompany Iola the race traveler into the new world of blackness" (61).

In contrast, Johnson does not take this approach. "Instead of thematizing and foregrounding passing in his fiction, Johnson engages in it by choosing to tell his story from the point of view of a racially indeterminate protagonist" (65). Fabi argues that this choice not to center a marginalized subject position "results in greater formal adherence to the conventions of the utopian genre" (66). Fabi finds value in Johnson's representation of a "feasible utopia" (68) in which a commitment to racial justice and "affirmative action" is a central—not marginal—concern, leading to a society where "triumph of reason over partisanship and demagoguery had at last been reached" (Johnson 104). However, Fabi has an ultimately negative assessment: Even if we accept that Johnson's choice of a racially indeterminate protagonist was "a strategy to reach a larger white audience...the fact remains that the price of his choice was a dramatic

decrease in the oppositional force of his text, a decrease that emerges clearly by contrast with contemporaneous African American utopias” (67).

Johnson’s Speculative Mode

Johnson’s “strategy to reach a larger white audience” (Fabi) is an important context for understanding the function of his novel, and there are several techniques, both direct and implicit, that Johnson employs in this strategy. Most obviously, Johnson addresses his intended audience much more directly and explicitly than the other authors in this dissertation. In the preface he writes: “The author dedicates this work to the thousands of sympathetic and well wishing friends of the Negro race” (v). More specifically, he targets white Southerners. “He believes that at the bottom of southern society there is a vein of sympathy and helpfulness for the Negro and that this feeling should be cultivated and nourished that it may grow stronger and finally supplant harsher sentiments” (v). To be sure, we should not take an author’s stated intentions as the final word, but this direct, explicit address to a white audience, combined with some of the more salient elements of the text—the sometimes condescending tone, the lack of dialogue around contested issues, and, most obviously, the nearly complete lack of Black characters—it is fair to say that this novel was intended primarily, perhaps exclusively, for a white audience. This is yet another major difference from the other three novels, all of which seemed to intentionally target Black and white audiences, in different registers. In addition to stating the intended audience, the Preface provides brief but useful insights into how Johnson imagined his novel functioning. After “dedicating” the novel to the “well wishing friends of the Negro race,” Johnson states that “He is trying to show how the Negro problem can be solved in peace and good will rather than by brutality” (v).

Stating his intention in the very beginning was probably what led one reviewer to respond with the weary title, “Another Problem Solver.” Johnson also provides a very succinct statement of how this problem can be solved peacefully: “that the Golden Rule furnishes the only solution” (v).

Regarding the intended readership, most scholars—even those who only mention the novel in passing—note its conciliatory and deferential stance toward imagined sympathetic white Southerners. In particular, the novel, on the surface, appears to be assuaging white anxieties about social equality between Black and white people. At one point, the narrator reflects that, in the South in 2006, “It was not expected that a man was the social equal of another because he worked at the same bench with him, or rode in the same car on the railroad. That was now considered the postulate of an ignoramus” (80). In other words, Johnson seems to be speaking directly to Southern whites, insisting that allowing for equal employment opportunities and accommodations will not result in them needing to recognize Black people as social equals. Veselá writes, “we glimpse a utopia where egalitarianism is undermined by the fear of assimilation” (273). Bould puts it more starkly: “Johnson's vision...is so whitewashed one might think that a genocide has occurred” (65). Sargent, in a recent survey of African American contributions to utopianism, has an interesting interpretation: “throughout the novel, the attitude of whites to blacks is so paternalistic that there may be an element of satire” (31). Whatever Johnson’s intention, these aspects of the novel are hard to miss, and they strike contemporary readers as unsavory, without a doubt. Even compared to Harper’s, Griggs’s, and Hopkins’s speculative visions, all of which contain some similar elements, Johnson’s seeming deference to the sympathies of paternalistic white Southerners is

extreme. As Babb summarizes, “[T]he subject matter of Johnson’s work was certainly counter to prevailing literary headwinds” (256).

Additionally, we can infer that Johnson was attempting to reach as broad an audience as possible, based on his incorporation of the popular time travel formula. There were by this point, of course, dozens of such genre novels, but it is difficult to fully understand *Light Ahead* without comparing it to its most obvious influence, Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. It is hard to overstate just how popular, controversial, and influential Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* was. It is also somewhat difficult to imagine its popularity, because it is no longer a book that many people read. But, based on Rooney’s reckoning,

Bellamy’s phenomenal success served as the immediate stimulus for 95 percent of all the utopias written during this period [the turn-of-the-century]. Though only seven utopians supported Bellamy’s form of utopia, all but ten of the 119 utopias were written after 1888. In fact, one-third of all these works were published during the next five years (9).

Johnson’s novel is no exception. First-time readers of *Light Ahead* who are familiar with Bellamy will immediately recognize the parallels. Turn-of-the-century reviews generally noticed them as well. A reviewer in the *Indianapolis Freeman*, for example, writes that the novel is “something on the order of Bellamy’s ‘Looking Backwards’” (“Our Journalists”). And when reviews did not comment directly on the similarities, it is likely because they were already taken for granted, given the prominence of *Looking Backward* in the American consciousness. To emphasize the similarity, Bibler begins his chapter on *Light Ahead* by summarizing “The plot of an American novel published near the turn of the twentieth century”:

a privileged, well-educated New England man coming of age near the turn of the twentieth century enters an almost supernatural state of sleep. He wakes up at the beginning of the 21st century to find that the problems of

his time have been solved and that the United States has become a utopian society. He is taken in by a benevolent doctor and engages in lengthy discussion about how life was in his own time, how twenty-first century life compares to it, and how the change came about. By the end of the novel he has fallen in love with the doctor's beautiful younger relative and secured her hand in marriage, establishing himself permanently as a citizen of the utopian United States of the 21st century (57).

The punchline is, of course, that this summary seems to be describing the much-more well-known *Looking Backward*, but it applies equally as well to *Light Ahead*.

There is no doubt that on some level Johnson was attempting to increase the appeal of his novel by echoing Bellamy's formula. But, in some significant ways, the similarities between Johnson and Bellamy are much deeper than the superficial aspects of the time-travel-utopia formula. In fact, from a certain perspective, they both share the same fundamental concern with the current social order—or, in other words, they both attribute society's failure to the same "root of all evil": private capital and the profit motive. Throughout the novel, Bellamy characterizes private ownership as the great obstacle that needed to be overcome to realize a society that works cooperatively and provides for all. Bellamy expresses this most directly when he describes the transition to businesses that are fully public and nationalized:

[S]trangely late in the world's history, the obvious fact was perceived that no business is so essentially the public business as the industry and commerce on which the people's livelihood depends, and that to entrust it to private persons to be managed for private profit is a folly similar in kind, though vastly greater in magnitude, to that of surrendering the functions of political government to kings and nobles to be conducted for their personal glorification (77).

Though Johnson does not elaborate nearly as much on the idea of private interest hindering progress and equity, it still animates many of the novel's imagined

improvements. For example, the removal of a profit incentive is responsible for improved labor relations:

organized labor still has its problems, but you must remember that they are not of the same character as those of a hundred years ago. The essentials of life...are now handled by the National Government, and the government is pledged to see to it that labor in the production of these commodities is paid a fair share of the surplus accruing from sales. No attempt at profit is allowed; the management is similar to that of the Post Office Department, which has been conducted from the beginning for the convenience of the people, and not for revenue to the Government. The workmen are paid well and the cost to the consumer is lessened by discarding the profits that formerly went into private purses (Johnson 76).

