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Unsung, Unwavering: Nineteenth-Century Black Women's Epistemologies and the
Liberal Problematic

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Regis Marlene Mann

June 2013

Dissertation Committee:

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The Dissertation of Regis Marlene Mann is approved:

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I wish to acknowledge the encouragement, patience, insight, and generosity of each one of the colleagues, mentors, family members, and friends, who have supported me throughout this journey, with abundant praise and thanksgiving to the One who sustains us all.

For Jeanne

Thanks. For everything.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Unsung, Unwavering: Nineteenth-Century Black Women's Epistemologies and the
Liberal Problematic

by

Regis Marlene Mann

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, June 2013
Dr. Erica Edwards, Chairperson

Unsung, Unwavering deploys African-Americanist and feminist literary criticism in order to problematize how scholars have read nineteenth-century African-American women's activism and knowledge production. It simultaneously expands contemporary critical inquiry in two key ways: that is, I analyze nineteenth-century black women's interrogation of the effects of liberalism as juridical, economic, and affective performance; and I unsettle sedimented perspectives of black resistance as inherently militant, male, and vernacular.

The first three chapters, in particular, address the ways in which Harriet Wilson, Elizabeth Keckly, and Anna Julia Cooper undermine fundamental liberal and Enlightenment precepts including reason, individualism, and the privileging of a transcendental Subject. Each of these women also rely on distinct tropes of embodiment in their writing to contest reigning prescriptions toward objectivity, while making visible the constraints of practices including tolerance and inclusion.

The first chapter, “‘They Won’t Believe What I Say’: Theorizing Freedom as an Economy of Violence,” analyzes Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), in which Wilson exposes the coerciveness of liberalism via dense engagement with questions of sexuality, labor and poverty, and the figure of the tragic mulatta. Keckly’s *Behind the Scenes* (1868) similarly dislodges hegemonic models of individual sovereignty, progress, and interracial intimacy. As I argue in the second chapter, titled “The Production of ‘Emancipation’: Race, Ritual, and the Reconstitution of the Antebellum Order,” Keckly’s politicized acts of witnessing and selective self-commodification foreground insidious modes of control embedded within American progressivism. Cooper, on the other hand, condemns prevailing ideals of abstraction and universality. Her reconceptualization of dominant tenets of civility, freedom, and equality; invocation of musical metaphor; and irruptions of sarcastic wit throughout *A Voice From the South* (1892), I contend in “‘Wondering under Which Head I Come’: Sounding Anna Julia Cooper’s Fin-de-Siècle Blues,” compel a radical reevaluation of our ways of recognizing social change. Novels such as Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*, as evidenced in the concluding chapter of “‘Mammy Ain’t Nobody Name’: Power, Privilege and the Bodying Forth of Resistance,” provoke dialogue with Wilson, Keckly, and Cooper, and demonstrate the ongoing relevance of interrogating the limits of American liberalism in the neoliberal present.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: “THEY WON’T BELIEVE WHAT I SAY”: THEORIZING FREEDOM AS AN ECONOMY OF VIOLENCE.....	19
CHAPTER TWO: THE PRODUCTION OF “EMANCIPATION”: RACE, RITUAL, AND THE RECONSTITUTION OF THE ANTEBELLUM ORDER.....	69
CHAPTER THREE: “WONDERING UNDER WHICH HEAD I COME”: SOUNDING ANNA JULIA COOPER’S FIN-DE-SIÉCLE BLUES.....	118
CHAPTER FOUR: “MAMMY AIN’T NOBODY NAME”: POWER, PRIVILEGE, AND THE BODYING FORTH OF RESISTANCE.....	169
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	217

Introduction

In accounting for my interests and investments in this dissertation, two stories emerge.

The first, simply put, is that of my passion for black women's writing, the pleasure I experience when engaging the literatures and histories of those of the past. For as long as I can remember, I have been drawn—intellectually, spiritually, emotionally—to records of the triumphs and of the struggles of black women as they have come to articulate their place in this world. Indeed, relished encounters with these women's words, with their diverse patterns of thought, serve as vital coordinates along my path to adulthood and to becoming a scholar of African American literary and cultural studies in my own right. A sixth grade project on the entrepreneurship of Madam C.J. Walker. My initial introduction to Harriet Jacobs'/Linda Brent's slave narrative by a Sunday school teacher. Later, in college, that fabled first reading of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. For me, the turn to black women's prose and public performance as archives of violence and loss, but also of resistance and possibility, feels familiar, familial even. It feels comfortable.

In graduate school, this commitment has manifested itself as research into the fiction of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, the anti-lynching campaigns of Ida B. Wells, and the insurgency of black women's quilting. It has likewise taken the form of inquiry into nineteenth-century black feminists' critiques of global imperialism; of Emancipation as purely nominal; and of the nexus of inclusion, representation, and patriotism at the heart of liberalism. Interdisciplinary in orientation, my graduate study has spotlighted

modes of black opposition in their most quotidian forms, theorizing the implications and effects of cultural production articulated under the guise of consent. Refusing a romanticization of the black subject, or her capacity for agency or autonomy, I have addressed early black writers' destabilization of liberal tropes of tolerance, as well as of rights and citizenship discourse, locating both the domination and the vision inherent in liminal contestations of the racial and social order. This volume, then, consummates an enduring preoccupation with questions regarding labor and U.S. enslavement, legacies of organizing, and racial uplift ideology, just as it symbolizes new directions—professional and personal—in my interrogation of power, epistemology, and black subjectivity in the antebellum and post-Reconstruction eras.