In this passage, we can also glimpse an intersection with another of Bellamy's preoccupations: the belief that eliminating private interest will also eliminate waste and increase efficiency. In Johnson's understanding, this efficiency results in less "cost to the consumer."

Like past and present critics, I was struck by the similarities between *Light Ahead* and *Looking Backward* on my first reading. I was surprised because I assumed these novels would have radically different approaches to utopia. Yet the more I thought through my initial surprise and compared the two novels, the more I confronted a paradox. Bellamy and Johnson have seemingly opposite approaches to race, but their approaches yield surprisingly similar results. *Looking Backward* is infamously raceless. At the very least, we must assume that Bellamy was not preoccupied with race or solving "the Negro problem" as he drafted the novel. A more aggressive interpretation would be that Bellamy—consciously or not—imagines Black people out of existence. This is Yeonsik Jung's interpretation. She points out that West's servant—a "faithful colored man by the name of Sawyer" (Bellamy 56)—is mentioned in the Victorian past-present,

but he does not survive into the future: no one knows his fate, but it is “assume[d] that Sawyer lost his life in the fire or by some accident connected with it” (Bellamy 70). Jung argues that the “death of the black servant [is more] than a mere fluke” (147). “[I]n a symbolic way, [Sawyer’s death] makes possible the opening of the utopian city of Boston to readers of *Looking Backward*. Despite his crucial role in the creation of utopia, however, Sawyer and his black descendants are completely perished and ‘forgotten’ in the course of evolution” (147). There are, of course, a range of other interpretations between the extremes of inattention and active annihilation, but the fact remains that the novel conspicuously imagines a future where race is invisible.

This is obviously not the case with *Light Ahead*. Johnson takes the opposite approach of Bellamy. Rather than trying to give a full account of his imagined future, he describes only those aspects that are directly relevant to the “so-called ‘Negro problem’” (2) and its solution. Bellamy attempts to be comprehensive, but fails to include race in his utopian novel, whereas Johnson (perhaps in response) focuses on race exclusively. And yet, paradoxically, despite these opposite approaches, Johnson’s novel somehow *also* fails to imagine a future where race is visible. With the very notable exception of Dr. Newell’s secretary, who is “not full black, but mixed blood—in color between an Indian and a Chinaman” (79), Twitchell never encounters any other Black people in this future. Several scholars have described *Light Ahead* as an early example or prototype of Afrofuturism. But if we expect from Afrofuturism that on some level it imagines a future where Black people are visible (which is not a very controversial bare minimum), then the novel does not achieve this in any meaningful sense.

That *Light Ahead* fails this basic metric should give us pause in including the novel in any traditional canon of Afrofuturism, and, similarly, should make us reconsider whether Johnson even primarily intended to imagine a Black future in the first place. Yet, even the strongest and most thoughtful interpretations of *Light Ahead* (of which there are admittedly few) interpret the novel primarily as a vision of the future—or in other words, as an essentially aspirational vision. Zamalin and Fabi, for example, both offer different versions of this interpretation.

Zamalin, in a short amount of space, identifies unique features of Johnson's vision and differentiates it helpfully from other, more well-known turn-of-the-century Black speculative fiction, but misinterprets certain aspects as being ahead-of-their-time or particularly forward-looking. He includes Johnson's novel in his recent book-length survey of *Black Utopia*. *Light Ahead* is one of the four novels he analyzes in a chapter exploring "turn-of-the-century Black literary utopianism," an era he calls "the golden age of black utopian literature, which vividly developed the transformative vision of black citizenship Delany only outlined [in *Blake*]" (34). "*Imperium* and *Iola Leroy* together imagined a postracist black politics freed from the fetters of white normative judgments. But neither fully elaborated or defended a future of interracial equality. This was the greatest achievement of Johnson's *Light Ahead for the Negro*" (39). In contrast to Griggs's and Harper's respective visions of Black nationalism, "Johnson embraced...social-democratic populism," and his novel "was the first text to conceptualize the utopia of interracial freedom and egalitarian cooperation" (39). "*Light Ahead* moved black utopianism away from a focus upon elite leadership to direct popular rule, from a conversation about the moral integrity of masses to a defense of their

intrinsic capacity for rule” (39). Zamalin argues that the crux of the novel is Johnson’s “utopian vision of economic equality” (36). The most obvious example of Johnson prioritizing the importance of economic freedom is his vision of racial cooperation within labor unions, which in the 2006 U.S. has been the solution to strikes and lockouts. “Johnson realized the dream of socialists in painting a picture in which predominantly white labor unions would organize across the racial line for better pay, shorter hours, and more adequate working conditions” (Zamalin 46).

While I agree that economic aspects are certainly the emphasis of *Light Ahead*, I think Zamalin overstates the extent to which the novel is modern or forward-looking, as opposed to simply saturated in the economic discourse of its time. For example, Zamalin argues, “Ahead of its time was Johnson’s defense of the viability of anarchism: *Light Ahead* imagined a Turn-of-the-Century Black Utopianism polity without a president, Congress, or political appointees, and where economic freedom, worker’s rights, complete political suffrage, and universal education were realized” (39-40). While the lack of a president and a Congress might fit some technical definition of anarchism, this goes against the spirit of Johnson’s vision, which portrays a society with very well-developed state functions. For example, it seems that all the major policy decisions are made by something called a “Bureau of Public Utility.” Johnson’s imagined 2006 United States is not anarchist in any meaningful sense. *Looking Backward* is a useful comparison. Bellamy’s vision similarly imagines a society without political positions, in which state functions are administered by bureaus, and in which equality has been achieved in all sectors. But Bellamy’s society is about as far from anarchism as possible. William Morris (who *does* envision something like anarchy in his utopian novel *News*

From Nowhere) describes Bellamy's society as "organized with a vengeance. His scheme may be described as State Communism, worked by the very extreme of national centralisation" (255).

Unrelated to the "anarchism" of the novel, but another example of Zamalin wanting the novel to be forward-looking or modern in some way: Zamalin argues that "Johnson embraced Nietzsche's idea of artistic self-invention and humanistic faith in freedom—as Twitchell puts it, 'Individuality gives room for thought, out of which is born invention and progress'" (45). Again, it is probably technically possible to read this line through the lens of Nietzsche's philosophy, but in the context that Twitchell says this, it seems much more likely that Johnson is simply defending his egalitarianism against the objection that a society like this must necessarily subordinate individuals to the collective will.

Fabi provides the most comprehensive and insightful interpretation of *Light Ahead for the Negro*, but I think ultimately misses the mark in the final analysis, when she argues that Johnson's vision of the future is intended to act as a blueprint or path forward. Fabi significantly describes the novel as a "*feasible* utopia." She argues that Johnson

must have planned [*Light Ahead*] as a *feasible* utopia, an inspirational vision of a realizable and not too distant future. Keeping in mind his intended white audience and the attending 'distrust of the reader'...one is not surprised to realize that the potential feasibility of Johnson's proposal rests precisely on its incomplete novelty (68).

(By "incomplete novelty," I think she means "incomplete" as in not comprehensive: Johnson does not attempt to give a full account of society, as someone like Bellamy does, but rather focuses on the specific aspect of the "Negro problem.") I agree with Fabi to a

certain extent. *Light Ahead* is certainly “incomplete” compared to other turn-of-the-century utopian novels that attempt a totalizing vision. And it is arguably “realizable” in the sense that its imagined improvements are relatively modest. Rather than eliminating poverty, war, and suffering from the world, Johnson is simply imagining a society where “equality before the law” is a reality (68). (It bears repeating: Johnson insists multiple times he is not advocating for “social equality”!) But “feasible utopia”³⁰ gives a misleading impression that Johnson takes a “realistic” or “common sense” approach to the problem. But in fact, despite envisioning a utopian society with relatively modest or marginal improvements, the ideas that Johnson presents in *Light Ahead* are, in many respects, quite politically naïve, an idea I will return to at the end of the chapter.