The second, messier story pertains to the ways in which my tenure in graduate school has been impacted by thoroughly well-meaning, if aggressive displays of white privilege, entitlement, and authority, moments during which I have often been reduced to silence or tears. Two incidents are symptomatic. In one case, I participated in a graduate seminar in which the theoretical approach deployed by journalist and activist Pauline Hopkins, particularly through her novel *Of One Blood*, was summarily dismissed by the predominantly white collective as a fundamentally illicit literary object, a response garnering tepid intervention on the part of the professor. During the course of my subsequent meeting with the senior faculty member in charge of the class, claims regarding my peers' possible *misreading* of Hopkins' intertextuality and irony—and my characterization of the “inclusion” of Hopkins' text on the syllabus as a gesture of multiculturalist optics, rather than thoughtful critical address, given its meager treatment

in relationship to more mainstream works—was met with a wave of genuine, liberal sympathy over...my hurt feelings. It was promptly recommended that I proceed with the type of work which would shed light on Hopkins' legacy *myself*.

In a separate Ph. D colloquium, a white male student from another department used a racial epithet in class, presumably to mimic institutional dissension following the release of W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* in 1935. The by-now-classic text, he concluded emphatically, would have been deemed little more than a “nigger's book” by early twentieth-century academic standards. After the occurrence, ensuing conversation devolved into a discussion of white fears of conversing about race and racism in the public sphere without reprisal, despite opposing viewpoints voiced by a man of color in the class, before giving way to an apparent consensus as to the perpetrator's lack of malice in his ventriloquization of *historical* racist discourse.

Concerned less with demonizing the individuals involved in the scenarios above—including myself, for various public displays of muteness and/or waterworks in the wake of each event—I remain intrigued by what I continue to learn from such confrontations. That is, I have since mobilized my pain and associated feelings of exclusion as a means by which to understand and to lay bare hierarchical modes of relation. How, for instance, does liberal intention condone and obscure violent circuits of power? How do ethics of civility, objectivity, and rationality mediate processes of devaluation and abjection? Moreover, how do broader cultural narratives of progress, self-help, and universality uphold sedimented dynamics of privilege, order, and control? Given that much of my intellectual mentorship and emotional support in the midst of

such ordeals was derived from African-American male and Asian American female feminist scholars, why must difference be theorized as a critical site of contradiction *and* creativity, irreducible to a tokenized otherness sanctioned by hegemonic whiteness? Or viable anti-racist coalition as a common context of oppression founded as much on solidarity as on struggle and risk? If my love for black women’s writing, simple and plain, spurs a connection to the topic of my dissertation, the story of my subjection to the constraints of ostensible progressivism—less simple and less plain—as readily informs the course of my literary curiosity, imagination, and awareness. Accordingly, *Unsung, Unwavering: Nineteenth-Century Black Women’s Epistemologies and the Liberal Problematic* opens up a reading and interpretive methodology as attuned to early black women activists’ challenges to liberalism as to its influence in our contemporary moment, without positing a direct, causal relation. At the same time, it extends a larger query into why critiques in this vein continue to be left unheard.

Perhaps there is another story to tell here.

Unsung, Unwavering is the story of nineteenth-century black authors’ critical engagement with the fundamental disjunction between democratic promise and dispossession in the American nation-state, or what I term in the pages to follow the “liberal problematic.” Taking for granted that a reconfiguration of prevailing ideologies of selfhood, privilege, and consent is a significant, if underexamined legacy of black feminist knowledge production, the liberal problematic expands upon Saidiya Hartman’s articulation of the “double bind of emancipation,” Tavia Nyong’o’s theory of the

“circum-Atlantic fold,” and Wendy Brown’s understanding of “political rationality.” Usefully, as Hartman and Nyong’o emphasize the incomplete, semblant nature of freedom in the nineteenth century, or what the latter situates as a breach between “the potential and the performance of emancipation” (18), Brown underscores the conditionality and contingency of normative political action and public discourse, of the very essence of what constitutes truth, in the present (693). Relatedly, the liberal problematic signals a naturalization of mainstream, procedural iterations of equivalence, autonomy, and reason.

“Between the potential and the performance of black freedom,” contends Nyong’o, “there lies the hollow of a fold within which many of our conceptualizations of race, inheritance, and hybridity were formulated” (18). In fact, he maintains of the fold, a spacio-temporal, rather than a strictly teleological formation, “Black people became both subjects and objects of freedom, reduplicating an abstract discourse of human equality. They took on a catalytic role for the potential and the performance of freedom, partaking of a mimesis that proved menacing to a dominating power that found, in that ostensibly flattering reflection, the outlines of its own prospective dissolution” (ibid). For Nyong’o, in extrapolating on the previous work of Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Paul Gilroy, and Hartman, black liberation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is at once manufactured and ominous, counterfeit yet threatening.

In the context of my argument, black activists’ disruptions of the liberal problematic—even when partial, fleeting, or never fully outside the bounds of appeals for human recognition—make visible logics of marginalization and refusal underlying

dominant notions of public culture and governmental practice. Indeed, the cadre of nineteenth-century black scholars and theorists assembled herein crystallizes the duress of inhabiting Western jurisprudence, particularly for those perceived to embody, if not to epitomize, the limits of citizenship. Traversing conventional disciplinary boundaries, early African American women writers often devised cogent analyses ever mindful of precisely how prevailing ethics of individualism and rationality constrain black movement, being, and consciousness. That is, in a historical moment for which the slave narrative still frequently circulates as predominant signifier, figures such as Maria W. Stewart and Frances E.W. Harper engaged an array of genres from prose to memoir, fiction to poetry, to consider the ways in which politics of abstraction, decorum, and duty structure how black communities build relationships and encounter one another. Offering a history of literary critiques of liberalism, and the idiom of self-possession, equity, and volition by which it is reinforced, *Unsung, Unwavering* portrays black women's critical address of the acutely intersectional effects of an endemic slippage between freedom and subjection. Ultimately, I read black women activists' challenges to liberalism, as political rationality and as ritualized performance, *as* resistance, in many respects an always already militant, vernacular, and masculine terrain. In doing so, I problematize how scholars have typically read nineteenth-century African-American women's intellectual production and social action—against that of a more tangibly formidable Sojourner Truth or Ida B. Wells, for instance—as inauthentic or accommodationist.

Importantly, many of the previous histories of authors such as Harriet Wilson, Elizabeth Keckly, and Anna Julia Cooper (the subjects of the first three chapters of this

book) have insisted on reading texts such as Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), Keckly's *Behind the Scenes* (1868), and Cooper's *A Voice from the South* (1892) exclusively through a trajectory of what Elizabeth Higginbotham refers to as the "politics of black respectability," or else presented disproportionate emphasis on such writers' apparent complicity and collusion. In contrast to the likes of Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman, Wilson, Keckly, and Cooper commonly provoke charges of bourgeois indifference or elitism, passivity or acquiescence, vis-à-vis existing regimes of power. In fact, a dichotomous relation between consciousness and activism, a privileging of radicalism, and similarly circumscribing definitions of black struggle, still haunt much resistance studies inquiry. This coincides with what Sianne Ngai theorizes in *Ugly Feelings* as the "symbolic violence in the principle of commensurability itself," whereby "there is an underlying assumption that an appropriate emotional response to racist violence exists, and that the burden lies on the racialized subject to produce that appropriate response legibly, unambiguously, and immediately" (188). A strictly gendered and classed construct, "resistance" continues to pivot upon, in many respects, narrow standards of credibility and purportedly quantifiable measures of realness.

Kevin Quashie's recent project, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, on the other hand, speaks to an enduring incumbency of theorizing race differently, or of "mak[ing] the name of blackness capacious enough so that its articulation can hold a wide variety of habits of being" (93). Though Quashie's approach is distinct from my own—I am finally less willing to relinquish "resistance" as a framework through which to understand nineteenth-century black women's writing, in

particular—his claim that “constructions of blackness-as-resistance [...] serve the needs and fantasies of the dominant culture” (129) remains insightful and productive.

Troubling conditions under which “[r]esistance is, in fact, the dominant expectation we have of black culture” (3), Quashie cites the agency embedded in quiet, in surrender, and in interiority. He renarrates broader cultural tropes of signifying, dissemblance, double consciousness, and masking in order to locate politicized action in imagination, waiting, and prayer. Moreover, in recuperating spaces of inner pleasure, desire, and vulnerability, Quashie complicates easy equations of blackness with public expressiveness and representation, calling attention to modes of black articulacy previously overlooked.

In this vein, *Unsung, Unwavering* reorients canonical nineteenth-century American literary studies, black women’s history, and paradigms of resistance in order to apprehend irruptions into institutions of disembodied knowledge, universality, and value undergirding the liberal problematic. Deploying the scholarship of Lindon Barrett, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks, in conjunction with interventions by Patricia Hill Collins, Lauren Berlant, and Hazel Carby, I analyze the ways in which black women’s displays of sarcasm, auralty, opacity, and materiality contest received expectations of comportment and political subjectivity. Accounting for the rhetorical effects of nineteenth-century activism which exceed the spheres of pandering or mimesis, I augment research spearheaded by Elizabeth Alexander, Nell Painter, P. Gabrielle Foreman, and Kevin K. Gaines to interrogate nineteenth-century black women’s consistent engagement with fundamental liberal and Enlightenment precepts, an archive encompassing many, though certainly not all, writers published during the period. Further, by the dissertation’s end, I

mine nuanced intersections between early black published discourse and late-twentieth century novels that re-imagine antebellum America. Utilizing the work of Barbara Christian and Roderick Ferguson, Arlene Keizer and Hortense Spillers, I explore how modern African-American art such as Sherley Anne Williams' 1986 novel *Dessa Rose* (the subject of my fourth chapter) provokes dialogue with Wilson, Keckly, and Cooper in significant ways. Hence, *Unsung, Unwavering* concludes by probing the complexities of claims staked in the eras of enslavement and Emancipation by contemporary artists in a neoliberal age.

The first chapter in this volume, ““They Won’t Believe What I Say’: Theorizing Freedom as an Economy of Violence,” analyzes Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), in which Wilson exposes the coerciveness of imbricated discourses of sentimentality, Christianity, and economic determinism sustaining the liberal problematic. In particular, Wilson offers a dense engagement with questions of labor, poverty, and the figure of the tragic mulatta, citing materiality as a critical register of political meaning and experience. Embodiment, though typically rendered antithetical to notions of comprehension, logic, and sense, bears theoretical implications and effects. Accordingly, Wilson implicates abstract rationalism in hierarchizing, socially constructed processes of investment and exchange. Further, Wilson reimagines dominant ideologies of self-help and self-determination in the context of working class and underclass exploitation in the antebellum North, just as she revises governing perceptions of interracial altruism and charity.

In terms of the latter, Wilson catalyzes literature as a vehicle to lay bare the collusion of liberal empathy, Christianity, and capital in performances I refer to here as “postures of abettal.” Indeed, Wilson condemns goodwill as alibi throughout her text, critiquing characters such as Mr. Bellmont, Aunt Abby, daughter Jane, and sons James and Jack’s purportedly unknowing reproduction of the conditions of Frado, the young, black protagonist’s, dehumanization. Of the techniques by which the autobiographical novel’s most ostensibly compassionate characters participate in Frado’s abuse, Wilson theorizes many, as the well-meaning Bellmont cohort’s alternate displays of covert refuge, reassuring humor, tokens of accommodation, and promises of spiritual salvation, finally do little more than sanction Frado’s subjection. This account of the Bellmonts’ advocacy for their orphaned black charge as merely a screen behind which they safeguard their property rights and economic standing typifies Wilson’s intervention into liberalism as at once a political economy and a ritualized affective performance.