I argue that we can give a fuller account of what Johnson is attempting in his speculative novel by reading against the grain. Johnson’s imagined future is important not so much for what it represents, but for what it allows, which is a speculative vantage point from which to view the present moment *as* history—or, in other words, as a historian might. *Light Ahead* operates in the mode of a “‘proleptic’ or ‘prospective’ historiography, a means of ‘historicizing the present’ by imagining that it will someday be the subject of research for a future antiquarian” (Hay 22). A famous example of proleptic historiography in the African American literary tradition is the moment in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* when Linda Brent reacts to her “bill of sale”:

“The bill of sale!” Those words struck me like a blow. So I was sold at last! A human being sold in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is

³⁰ This is beside the point and pedantic, but I would argue that “feasible utopia” is an oxymoron. Strictly by definition, a “no-place” is not “feasible.” But more importantly, a “utopia” can only have an estranging effect on a reader if it posits a radical change of some kind, not a “feasible” society.

on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion. It may hereafter prove a useful document to antiquaries, who are seeking to measure the progress of civilization in the United States (217).

In this case, the proleptic vantage point emphasizes the cruelty and absurdity of a woman being sold as an “article” at such a late moment in the “progress of civilization.”

The clearest articulation of *Light Ahead*'s speculative mode³¹ comes from one of Twitchell's observations at the end of the novel:

I noticed the absence of the old time signs which I had heard once decorated the gates of this park, “Negroes and dogs not allowed.” Of course Irene had never seen or heard of such a thing and I therefore did not mention my thoughts to her. She was a creature of the new era and knew the past only from books and tradition. I had the misfortune, or pleasure, as the case may be, of having lived in two ages and incidents of the past would continually rise before me in comparison with the present (110).

In this passage are two distinct ways of looking at the present from the perspective of the future. One is from the point of view of Twitchell, who has experienced both present and

³¹ It is worth noting something that makes my task in this chapter a bit more difficult. Johnson seems to disavow the elements of the novel that make it speculative. “The story weaved into the work,” he writes, “is subordinate to the discussion of facts, and not paramount; it is intended to be mild, thus putting it in keeping with the character of the heroine whose deeds it portrays” (vi). He is strangely telling readers to ignore the elements of the novel that might have made it more appealing than a more straightforward work of polemic or sociology. In a certain sense, it is quite easy to follow Johnson's directions. The novel is made up largely of this “discussion of facts” that he directs our attention to. In particular, the “Now and Then” chapter is basically nothing more than a factual discussion of the present day. And the story is certainly “mild”: I would go further and say it is forgettable and perfunctory. But even if the details of the narrative are not incredibly engaging, I argue that, despite what Johnson insists in the Preface, the success of this novel (such as it is) depends crucially on the temporal perspective that the “story” enables. In other words, the novel would not work as simply a “discussion of facts.”

future, who has “lived in two ages” which are “continually ris[ing] before [him] in comparison.” The other is from the perspective of Irene, who, having only lived in one era, “knew the past only from books and tradition.” Twitchell’s perspective is what we associate with a conventional turn-of-the-century utopian novel: this is the device that enables the estrangement of the present in comparison to an imagined better future. And to be sure, *Light Ahead* does regularly employ this device of the “two ages” coming up in “comparison.” But in this passage, Johnson seems to be questioning, almost rejecting, the validity of this perspective. Conventionally, we would expect to see this issue of the segregation sign resolved through dialogue (Twitchell: “I noticed there are none of these old time signs”; Irene: “Oh, yes, we removed them immediately when we realized they did not follow the Golden Rule.”). But, for this issue at least, Irene lacks any first-hand knowledge of something that no longer exists, that she did not experience. It is ultimately Irene’s perspective that Johnson wants to emphasize: evaluating the present moment not as a time traveler but as an historian would.

So, the primary goal of *Light Ahead* is to write history. And Johnson pursues this goal from two distinct but interrelated perspectives. First, he joins a small but growing group who were at the turn of the century challenging the prevailing historiography of the Reconstruction era. Then, using the vantage point of an imagined future, he applies the same methodology to challenge the prevailing historiography of the *present*, providing a speculative perspective on how future historians might view the present, a period that he aptly characterizes as Southern states “re-reconstructing themselves, as it were, by making amendments to their constitutions which virtually disfranchised a large proportion of the Negro voters” (82). The historian’s perspective of the present that

Johnson constructs ultimately functions not to *solve* the so-called “Negro problem,” as Johnson states in the Preface, but to estrange the complexity of the problem and the discourse around it.

A History of Reconstruction

Like every other author in this dissertation, Johnson demonstrated a commitment to Black history, particularly history intended for a younger generation. What Johnson was undoubtedly more famous for during his lifetime was not his speculative vision of the future, but his revision of the past, in the form of a textbook called *A School History of the Negro Race in America, from 1619 to 1890*. According to Foner, this was one of “the first textbooks aimed at a Black readership, designed to be used in southern schools established by the Freedmen’s Bureau and the biracial Reconstruction governments” (“Complicity”). These textbooks “emphasized Blacks’ contributions to American history, particularly their service in the wartime Union army.” Like the other authors whose texts I have examined, Johnson demonstrated a commitment to educating the rising generation, which manifested in projects that emphasized racial uplift. Johnson’s *School History* textbook communicates the goal of racial uplift very explicitly. In the final sentence he articulates a familiar version the rhetoric of uplift: “We shall rise, not by dragging others down, but by encouraging those who are up to extend down to us the helping hand, which we must quickly grasp, and by its help *lift ourselves up*” (192, emphasis in original). In this articulation Johnson notably reverses the typical perspective of uplift, emphasizing the duty of those on the bottom to grasp the hands above them, rather than the more typical emphasis on the obligation of those above to reach down. Johnson also addresses his “young readers,” writing that

much has been done, as you have read in this chapter, to raise the race in the estimation of the world, but much more remains to be done. What has been said in this chapter is not to make you content and satisfied; but rather to inspire new zeal and fresh courage, that each one of you may add something more to what has already been accomplished. You can, you must, and we believe you will (164).

In this second-person address, Johnson manifests very clearly his conviction that history can be used to inspire and encourage emulation for young people. To this end, his history textbook contains, in addition to basic historical facts, dozens of profiles of African Americans—beginning with Crispus Attucks—who have demonstrated “the many brave deeds and noble characters of their own race” (3). (He includes a short profile of “Francis Ellen Watkins” who he incorrectly identifies as “another of Maryland’s bright slaves”—and excerpts her poem “Ellen Harris” (36).) In fact, Johnson’s textbook shares much in common with Hopkins “Famous Men...” and “Famous Women of the Negro Race” discussed briefly in the previous chapter. Hopkins and Johnson both perform what Lois Brown calls a “liberation historiography,” fostering a sense of racial pride through an “ennobling and romanticized black history” (Brown 291).