Conjointly, Wilson invokes blackness, fugitivity, and associated figurations of opacity in *Our Nig* in order to challenge Western liberal dictates toward ocularcentrism, order, and coherence. Through representations of swamp iconography and other dark courses to which Frado flees as an indentured black youth, Wilson problematizes Enlightenment-bound discourses of transparency. In dialogue with contemporary scholarship by Stephanie M. H. Camp and Daphne A. Brooks, Wilson subverts perspectives of blackness as threatening or lack. By appropriating obscurity as a symbol of revolt *and* a conflicting code of intelligibility, she supplants broader patterns of privileging fixed meaning and rational subjectivity. Articulating opacity in excess of

abject difference, Wilson even frames her narrative as a whole with an insurgent preamble situating blackness as a source of consciousness, solitude, healing, and defiance.

Finally, Wilson also manipulates tropes of childhood and liberal assumptions of innocence in provocative ways. Conjuring a picaninny figure animated by, in the words of Lindon Barrett, a “politics of joy,” Wilson politicizes the familiar nineteenth-century literary persona of “the disorderly girl.” In Wilson’s formation, Frado-as-picaninny functions to critique socio-political and economic norms, including Christianity and domesticity. Moreover, displaying contrariness to a liberal construal of black anger as fundamentally unlicensed, even criminal, Frado’s politics of joy—embodied in certain instances as song—marks a euphoric consciousness inextricable from productive enactments of black fury. Distinct from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Pearl, Wilson’s characterization warrants a critical reassessment of the chastity and of the vulnerabilities associated with youthfulness, and of the latter’s utility in circumventing practices of discipline, management, and exclusion buttressing the liberal problematic.

Chapter Two, “The Production of ‘Emancipation’: Race, Ritual, and the Reconstitution of the Antebellum Order,” likewise attests to nineteenth-century black women activists’ complex contestation of the liberal problematic through a focus on Elizabeth Keckly’s memoir, *Behind the Scenes* (1868). Notably, in this text outlining the author’s years as a seamstress and laborer for the Lincoln White House, Keckly dislodges hegemonic models of individual sovereignty and progress. Underscoring the disturbing conditions facing the formerly enslaved at the onset of Emancipation, she depicts a state

of epidemic black homelessness, starvation, and poverty, thereby disrupting prevailing mythologies of the postbellum North as quintessential racial asylum. Moreover, Keckly's theorization of suicide as an expression of black political consciousness, via a description of her uncle's death by hanging in the antebellum South, troubles logics of bodily, bounded integrity while foregrounding the precariousness of black freedom. Her politicized acts of witnessing and mediation, as well as her selective self-commodification, make visible insidious modes of social and economic control and disrupt conventional modes of fetishizing and Othering black women's bodies.

The second chapter also situates black women's textile production as a form of resistance. Producing meaningful critical and aesthetic effects throughout the memoir, Keckly's performances of material design complicate Western philosophical notions of order and abstract reason. Activating cultural histories of nineteenth-century black women's patchwork as an archive of communal memory, the representation of dressmaking in Keckly's text ascribes political meaning to an embodied practice which exceeds the purposes of utility or adornment. Further, this chapter confronts liberal tenets of exceptionalism by linking Keckly to widely recognized slave narrator and activist, Harriet Jacobs; for both women, embroidery and other needlework facilitate black reciprocity and function as acts of survival.

Keckly's subsequent articulation of counter-memory also casts doubt on teleological, "up from slavery" narratives. In fact, she consistently intervenes into racialized ideologies of development, which as Grace Kyungwon Hong establishes in *Ruptures of American Capital*, "was arguably the most important explanatory paradigm

through which the various tensions, contradictions, and contestations around the U.S. nation-state in the nineteenth-century were articulated and negotiated” (3). Implementing processes of memorialization which acknowledge the lives and sacrifices of her ancestors—from her Aunt Charlotte to fellow laborers on the Garland plantation prior to her employment in Washington, D.C.—Keckly stages subversive performances of commemoration throughout *Behind the Scenes*, displacing pastoral images and plantation nostalgia with her own fragmented remembrances and problematizing state-sanctioned systems of knowledge production. Memory, in this instance, surpasses an ethics of precise recall or rational retrieval, as Keckly’s selective reminiscences simultaneously embody practices of faith and of worldview. Via counter-memory, Keckly produces meaning and value in her life not finally tethered to whiteness, but to a manner of feeling and sense of creation that reveal tacit mechanisms of power and privilege.

What’s more, Keckly as readily unmasks tropes of normative intimacy in her writing. Indeed, Keckly’s literary representation of postbellum, interracial patron-client relationships exposes precisely how notions of the “Mammy” figure and of integrated friendships, in particular, pivot upon oblique modes of compulsion. Routinized displays of kinship, fondness, and familiarity, Keckly makes plain, extract docility and compliance: they do not affirm mutual respect. Hence, Keckly continually re-stages scenarios in which she counters employers’ assertions of apparent confidence or care with a calm, self-imposed quietness. Such withdrawals from dominant performances of favor and esteem unsettle rigid power dynamics, foregrounding as Lauren Berlant argues, the ambivalence and artifice of intimacy as an institution. Juxtaposed with Keckly’s

nonrational articulation of motherhood, the affective contours of liberal rituals of servitude emerge as a central object of nineteenth-century black women's ideology critique.

In Chapter Three, “‘Wondering under Which Head I Come’: Sounding Anna Julia Cooper’s Fin-de-Siècle Blues,” I illustrate how Anna Julia Cooper undermines the liberal problematic by exposing the drawbacks of solely conceptual modes of thought forged in the absence of substantive interaction. Crucially, in *A Voice from the South* (1892), Cooper condemns prevailing ideals of abstraction and universality within traditions of U.S. Constitutionalism and Episcopalianism. She lodges similar critiques of the literature of prominent mainstream writers of the era, including William Dean Howells, for reductive and caricatured, if benignly-crafted representations of black and mixed raced bodies. By foregrounding the value of difference—of the *necessity* of conflict and heterogeneity within communities—and countering cultural mandates toward binary logic and individualism, Cooper hinders commonsense claims to progressivism. Further, Cooper incriminates a (white) Women’s Movement which advocates parity, at the same time that it wields liberal affect as a mode of cultural policing along the lines of race and class.

Such critiques must also be taken together with Cooper’s persistent invocation of music throughout the volume. From an aural organizational structure, to the use of the metaphors of harmony and of the Singing Something, Cooper’s marshaling of sound defies Western models of reason and comprehensibility, many of which remain rooted in visuality. To restate, Cooper’s composition blends both literal and phonic, embodied

meaning in order to recuperate the subjectivities of black women, men, and commensurate groups subject to oppression in the U.S. Performatively demonstrating an inability of sense to transcend spirit, or of the mind to supersede material presence, Cooper recovers the body through song, through her own fin-de-siècle blues.

Paramount in Cooper's analysis of the liberal problematic, I would add, is her reconceptualization of dominant tenets of civility, freedom, and equality as public pedagogy, a framework I am calling "critical regard." Irreducible to liberal notions of uplift or self-help, and particularly attuned to the constraints of volition and sovereignty within the context of lived black realities, Cooper usurps established definitions of comportment, etiquette, and appropriateness. Indeed, her call for virtues of mutuality and respect produces conditions of socio-political awareness and possibilities for institutional change. A formulation positing accountability at the core of civil subjectivity, "critical regard" significantly alters governing tropes of citizenship and expectations of political responsibility. In prioritizing egalitarian ethics ever cognizant of gender, racial, and class difference, Cooper challenges prevailing assumptions of black resistance and agency.

Finally, Cooper's subtle and overt sarcasm broadens contemporary perceptions of humor and rationality. Expanding upon a considerable secondary archive encompassing the work of Lawrence Levine and Mel Watkins, and comprised of scholarship by Darryl Dickson-Carr and Todd Vogel, "Wondering under Which Head I Come" concludes with a reading of Cooper's wry intervention into the domain of black performativity. Cooper's departure from apparently "feminine" modes of public address, predicated upon purposeful word play, annuls standards of blackness as unconsciously ironic and derides

patterns of state-sanctioned violence and exclusion. Via defiant displays of multi-vocality, mock deference, and feigned reserve, among other means, Cooper denaturalizes cultural myths *and* consequences of male and race privilege, authority, and control.

In the final chapter, “‘Mammy Ain’t Nobody Name’: Power, Privilege and the Bodying Forth of Resistance,” I locate *Our Nig*, *Behind the Scenes*, and *A Voice from the South* as pivotal intertexts for Sherley Anne Williams’ novel *Dessa Rose* (1986). As I explore Williams’ diverse, dialogical engagement with previous legacies of resistance, I especially draw attention to her disruption of what one might gesture toward as a “neoliberal problematic” via her distinct problematization of perpetual notions of abstraction and coherence. Usefully, Williams challenges representations of the mind-body split and associated tropes of antebellum mediation such as the interracial “as-told-to” dynamic. She theorizes the ways in which disembodied, conceptual jargon obfuscates power, the ways in which rationality disavows black subjection as intractable difference. Williams’ final, politicized reclamation of eroticism, moreover, opens up new possibilities for expressions of black pleasure.

Not unlike Cooper, then, Williams cultivates an insurgent politics of sound as she invokes black spirituals, love songs, call-and-response rhythms, and cries of mourning. Manipulating overriding systems of language and signification, Williams mobilizes a framework which refuses liberal bounds of intelligibility. Indeed, Cooper’s and Williams’ aurality constitute habits of meaning-making which de-emphasize visuality and its associated constraints, thereby fostering endurance and survival. Yet, Williams simultaneously extends Cooper’s paradigm as the former imagines routine tasks such as

braiding as embodied processes through which to build knowledge and community. For Williams, plaiting circulates as a conduit of black storytelling, memory, and experience, and as Carol Boyce Davies reminds, calls into question worn discourses of comprehension and belonging.

Williams channels Keckly, on the other hand, through a destabilization of the “Mammy” figure. Rather than an infinitely exploitable site of sustenance and support, according to these authors, the “Mammy” construct consolidates white privilege under the guise of reciprocity. Thus, Williams undercuts liberal models of interracial friendship in significant ways, not the least of which is through a juxtaposition with a theory of black “sweetness.” In contrast to effectively sensation-driven or strictly private modes of expression, Williams’ concept of being “enveloped in caring,” alternately termed sweetness, reflects a level of affirmation and regard posing a challenge to normative configurations of intimacy. Through the characterization of a bondswoman named Chloe and literary representations of an ethic of selective self-commodification, Williams likewise imports Keckly’s articulation of the complexity of American liberalism as at once a ritualized, embodied performance and a political/economic apparatus.

Lastly, as Wilson’s *Our Nig* confronts circumstances of imposed materiality by recuperating the black body for the purposes of critique and redress, Williams’ fiction exhibits a comparable attentiveness to situating blackness beyond conventional registers of containment. Therefore, I maintain that embodiment in Williams’ novel continually intervenes in Enlightenment-era discourses of ocularcentrism and contained selfhood. In particular, and as Farrah Griffin confirms, touch functions in *Dessa Rose* as a mechanism

of profound healing and knowledge production. Further, just as Wilson summons the rhetorical construct of Frado-as-picaninny in her autobiographical novel in order to counter reductionist readings of racialized anger as inherently groundless, Williams interrogates the indecipherability of black rage within both interracial and intra-racial liberal matrices of privilege and authority. Arguably, only through this singular wrath and intensity, a decidedly Wilsonian restoration of black antagonism, can Williams' protagonist ascribe meaning to blackness apart from popular ideological formations.