Johnson’s commitment to ennobling historical representation naturally extended into an interest in cultural representation of African Americans more generally. In the beginning of *School History*, Johnson anticipates a talking point that Malcolm X would turn to half a century later, arguing that “People in this country have been educated to believe in white because all that is good has been ascribed to the white race both in pictures and words. God, the angels and all the prophets are pictured white and the Devil is represented as black” (13). A few years later, Johnson joined a growing cultural trend that emphasized the importance of Black children being able to play with Black dolls that were not degrading cultural stereotypes. In an 1894 conference of “Educators of Colored

Youth,” Johnson argued that “the prevalence of ‘bad representations’ made the need for positive images pressing, then it was of utmost importance for black girls and boys to be given toys and texts that ‘correspond[ed]’ with the actual achievements, conditions, and appearance of the race” (Mitchell 179-180).

This interest in representation extends in a different form into the preoccupations of *Light Ahead*, particularly Johnson’s concerns about how African Americans are portrayed in newspapers. In other ways, though, Johnson’s portrayal of Black history in *Light Ahead* differs significantly from his textbook a decade earlier. In the textbook, he gives notable attention to Black resistance to slavery, noting that, during the beginning of the slave trade, “Many, when opportunity permitted, would jump overboard rather than be taken from their homes” (15). He mentions in some detail the New York Slave Revolt of 1712. Most significantly, he includes a chapter devoted to “Nat. Turner and Others Who ‘Struck’ for Freedom” (87). In addition to a lengthy description of Nat Turner and the 1831 “Insurrection,” Johnson also includes descriptions of the Virginia maroon community and the 1839 revolt on the Spanish ship *La Amistad*. In contrast, in *Light Ahead*, Twitchell offers an extended meditation on the question “‘Why did not the Negro offer some resistance to these outrages?’” (43). Some of the answers include being “overawed by numbers and resources,” the “inability to organize,” and the idea that Black people are “not naturally of a rebellious nature” (43-45). To be sure, Johnson is more so summarizing popular explanations rather than endorsing them. But it is a very different perspective and emphasis on this contested issue than what he presents in the textbook—yet another indication that, although Johnson may have included elements of satire, his novel is intended almost exclusively for a sympathetic white audience.

Like he did in *School History*, Johnson is revising dominant interpretations of Black history in *Light Ahead*—specifically interpretations of the Reconstruction era. Ewing³² argues that the text is meant primarily to “challenge the prevailing historiography of Reconstruction in Johnson’s time” (207). Viewing the present moment [1904] from the vantage point of an imagined future, “Johnson reperiodizes this era and terms it ‘re-reconstruction’” (209). “He characterizes this ‘re-reconstruction’ of the southern states as the completion of what he calls the ‘decitizenization’ of African Americans, referring to widespread Black disenfranchisement in the South” (210). Johnson, Ewing argues, “directly refut[es] the arguments of historian William Dunning” and the emerging “Dunning School” of historiography (214), reimagining the end of Reconstruction not as a failure of Black enfranchisement and leadership, but as a failure effected by the “wily and cruel means” of Southern white supremacists (Johnson n8).

In particular, Johnson was aligned with Du Bois’s revisionist work on Reconstruction. Du Bois’s work would, of course, culminate in 1935 with *Black Reconstruction*, the definitive refutation of the Dunning School and “the foundational text of revisionist African American historiography” (Bilbija 64). But the seeds of Du Bois’s interest in Reconstruction historiography are present as early as 1901, a few years before Johnson published *Light Ahead*. In his essay “Of the Dawn of Freedom” (the second

³² Ewing’s very recent article is “Prophesying Citizenship in Edward A. Johnson’s *Light Ahead for the Negro*.” It was included in a special issue of *American Literary Realism*, and it focuses exclusively on the novel. The inclusion of this article hopefully signals the beginning of a new period of interest in *Light Ahead*. Additionally, Ewing does not see *Light Ahead* as a conventional future utopia as many other scholars do, but rather as a “temporally complex, generically hybrid text.” “Part speculative fiction, part pastiche of fictional and historically accurate primary source documents, and part historical analysis, *Light Ahead* is a disorienting mix of fact and fiction” (208).

chapter of *Souls of Black Folk*, which was previously published in *The Atlantic*), Du Bois begins and ends with his familiar refrain that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” (16; 34). He elaborates that this “problem” involves “the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (16). The international scope of the color line is often omitted in contemporary quotations of Du Bois’s prophetic refrain, but it was a consistent theme throughout his work. This essay, however, although it begins with a grand statement on the color line, quickly narrows to a far more modest scope: “to study the period of history from 1861 to 1872 so far as it relates to the American Negro” (17), a period of history which he views as “a phase of this problem” of the color line (16). More specifically, Du Bois is giving “an account of that government of men called the Freedmen’s Bureau,— one of the most singular and interesting of the attempts made by a great nation to grapple with vast problems of race and social condition” (17). In simple terms, the essay is a reconsideration of the legacy of the short-lived Freedmen’s Bureau, which at the turn of the century was generally a reviled institution, and something of a scapegoat for the “failures” of Reconstruction. Or, as Du Bois summarizes the attitude toward the Bureau: “nothing is more convenient than to heap on the Freedmen’s Bureau all the evils of that evil day, and damn it utterly for every mistake and blunder that was made” (31). In this essay we can see the kernel of interest in this historical period that would culminate in *Black Reconstruction*, although there are some key differences. For one, the essay emphasizes the decisions made by white leaders, and it is not a concerted effort to interpret the story of Reconstruction “with especial reference to the efforts and experiences of the Negroes themselves” (*Black Reconstruction* xix).

Additionally, it is not nearly as self-conscious in its attempt to counter a dominant interpretation of the historical period. For the most part, it is a mild chronological statement of events, leading up to an even-handed summary of the Bureau's performance:

Such was the dawn of Freedom; such was the work of the Freedmen's Bureau...for some fifteen million dollars...this Bureau set going a system of free labor, established a beginning of peasant proprietorship, secured the recognition of black freedmen before courts of law, and founded the free common school in the South. On the other hand, it failed to begin the establishment of good-will between ex-masters and freedmen, to guard its work wholly from paternalistic methods which discouraged self-reliance, and to carry out to any considerable extent its implied promises to furnish the freedmen with land" (31).

Although, to be sure, simply attempting to give a more accurate or neutral account of this institution could be seen at the turn of the century as a radical reinterpretation of history against the dominant narrative.

However, it is in the occasional moments that Du Bois extends beyond a straightforward explanation of successes and failures that the essay is most provocative. In addition to being a reinterpretation of this historical period, the essay functions as a critique of those "men of marvellous hindsight" who view the past with a complacent and condescending attitude (29). "It is all well enough for us of another generation," Du Bois writes, "to wax wise with advice to those who bore the burden in the heat of the day" (27). Du Bois replaces this type of idle "advice" and speculation with a realistic and critical appraisal of the conditions that help explain the failures of the Freedmen's Bureau:

In a time of perfect calm, amid willing neighbors and streaming wealth, the social uplifting of four million slaves to an assured and self-sustaining place in the body politic and economic would have been a herculean task; but when to the inherent difficulties...were added the spite and hate of

conflict, the hell of war...in such a case, the work of any instrument of social regeneration was in large part foredoomed to failure (26).