As a whole, then, this dissertation is a story which reads black women differently. This closer reading is critical in order to correct the continued failure to account for black women's departure from the dictates of liberalism—rather than just their complicities with it—a failure which ultimately diminishes contemporary perspectives of nineteenth-century black women's epistemologies. It is my story. And yes, it is also yours.

“They Won’t Believe What I Say”: Theorizing Freedom as an Economy of Violence

I

Much of what literary critics, cultural studies scholars, and historians currently know about the life and writing of Harriet Wilson, generally regarded as the first African American woman to publish a novel in the United States, contradicts conventional notions of labor, of womanhood, and of blackness in the antebellum period. Simultaneously one of the earliest and most significant articulations of the “contrariness” which Barbara Christian theorizes as “the core of so much of Afro-American women’s literature,” Wilson’s 1859 autobiographical novel *Our Nig, Or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* and its protagonist Frado posit black resistance less as an ontological construct (blackness = resistance), than as a rhetorical one by which the power and privilege undergirding dominant modes of relation and standards of knowledge production might be problematized.¹ Far from eliding the material, often violent conditions endured by blacks in the pre-Civil War North, Wilson’s insistence on “relating a truth contrary to what readers have come to believe,” to borrow from Christian again, at once calls normative ideologies of race and nation into question and initiates new epistemological possibilities.

It is precisely such contrariness, for instance, that James, one of the adult sons of the white family for whom Frado toils as an indentured “black girl-woman,” artfully

¹ According to Barbara Christian, in the essay “What Celie Knows that You Should Know,” in the 2007 collection of her essays edited by Bowles, Fabi, and Keizer, “[Harriet Wilson] writing and publishing her subversive story underlines her insistence on her own existence, her insistence that it be acknowledged, respected, recognized by others [...] It is her truth, despite the prevailing traditional or alternative modes of representing reality, that Frado knows, that Celie knows. It is that contrariness that is at the core of so much of Afro-American women’s literature [...]” (27)

deflects in a scene following one of Frado's savage beatings at the hands of his mother, Mrs. Bellmont.² As James entreats the victim of his mother's habitual, unprovoked rage to simply "try to be a good girl," the narrator relates: "'If I do, I get whipped,' sobbed the child. 'They won't believe what I say'" (28; emphasis added). Indeed, what Frado says—her epistemic claims, her truths—troubles the established order. As a consequence, her words must be contained and disavowed.

Yet, after initially appearing to concede to James' counsel to modify her attitude and behavior, Frado subsequently adds, "Oh, I wish I had my mother back; then I should not be kicked and whipped so. Who made me so?"

"God," answered James.

"Did God make you?"

"Yes."

"Who made Aunt Abby?"

"God."

"Who made your mother?"

"God."

"Did the same God that made her make me?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, I don't like him."

"Why not?"

Because he made her white, and me black. Why didn't he make us BOTH white?"

"I don't know; try to go to sleep, and you will feel better in the morning," was all the reply he could make to her knotty queries. (28)

Narrativized as "knotty queries," Frado's contrariness surfaces here in order to puncture the ostensible universality of Christian charity and compassion, crucial facets of what I situate in the pages to follow as the novel's broader, if undervalued critique of liberal

² I draw the term "black girl-woman" (22), and all other quotes from Barbara Christian herein, from the essay cited above.

ideology and its attendant affective formations, or what I am calling the liberal problematic. Indeed, the exchange crystallizes a slippage between the spirit of goodwill and black difference, of benevolent faith and racial prejudice. “Wilson’s depiction of Christianity does not arise without interrogation but as a faith subjected to her own experience, to her own parodic critique,” confirms Claudia Tate (38). Thus, though James is depicted as perhaps one of Frado’s greatest allies during her indenture, he feigns ignorance in this scenario as Frado implicitly casts doubt on a sense of spiritual uplift and belonging strictly policed along the lines of race. While James attempts to avert Frado’s attention with paternalistic, pathologizing discourse—“try to go to sleep, and you will feel better in the morning,” he promises, likening raced, classed, and gendered subjection to the likes of the common cold—the narrator’s subsequent note that “a number of days [passed] before James felt in a mood to visit and entertain old associates and friends” following his conversation with Frado alludes to black women’s contrariness as a site of rupture (28).

This chapter engages precisely such moments of rupture in order to theorize how the contrariness of nineteenth-century black women writers and activists like Wilson, and later Elizabeth Keckly and Anna Julia Cooper, frequently undermines narratives of liberalism as fundamentally emancipatory—those cultural mythologies manifest in founding documents and government policy, encoded in venerable frameworks of nation and belonging, and veiled in networks of property and exchange. Indeed, *Our Nig* exposes liberalism’s coercive underside as a site of trauma while simultaneously offering witness to black defiance. In particular, *Our Nig* thinks with contemporary texts such as

The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave (1831) as Wilson invokes materiality as a valid, necessary source of meaning and worldview. Embodiment, for Wilson and Prince, bears theoretical presence and substantive rhetorical effects, thereby exposing abstract rationalism as a self-interested performance. As the scene above intimates, Wilson likewise mobilizes her novel as a vehicle to lay bare the collusion of liberal empathy, Christianity, and capital. In this way, Wilson re-conceptualizes dominant definitions of asylum, altruism, and progress, occupying intellectual terrain reserved for presumably more radical or militant black women activists of the era such as Ida B. Wells. Logics of intentionality, self-help, and self-possession, too, emerge as central objects of critique in *Our Nig*.

Moreover, Wilson marshals opacity as a means to counter Western ocularcentrism and associated liberal dictates toward order and coherence, all while drawing upon the trope of childhood to distinctly subversive ends. Specifically, Wilson appropriates a common nineteenth-century literary figure Lisa E. Green terms “the disorderly girl” to issue biting social commentary and to imagine, as I will argue, a politicized picaninny animated by, following Lindon Barrett, a “politics of joy.” A consciousness informed not by indiscriminate euphoria, but by contrariness to liberal prescriptive which always already de-legitimizes black anger, Frado’s “politics of joy” exceeds the resistive register of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Pearl to demand a critical reassessment of contemporary notions of black innocence and of what it means to be human. Further, by uncovering intersections (and tensions) between Frado and Florens, a late seventeenth-century black orphan in Toni Morrison’s early twenty-first century novel *A Mercy*, one can more fully

counter readings of nineteenth-century black women's writing as purely sociological or inauthentic, accounting for liberal ideology critique as a significant, ongoing expression of black women's activist labor and intellectualism.

II

By way of brief exposition before considering the question of embodiment, it is significant that the place of the autobiographical—that is, the extent to which Harriet Wilson's life experiences inform her articulation of Northerners' coercive exploitation of Frado, or "our Nig," as an indentured child servant in the New England home of the Bellmonts—remains a point of contention among scholars. Nearly thirty years after Henry Louis Gates, Jr. re-released Wilson's largely forgotten title, Barbara White, R.J. Ellis, Reginald Pitts, and P. Gabrielle Foreman, as well as Gates himself, among others, continue to destabilize Wilson's apparently negligible archival trace. Importantly, such scholars remain committed to interrogating the dynamic interplay between personal elements and fictionalization techniques at work in a literary text abandoned, prior its late twentieth-century reemergence, for over a century. JerriAnne Boggis', Eve Allegra Raimon's, and Barbara A. White's essential, interdisciplinary collection of essays *Harriet Wilson's New England: Race, Writing, and Region*, for example, offers perhaps the most recent and useful iteration of this debate within Wilson studies. Notably, Foreman argues therein, "Indeed, now that we have situated *Our Nig* in the even deeper critical and historical context that has emerged since its rediscovery, readers must acknowledge that the text functions as an autobiography characterized by its complex novelistic qualities just as surely as it can be considered a brilliant novel that makes substantive autobiographical claims" (125). Moreover, troubling not only static generic boundaries

of autobiography, *Our Nig* likewise complicates conventional seduction plots of the period, as well as traditional slave narrative by writers and activists such as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Charles Ball, many of which pivot upon black male labor, truancy, escape, and a precise spatial and progressive movement from slavery to freedom.³

However, certain parallels between Wilson's and Frado's history are clear. In the novel, Frado's white, indigent, and seemingly apathetic mother, Mag Smith, deposits her at the home of an unknowing, more financially secure family in the wake of Frado's black father, Jim's, death and Mag's marriage to another man, Seth Shipley; Wilson was born March 15, 1825 in Milford, New Hampshire to a Margaret Ann Smith and Joshua Green. The fictional "Bellmont" clan, in fact, refers to a prominent New England family for whom Wilson likely worked, the Haywards, with close ties to the famed abolitionist group, the Hutchinson Family Singers. Upon coming of age and obtaining release from indenture, Wilson—like Frado—endured chronic underemployment, poverty, and debility, and frequently relied on public assistance. Accordingly, "Deserted by kindred, disabled by failing health," Wilson declares in the Preface to *Our Nig*, "I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life" (4). And just as Frado (like her own mother, Mag, prior to her marriage to Jim) is seduced and later forsaken to raise a child alone, Wilson, too, was a single mother. Indeed, toward the end of *Our Nig*, Frado is abandoned by her husband Samuel, one of the "professed fugitives from slavery" (64) making rounds in New

³ For more on the ways in which Wilson's text diverges from traditional slave narrative, see Ellis, pg. 5.

England and who confesses upon his final departure that “his illiterate harangues were [mere] humbugs for hungry abolitionists” (65). Memorably, Wilson also issues an “appeal to my colored brethren universally for patronage” in the Preface in order to spur book sales to provide for her son, George Mason Wilson, following the dissolution of her marriage to Thomas Wilson (4). Upon George’s death on February 15, 1860, less than six months after the publication of *Our Nig*, Wilson was forced to *other* experiments such as the peddling of hand-made straw hats and hair care products, and later made a name for herself in spiritualist circles. Wilson died on June 28, 1900.⁴

Nevertheless, as exciting genealogical and archival inroads continue to be made surrounding Wilson’s adulthood and life post-indenture, it remains that the bulk of *Our Nig*—all but three chapters and the Appendix—attends to Frado’s violent tenure in the Belmont household and its consequences for her *body*. A libidinal investment in Frado’s sadistic violation imbues these pages, and grounds what I identify as one of the novel’s most crucial organizing claims: that materiality and embodiment function as vital reservoirs of socio-political awareness and understanding. Johnnie Stover advances a related claim in *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women’s Autobiography*, arguing that “The antebellum autobiographers, Wilson and [Harriet] Jacobs, highlight the importance of the body as a site of oppression in their respective narratives, specifically those parts of the body that are relevant to the acts of oral communication: ear, mouth, tongue, and throat” (109). Stover, as does DoVeanna S. Fulton in *Speaking Power*, offers a reading

⁴ For biographical information, see P. Gabrielle Foreman’s introduction to the Penguin edition of Wilson’s text, her essay in *Harriet Wilson’s New England*, or her own critical work, *Activist Sentiments*.

attuned to the abuse of the “phenotypically white-skinned but juridically Black” body as a struggle to delegitimize black orality as a mode of knowledge production.⁵ The vicious suppression of black women’s speech acts, for Stover and Fulton, marks their bodies as cultural texts which subvert “dominant transcripts” of cult ideology, black idleness, and of liberal notions of the private.⁶ Both scholars cite Mrs. Belmont’s common use of a block of wood to prop open Frado’s mouth during beatings as both a dissimulation of terror under enslavement and a hysteric form of silencing by those ever threatened by that which the black body might tell.