As Du Bois indicates, it is essential to judge historical legacy with an accurate understanding of limitations, and it is especially important when thinking about the period of Reconstruction, which Du Bois claims is “difficult to write [about] calmly, so intense was the feeling, so mighty the human passions that swayed and blinded men” (27). But Du Bois takes this maxim of historical interpretation and applies it to the current moment and the “negro problems” at the turn of the century. He ends the essay by declaring that “The legacy of the Freedmen’s Bureau is the heavy heritage of this generation. To-day, when new and vaster problems are destined to strain every fibre of the national mind and soul, would it not be well to count this legacy honestly and carefully?” (34) And, at the end of the essay, Du Bois “counts this legacy” not necessarily just in the successes and failures of the Bureau, but in what *might have been* different under different circumstances. The third-to-last paragraph is a subtle counterfactual that begins: “Had political exigencies been less pressing, the opposition to government guardianship of Negroes less bitter, and the attachment to the slave system less strong, the social seer can well imagine a far better policy” (33). He then lists the several features of a hypothetical “permanent Freedmen’s Bureau,” which might have “solved in a way we have not yet solved the most perplexing and persistent of the Negro problems” (33). It is in this counterfactual—“Had political exigencies been less pressing”—that Du Bois locates a potential path forward. He implies that, despite the “new and vaster problems” of the 20th century, the conditions are significantly different and likely more favorable than they were during the Reconstruction period, and that the unfinished legacy of this period might be worth reinvestigating.

Johnson was undoubtedly aware of Du Bois's essay. To me, it seems quite likely that "Of the Dawn of Freedom" was a direct inspiration for *Light Ahead's* fictional "Reconstruction and Negro Government," an essay published in 1902 and republished in 1950 that offers a brief revisionist history of the Reconstruction era. Both essays are clearly saturated in the same discourse about the period of Reconstruction and engaged in the same project of rebutting common claims about its failures. Du Bois and Johnson are responding to an interpretation of the Reconstruction era that we now associate with the Dunning School of historiography. The Dunning School was not necessarily the dominant interpretation in the early 1900s, but it was certainly in the process of becoming so.³³ Members of the Dunning School offered a broad, comprehensive narrative of the Reconstruction period, and shared a fundamental assumption, "to quote one member of the Dunning School, of 'negro incapacity'" (Foner xx). According to Foner, "The childlike blacks, these scholars insisted, were unprepared for freedom and incapable of properly exercising the political rights Northerners had thrust upon them. The fact that blacks took part in government...was a 'diabolical development, 'to be remembered, shuddered at, and 'execrated'" (xx).

³³ The question of whether the Dunning school was "dominant" at the time is maybe beside the point. Their ideas were commonplace long before their publications existed. As Foner notes, "These scholars did not invent the portrait of Reconstruction as a disastrous mistake—that originated in Democratic propaganda of the postwar years" ("Foreword" xi). In many ways, the publications and dissertations from the Dunning School simply functioned to provide a "scholarly apparatus" to substantiate the prevailing sentiments about Reconstruction (Smith 7). But for what it is worth, the actual publications of the Dunning School were reaching influential Americans as early as 1898. Henry James wrote a "glowing review" of Dunning's collection *Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction*, in which he "shared Dunning's regret over the demise of states' rights and the rise of African American civil rights during Reconstruction" (Smith 7).

Du Bois does not respond to this assumption directly, at least not to the extent that he would in *Black Reconstruction*, but Johnson does. In some ways, the fictional essay in *Light Ahead* actually upholds this assumption of Black incompetence. The essay begins with the very common line of reasoning that, because their attempts at education had been systematically suppressed, former slaves were in large part not prepared for the responsibilities and demands of emancipation:

For two hundred and forty years his education and training had been directed towards the suppression of his will. He was fast becoming an automaton...It is, therefore, not surprising that freedom's new suit fitted the recently emancipated slave uncomfortably close; he hardly knew which way to turn for fear he would rend a seam. Consultation with his former owners was his natural recourse in adjusting himself to new conditions (56).

From this justification, the essay asserts that the newly emancipated were susceptible to following leaders without their best interest in mind. "In some instances these proved to be corrupt camp followers, in others ambitious and unscrupulous Southern men who made the Negroes stepping stones to power or pelf" (57). These are all common turn-of-the-century talking points that reinforced the assumption that Black people were childlike and gullible. Where the essay deviates from the Dunning School is in assigning blame for the ostensible failure of Reconstruction. In a way, the essay demonstrates a contradiction of the Dunning School: if Black people were gullible and incompetent and without real leadership, then they cannot reasonably be held responsible for the failure. "[T]hose who had the reins of government in hand were not Negroes. The truth is, that if the team went wrong the fault was that of the white drivers and not that of the Negro passengers who, to say the most, had only a back seat in the wagon of state" (58). Later, the essay gives a more general explanation of the failures: "The evils of reconstruction were due to the

general demoralization which followed the Civil War, rather than to the Negro. War is 'hell' and so is its aftermath" (61). To be sure, neither of these are satisfactory interpretations of the Reconstruction period, at least according to how we understand the period in the 21st century. But, like Du Bois's "Dawn of Freedom," this fictional essay attempts to interrogate the dogma of hindsight and give a more nuanced appraisal of the difficult conditions of the period.

Another notable difference between "Of the Dawn of Freedom" and *Light Ahead's* fictional essay is that Johnson extends beyond Du Bois's timeline, which delineates the "period of history from 1861 to 1872" (17). Johnson, on the other hand, ranges, not always chronologically, between 1865 and 1902. And although the essay has "Reconstruction" in its title, it is just as much, if not more, about the present moment. The essay mentions, for example, the "'Jim-crow' system" as well as a very topical reference to "the Republicans deny[ing] self-government to the Philippines, Porto Rico and Cuba" (67). Du Bois's essay arrives briefly in the present moment, but only subtly, nudging the reader to consider how they might imagine the relevance of the Reconstruction era to the present: "would it not be well to count this legacy [of the Freedmen's Bureau] honestly and carefully?" (34). Johnson's essay is much more forceful and blunt, offering a prediction of sorts: "But the subordination of the Negro cannot last, there will always be white people in this country who will believe in his equality before the law. These principles are too firmly entrenched in the hearts of Americans to be utterly subverted" (68). The conclusion of the essay is pragmatic, almost cynical. The author argues that white supremacists in the South have such a tendency to

“go to extremes” that they will inevitably “turn the country against them”: “If a fool has rope enough the end is easy to see” (70).

In a sense, we might consider the society in *Light Ahead* as a vision of what Du Bois’s hypothetical “permanent Freedmen’s Bureau” might look like in practice. Like Du Bois, Johnson explicitly laments that the Bureau dissolved “before its work [was] done” (Du Bois 34), although he offers a slightly different explanation for its demise: “the Freedmen’s Bureau was greatly hampered and met an untimely end because of the selfishness and partisanship of that period. In fact, this one feature has stood in the way of progress in this Government from its earliest existence” (97). In Johnson’s imagined future, the “selfishness and partisanship” that prevented the Freedmen’s Bureau from flourishing is overcome: “the triumph of reason over partisanship and demagoguery had at last been reached, and...the American people...were determined to have the government run according to the original design of its founders, upon the principle of the greatest good to the greatest number” (104). And this “triumph of reason” is apparently made possible because “The business of the Government was entrusted to bureaus or departments, and the officers in them were chosen for their fitness by an improved system of civil service” (100). Somewhat paradoxically, the turn to bureaucracy³⁴ is both the cause and effect of what Twitchell perceives as the “triumph of reason” and the

³⁴ This turn toward bureaucracy, and especially Johnson’s seemingly excessive faith in it, is to me one of the most disconcerting aspects of the novel (maybe second only to the fact that Johnson’s future appears to be almost completely segregated). Johnson did not anticipate at all the dehumanizing and alienating effects of bureaucracy which would be articulated in the coming decades, most notably by Kafka. The turn to bureaucracy, though, is a bit more palatable and understandable if we consider it in the more specific context of the Freedmen’s Bureau and its legacy—Johnson’s attempt to imagine the continuing work of one particular institution rather than imagining bureaucracy as a totalizing system.

subsequent improvements that it brings. Most importantly, it is ultimately responsible for “bringing about such a happy solution of the Negro problem” (120). And although the Freedmen’s Bureau does not literally revive itself or become a “permanent” institution, as Du Bois has us imagine, Johnson’s Bureau of Public Utility functions with the same rationale, and it answers the question that the Freedmen’s Bureau was ostensibly created to answer: “What shall be done with Negroes?” (Du Bois 16).

A History of *Re-Reconstruction*

Johnson offers a very cursory description of a future in which a “happy solution of the Negro problem” has been achieved, with the aid of something like a hypothetical, evolved Freedmen’s Bureau. But the novel’s much more significant and valuable contribution is not in imagining a “solution,” but in offering an imagined perspective on how the “Negro problem” might be evaluated by historians in the future. This perspective is a more significant contribution because, to put it bluntly, Johnson does not actually offer a reasonably workable solution. To return to Fabi’s argument: she interprets *Light Ahead* as Johnson’s attempt at a “feasible utopia.” But in fact, despite envisioning a utopian society with relatively modest or marginal improvements, the ideas that Johnson presents in *Light Ahead* are, in many respects, quite politically naive. Most obviously, he prefaces the novel by stating very bluntly that the “Negro problem” “can be solved in peace and good will rather than by brutality” by following “the Golden Rule” (v). The Golden Rule may be an effective ethical maxim, but it is certainly not a rigorous political platform. Additionally, there are several moments in the novel where Twitchell, inquiring about how a change in society came about, receives an earnest but facile answer. For example, when Twitchell asks “how was it all done?” (i.e., how was the “Negro problem”

solved?), Dr. Newell responds: “Well, we Southern people changed our leaders. We took men of noble character; men who appealed to reason and humanity, rather than pandered to the lowest passions of the people” (70). Dr. Newell does not elaborate: the eternal political problem of fearmongering and “pandering” politicians is seemingly solved by flipping a switch that makes people vote for “noble” leaders instead. To be sure, we could say that political naivete is a feature of many utopian novels. But Johnson’s lack of elaboration stands in contrast to formally similar novels that at least attempt a plausible explanation of the chain of events that led to the improved society and that do not present wishful thinking quite so earnestly.

Perhaps the best explanation for these moments of political naivete is that they are intentional. For one, we must consider Johnson’s background. At this point Johnson was actively involved in regional politics and on a path to eventually becoming New York’s first Black state representative. It is hard to believe that someone with this experience could hold a worldview like the one presented in *Light Ahead*, where meaningful change occurs without conflict or compromise. For another, even if Johnson did have a streak of idealism, it seems unlikely that he would expect his audience to buy so easily into an idea like “the Golden Rule furnishes the only solution” to the “Negro problem” (v). If any white Southerner were reading *Light Ahead* at all, they were probably sympathetic to the problem, but in 1903 could not have been very optimistic as they observed the realities of the Jim Crow South, and they were perhaps especially cynical about their state’s capacity to elect “noble” leaders who did not exploit anti-Black racism.

Whether intentional or not, though, the dissonance created by suggesting politically naive “solutions” to an entrenched, seemingly intractable problem is, I argue,

one of the most important effects that the novel produces. To put it simply, this dissonance estranges the reader's perception of the "Negro problem." It momentarily suspends the ostensible complexity of the problem and suggests that perhaps the difficulty lies not in the problem itself but in the discourse that surrounds and unnecessarily complicates it.

A consistent theme throughout the novel regarding the overcomplication of the "Negro problem" is the idea that the problem persists largely because there is a group of white people who benefit from its existence. When Twitchell gives his initial account of the "Negro problem" in his day, he summarizes some of the "proposed solutions." He begins by saying that "Various meetings were held all over the country to discuss the Negro problem", which might lead the reader to believe that he is going to describe earnest attempts at a solution (29). But Twitchell follows this with his assessment that "many a mediocre white man who thirsted for a little newspaper notoriety, or political preferment, in both the North and the South, had his appetite in this direction satisfied by writing or saying something on the Negro question" (29). By framing the "solutions" this way, Johnson casts doubt on whether most of them are even in good faith to begin with. Later in the novel, Johnson implicates politicians, who Dr. Newell believes "were quite anxious to keep the Negro question alive for the party advantage it brought. In the North it served the purpose of solidifying the Negro vote for the Republicans, and in the South the Democrats used it to their advantage; neither party, therefore, was willing to remove the Negro issue by any real substantial legislation" (103). It is notable that he implicates both major political parties, and throughout the novel Johnson points out that the North benefits from exploiting the Negro problem as well. At one point he writes that "Northern

capital endor[es] serfdom” (28). Overall, though, Johnson reserves most of the blame for Southern Democrats: “It must not be forgotten that the so-called race question is the only capital which a small group of Southern politicians of the old school still possess” (91).

Johnson implicates several different spheres of society for keeping the “Negro problem” alive, but his most substantial critique is of the newspaper industry. This is, in fact, another fundamental similarity with Bellamy, who also criticized the negative effect that privately owned newspapers have on public discourse. In *Looking Backward*, Dr. Leete describes to Julian West the effect that the newspaper press had on public opinion in the past “when private capital controlled and managed it primarily as a money-making business, and secondarily only as a mouthpiece for the people”:

To us, the judgments of your newspapers on such themes seem generally to have been crude and flippant, as well as deeply tainted with prejudice and bitterness. In so far as they may be taken as expressing public opinion, they give an unfavorable impression of the popular intelligence, while so far as they may have formed public opinion, the nation was not to be felicitated (142).

Johnson similarly comments on the tendency for the newspaper press to foment “prejudice and bitterness,” but rather than speaking in general terms, he applies it directly to the “Negro Problem.” In fact, this is the topic with which Johnson begins the “Now and Then” chapter, the core of the novel. “Many changes considered well nigh impossible one hundred years ago have taken place in almost all phases of the so-called Negro problem. One of the most noticeable instances to me is the absence of slurs at individual Negroes and at the race as a whole in your newspapers” (22). Twitchell continues his “statement about the Negro problem in [his] time”:

Newspapers mould public opinion. Your organization for the dissemination of news has it in its power to either kill or make alive in this

respect. Our organization, called the News Distributing Bureau, was formerly in the hands of people whose policy designedly necessitated the portrayal of the Negro in his worst light before the people, in order that certain schemes against the race might be fostered, and seemed to take special delight in publishing every mean act of every bad Negro, and leaving unrecorded the thousands of credible acts of the good ones (23).

Regarding the negative effects Johnson takes a much more conspiratorial stance than Bellamy, but they still both trace the problem back to ownership. For Johnson, that private ownership consists of “people whose policy designedly necessitated the portrayal of the Negro in his worst light before the people” (23).

From a distance, Johnson and Bellamy both seem to be offering an evergreen critique of sensational journalism. But there is a more specific historical context to which they are responding. Journalism scholars characterize the turn of the century as a transition between two competing paradigms of journalism: from an older tradition in which local papers published partisan, long-form editorial pieces for a niche audience, to a model that was much more concerned with reaching as broad an audience as possible. Facilitated by a more literate public, the growth of cities, and the increasing prominence of advertising, this “new journalism” was embodied in metropolitan dailies like the *New York World* and the *New York Journal*. “The financial stability of the new metropolitan dailies always depended on winning more and more readers in order to attract larger advertising revenues” (Emery 194). These were the conditions that enabled the development of “yellow journalism,” a set of techniques, turn-of-the-century critics believed, that produced sensationalized and exaggerated stories. This new journalism paradigm also produced a panic about its ostensibly detrimental effects on the average reader and on American public opinion. As opposed to traditional long-form, text heavy journalism, which privileged the expression and debate of ideas, the new journalism had

a “breezy style, lively headlines, and ample illustrations,” ideally suited for “people who had no previous tradition of reading” (Marzolf 9). “The defenders of the old culture saw their grasp on the public mind slipping, replaced by the vulgar new journalism. The ideal of the press as a pillar of culture and mold of public opinion was endangered because a public raised on trivia might lose its ability to concentrate or to take an interest in serious debate and uplifting culture” (9).

In this context, both Bellamy’s and Johnson’s critiques of contemporary newspapers are responding not to a generic societal ill (as in, for example Johnson viewing “partisanship and demagoguery” as an obstacle to progress (104)), but to a new phenomenon, a political problem emerging in a moment of transition. For Johnson, the explicit critique of newspapers is more pointedly an implicit critique of “new” or “yellow” journalism, a reaction against a historical development that he perceives as harmful. In this sense, the critique enacts what Jameson calls the “utopian enclave,” the “pocket of stasis within the ferment and rushing forces of social change...within which Utopian fantasy can operate” (15). Unlike Bellamy, Johnson never explicitly outlines the 2006 United States’ solution to yellow journalism, but, based on the society’s other political arrangements, we can assume that it involves a government Bureau taking control, thereby eliminating the profit motive of privately owned newspapers. Johnson’s critique adds to a growing chorus of press critics who, though they did not propose solutions that were quite as “utopian,” still pursued the “vision of the ideal newspaper...in the first decade of the new century” (Marzolf 34). “The growing commercialism of the press became a favorite target of the press reformers in the Progressive Era, and the endowed press and a financially independent press were suggested as popular

alternatives” (35). Johnson’s solution is ultimately a variation of a financially independent or “endowed” newspaper, the only main difference being that the funding is coming explicitly from the government and not from a philanthropic institution, which is usually how an endowed press was imagined in the early 1900s.

Johnson provides a historical perspective on the present issue of fearmongering of newspapers, demonstrating the extent to which a self-interested press will sensationalize and hyperbolize ostensible problems like Black criminality. He also uses the perspective of the historian to expose and defamiliarize a different type of fearmongering: “false prophets” who make dire predictions about the outcome of the “Negro problem.” Johnson most explicitly implicates and responds to Thomas Dixon. As the initial review of *Light Ahead* in *CAM* notes, the novel “refutes the ideas of Thos. Dixon in ‘Leopard Spots,’ and those who claim that it is necessary to use shot guns in settling the Negro problem” (“Political Outlook”). In fact, Johnson refutes Dixon’s ideas in two different temporal registers. First, in his account of the “Negro problem,” Twitchell compares Dixon’s ideas to other “solutions” for the problem, framing Dixon’s ideas as extreme, even among writers and politicians who wrote about the issue opportunistically. “Thomas Dixon tried to out Herod Herod in taking up the exceptional cases of Negro criminality and using them in an attempt to convince his readers of the Negro’s unfitness for citizenship” (29). Although this is obviously a denunciation of Dixon’s deceptive, hyperbolic rhetoric, it is more or less an objective assessment of Dixon’s views, simply a piece of Johnson’s “discussion of facts” that he emphasizes in the Preface.

Where Johnson’s refutation becomes more provocative is in the second temporal register—not of the contemporary observer explaining Dixon’s extreme position in

relation to others, but of a future observer commenting on Dixon's (lack of) legacy in a broader historical view. Twitchell asks if Irene Davis had read an old book which in my day used to be referred to as, 'Tom Dixon's Leopard's Spots'" (117). Davis responds that "she had not, but had seen it instanced as a good example of that class of writers who misrepresented the best Southern sentiment and opinion" (117). The speculative perspective of the future observer looking backward enables much more than a factual critique of Dixon's extreme and controversial opinions. It allows for an imaginative relegation of Dixon to the dustbin of history, a figure who is referenced but never read or taken seriously. In a sense, Johnson's prediction about Dixon's legacy is basically correct. His ideas were highly influential for a time, but by the 21st century (if not much earlier) his work became no more than a citation used to illustrate turn-of-the-century white supremacy.

While Johnson responds to Dixon by name, he is also responding to a general group of white Southerners who oppose Black citizenship. With the perspective of hindsight on the present that *Light Ahead* enables, Johnson characterizes them as "false prophets," men "whom history had not forgotten, but who lived only in ridicule and as examples of error" (119). This is the judgment that Johnson is able to cast from Irene Davis's enlightened future perspective. But even in Twitchell's description of the present moment, he characterizes the opposition to Black advancement as a succession of false prophecies. He describes the "pro-slavery advocates" at the end of the Civil War "who maintained the absurd proposition that if the Negro was emancipated he would soon perish, for want of sufficient ability to feed and clothe himself" (63). This prediction, of course, was false, and Twitchell demonstrates the irony that the new prophecy at the turn

of the century is the exact opposite of the previous prophecy: “in spite of these false prophecies, we can now find some of the sons of the prophets fearing and foretelling, not that the Negroes will perish, but that they will outstrip them in the race of life!” (63). Johnson groups contemporary doomsayers with the false prophets of the past, and then allows his imagined future to confirm this judgment.

On the most basic level, this is simply another perspective from which to criticize the positions of contemporary white supremacists. By comparing them to failed racist predictions of past decades, Johnson demonstrates a continuity of sinister and “false” ideas. As Twitchell says, “These people are as false in their theories as were the pro-slavery advocates” (63). And out of the ostensible complexity of the discourse surrounding the “Negro problem,” Johnson creates a simple moral binary, which Irene Davis explains. Regarding these “false prophets,” she “charitably dismiss[e] them with the remark that ‘It would have been better for the cause of true Christianity had they never been listened to by so large a number of our people, as they represented brute force rather than the Golden Rule’” (118). Here, Davis expresses a litmus test of sorts, a method for distinguishing the false prophets from the true. In this binary we glimpse another instance of *Light Ahead*’s political naivety, but as I have argued, a naivety that functions to estrange the arguments of white supremacists, and in this case lay bare the “brute” motivations of false doomsayers.

In addition to this more straightforward critique, the characterization of turn-of-the-century white supremacists as “false prophets” has a subtler function: it suggests the highly speculative nature of the white supremacist imagination. Theories that are taken in mainstream discourse as factual, logical, and scientific are implied to be hypotheticals

based on tenuous assumptions. When a reader is encouraged to reframe theories as “prophecies,” they are also encouraged to imagine all the speculative assumptions that support them. Johnson offers as a contemporary prophecy the theory that “Negroes...will outstrip [white people] in the race of life” (63). By viewing this as a prophecy, rather than a scientific inevitability, as the proponents of these theories intend, readers might become skeptical of any number of the necessary assumptions that support this worldview: that there are truly distinct racial groups to begin with, that these groups are locked in competition for resources, that they exist in a hierarchical structure, etc. By contrast, Johnson’s vision or prophecy of the future, even though it is speculative, fictional, and even fanciful—told through the point of view of a time-traveling protagonist—actually seems quite reasonable. Johnson imagines a society that simply pursued the solution of “*justice and equality*” (34), unburdened by the apocalyptic prophecies of Social Darwinists, and managed to solve a problem that seemed intractable.

Conclusion

By almost any metric, *Light Ahead for the Negro* is not successful. It is certainly not attractive to our contemporary sensibilities: it is aesthetically derivative and politically dubious. It does not seem to have attracted many people in its own time either. It likely did not sell well. Compared to Johnson’s other accomplishments, the novel barely registers. Even though it is set in the future, it does not really offer an aspirational vision where Black people are visible. More broadly, there are arguments to be made that this text does not belong as part of the Black speculative tradition *at all*.

And yet, against all of this, is the towering figure of Du Bois, who found sociological value in the novel and consistently advocated for it, even if his praise was

mild. Why Du Bois found more value in the novel than many other critics is partly because he was more attuned to what Johnson was attempting in the first place and to the real significance of the future that his novel envisions. In his brief review of *Light Ahead*, Du Bois emphasizes not the contents of Johnson's "prophecy of a century hence," but the distance that future provides from turn-of-the-century white supremacist writers: "His hero [Twitchell] has asked, in this millennium, of the fate of such books as Mr. Dixon's..." ("Southerner's" 318). Despite the novel's many flaws, we can more fully appreciate its contribution if, with Du Bois, we also emphasize this important aspect: the estranging of "books such as Mr. Dixon's" that kept discourse on the "Negro problem" in circulation.

CHAPTER 6

AFTERWORD: FURTHER INTO THE NEW CENTURY

With the benefit of hindsight, one of the most prescient moments from any of these novels turns out to be *Of One Blood's* final pages. The novel ends on a note of uncertainty, as Reuel “views...with serious apprehension, the advance of mighty nations penetrating the dark, mysterious forests of his native land. ‘Where will it stop?’ he sadly questions. ‘What will the end be?’” (193). Hopkins is gesturing toward what she has correctly prophesied as the most pressing international issue, the “advance of mighty nations” into Africa, or, in other words, Africa’s colonization by European powers, which would in the next decade culminate in a world war. In a 1915 *Atlantic* article, Du Bois identified the prime cause of World War I as the rivalry between imperial powers over the division of colonial territories in Africa, anticipating Lenin’s argument in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, published two years later. In “a very real sense,” Du Bois argues, “Africa is a prime cause of this terrible overturning of civilization which we have lived to see; and these words seek to show how in the Dark Continent are hidden the roots, not simply of war to-day but of the menace of wars to-morrow” (n.p.).

A few years later, in 1920, Du Bois would use the unprecedented destruction of this war as a subtext for his short story “The Comet,” the next major milestone in the development of African American speculative fiction. In the story, a comet strikes New York City and kills almost everyone with toxic gases, which Kaplan argues “conjure images of the battlefields of World War I” (qtd. in Wallinger 145). The only two survivors are Jim Davis, a working class Black man, and Julia, a wealthy white woman.

The catastrophe establishes the conditions of a new Eden for these two survivors. As

Julia reflects:

She was no mere woman. She was neither high nor low, white nor black, rich nor poor. She was primal woman; mighty mother of all men to come and Bride of Life. She looked upon the man beside her and forgot all else but his manhood, his strong, vigorous manhood—his sorrow and sacrifice. She saw him glorified. He was no longer a thing apart, a creature below, a strange outcast of another clime and blood, but her Brother Humanity incarnate, Son of God and great All-Father of the race to be (157-158).

Jim and Julia happily cry to each other that “the world is dead” (158). This apocalyptic, near-extinction event seems to have completely dissolved the color line, creating a Utopian space of radical possibility. But with a bleak anticlimax, the world returns. There were survivors after all, among them Julia’s father and fiancé, who come to Julia’s rescue. They first assume that Jim has raped Julia and threaten to lynch him. When they learn that he actually saved her, the father gives Jim money and offers him a job. The return of the world also means the return of white supremacy, Julia’s family enacting both a crude and a more sinister, paternalistic form of it. The story ends with the arrival of a “brown” woman, presumably Jim’s wife, holding the “corpse of a dark baby” (160).

“The Comet” is rich with contradiction. On one hand, Du Bois suggests that institutionalized anti-Black racism in the United States, even in a Northern city like New York, is so entrenched that nothing less than the destruction of the world can uproot it. As we have seen, apocalyptic thinking is an important component of turn-of-the-century Black speculative fiction, but never to this extent. Du Bois’s speculative imagination in “The Comet” produces the most extreme possible articulation of apocalyptic logic, a destruction of the entire

world. At the same time, the ending of the story seems to critique the utility of this type of world-destroying vision. The intrusion of Julia's family at the end of the novel, clumsily reasserting their dominance and restoring the natural order of things, pointedly deflates the fantasy of destruction and renewal that had sustained the story. What Du Bois leaves us with is, on one hand, a seeming rejection of apocalyptic narratives and, on the other, a self-conscious inability to imagine a satisfactory alternative.

Du Bois would go on to write *Dark Princess* in 1928, perhaps the last truly Utopian African American text of the first half of the century. Reflecting his increasing emphasis on global, interracial solidarity, the novel depicts an international group of leaders of color committed to combatting white imperialism. The novel is underappreciated, but certainly incongruous next to the figure who has come to represent Black speculative fiction during the Harlem Renaissance: the controversial and iconoclastic George Schuyler.

In a sense, Schuyler's two speculative novels reflect the broader trend in speculative fiction from this era that tended toward more pointedly satirical ends, the most obvious example being Huxley's *Brave New World*. Schuyler shifts the focus of the speculative away from its world-building potential and toward a more relentless, cynical critique of the status quo. Novelist Danzy Senna, in a positive reappraisal of Schuyler's *Black No More*, describes it as a "wild, misanthropic, take-no-prisoners satire of American life" that offers "no stable ground to stand on" (n.p.). It would be hard to overstate the "take-no-prisoners" quality of Schuyler's novels. In *Black No More* and *Black Empire* (1938), Schuyler at

various times caricatures and criticizes Du Bois, Garvey, James Weldon Johnson, and Black millionaire Madam C.J. Walker. He condemns the Ku Klux Klan and, with hardly any less vitriol, the NAACP. None of this is to diminish the value of many of Schuyler's critiques, but rather to emphasize the deconstructive, rather than generative, uses to which he adapts the speculative mode.

This moment in the timeline of Black speculative fiction, after Du Bois but before the resurgence in the early 60s, is a useful vantage point from which to look backward at what I think is the most remarkable feature of the tradition at the turn of the century. What is most remarkable is not necessarily that these texts anticipated later, more "modern" forms of speculative fiction, or that they sometimes seem to articulate an early version of Afrofuturism. Rather, what is remarkable is their radical *openness* to possibility. Black Americans approached an uncertain future with a wide range of ideological approaches or combination of approaches (integration, separation, nationalism, emigration, pan-Africanism, etc.), most of which had not been foreclosed, at least not imaginatively. Black political debate is palpably malleable in these texts. The ideological impasses had not hardened to the extent that they needed to be shattered by a take-no-prisoners approach like Schuyler's.

It is axiomatic that the turn of the century was a time of great transition and, relatedly, that speculative fiction flourishes in moments of transition. If that is true, then how much more so for Black Americans, "those," as Harper writes, "whom the fortunes of war threw, homeless, ignorant and poor, upon the threshold of a new era" (*Iola* 251). With this "new era" came the possibility of a

“New Negro,” a concept that, for all its shortcomings and contradictions, held the space for radical reinvention, a chance to fully “remake” a Black past, present, and future. The speculative mode afforded unique opportunities to experiment with possible approaches to this reinvention, and ultimately produced some of the most original and provocative literature of the era.

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