However, Katherine Fishburn’s work in *The Problem of Embodiment in African American Narrative* perhaps even more closely mirrors my own thinking when she positions nineteenth-century black writing by the likes of Douglass and Wilson as contrary to discourses of reason predicated upon an ethics of abstraction. Thematising the “quotidian experience of black bodies” in her project, Fishburn provocatively contends that “the slave narrative offered one of the most effective, if heretofore overlooked, pre-Heideggarian critiques of humanism and metaphysics ever attempted in the West” (1-2). Consequently, “[W]e do not give [*Our Nig*] the reading it deserves unless we understand it as a book about the body-self,” she later observes, citing Wilson’s “insistence on the centrality of embodiment to the human condition and its revelation that the wealth of the bourgeoisie depends upon and is produced by the bodily

⁵ I borrow the term “phenotypically white-skinned but juridically Black” from P. Gabrielle Foreman’s *Activist Sentiments*, pg. 17.

⁶ The term “dominant transcripts,” of course, is one coined by political anthropologist James C. Scott, in contrast to the “hidden transcripts” typically circulated by disempowered groups.

effort of the working poor” (106). For Fishburn, performances of hegemonic rationality predicated upon disembodiment and objectivity—primary idioms of the liberal problematic—cover over difference, perpetuate violence, and reinforce privilege.

My analysis departs, however, from Fishburn’s ultimate recuperation of universality—a reconstitution marked by her call for “our [collective] interrelatedness with other body-selves” (114). That is, even as she productively foregrounds Wilson’s portrayal of the “deeply felt and unremittingly physical experience of poverty” (103), and the everyday experiences of black, laboring bodies as antithetical to Western philosophical underpinnings, an abiding optimism in the transformative capacity of interracial, liberal humanist compassion anchors her inquiry. In my reading, on the other hand, Wilson does not contest rationality only to “employ its democratic ideals in order to define [herself] as equal to—if not indistinguishable from—white subjects” (Fishburn 1-2), to garner empathic appeal, or to effect coalition. Rather, Wilson asserts a distinct mode of being with intersectional effects. *Our Nig* must be understood, then, as an intellectual production clarifying the relation between illusory notions of (Northern) freedom and the brutalization, if not complete excision, of working black women’s bodies.

Accordingly, Frado’s young body, I maintain, speaks not to Fishburn’s view of the inextricability of blackness and whiteness and their respective definitions of freedom, but to the interminable chasm which separates them in the national imaginary. “From early dawn until after all were retired, was [Frado] toiling, overworked, disheartened, longing for relief,” notes the narrator on one occasion (35). Furthermore, “exposure from

heat to cold, or the reverse, often destroyed her health for short intervals. She wore no shoes until after frost, and snow even, appeared; and bared her feet again before the last vestige of winter disappeared” (ibid). As she performs never-ending, ungendering duties as maid, cook, nurse, farmhand, and driver—the completion of which are never deemed satisfactory according to Mrs. Bellmont—Frado’s swollen face and boxed ears also bear out the speciousness of the Protestant work ethic and other liberal discourses of progress and self-possession at the Bellmont homestead.⁷ Her weary limbs and increasingly stooped stature render pastoral images of antebellum New England suspect, extending an incisive critique of the ways in which racial and class dominance are inscribed onto the laboring bodies which Reason ardently disavows.

Importantly, the object of Wilson’s embodied analytic here also transcends narrow racial classifications, targeting at once the white abolitionist vanguard *and* the leadership of an autonomous black community. As Xiomara Santamarina reminds, the latter were all too frequently unmindful of “uplift ideology’s racially undermining potential, particularly in relation to the mass of black workers who, despite all efforts, really could not get up and leave their structurally disadvantaged occupational position as disparaged, menial workers” (96). Therefore, by “[r]epresenting black workers as failing to participate in the ideology of economic individualism,” Santamarina maintains, Douglass and others “obscur[e] the structural conditions governing black workers’ domination” (98). I would add, then, that Hazel Carby’s reading of Wilson’s novel as a

⁷ I use the term “ungendering” here to address the slippage in Frado’s gender identity under Mrs. Bellmont’s command. Mrs. Bellmont often comments on Frado’s capacity to complete the work of a man, boy, etc.

penetrating allegory of the nation, or of the ineffectual responses to Mrs. Bellmont's tyranny by other family members as Wilson's indictment of Northern/abolitionist capitulation to Southern rule, hinges upon the text's even more comprehensive undoing of the disembodied discourse indispensable to the project of liberalism as a whole.⁸

To the point, "Frado's bodily testimony forcefully exposes the underside of the Jeffersonian discourse," corroborates R. J. Ellis. "Frado is drained of strength by the Bellmonts' extraction of profit and then subjected to the rigors of public charity, in a grim economics that, whist rooted in the particular racist constructions of American life, portrays the ways in which American freedom is constructed around class, property and value" (156). According to Ellis, freedom is tethered to acquisition and ownership in Jeffersonian (among other Lockean-derived) formulations, yet circulates as readily accessible to all. Thus, as liberalism and Western rationalization affect objectivity and neutrality, in fact, the very prospect of reason necessitates disciplining, managing, and often erasing "unreasonable" bodies. Put differently, class mobility, reflection, and liberty always already rely on eliding the material conditions enabling and sustaining such positions in the first place.

Wilson, by contrast, mobilizes Frado's battered, pained body as a site of epistemological refusal, as her dramatic revision of Douglass and Covey's legendary confrontation likewise attests. In a crucial shift from Douglass' *Narrative*, Frado overcomes her mistress by retracting her labor rather than resorting to combat. Indeed, upon Mr. Bellmont's advice that though "he did not wish to have [Frado] saucy or

⁸ See Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood*, pg. 44.

disrespectful [...] when she was SURE she did not deserve a whipping, to avoid it if she could,” the young girl subsequently halts her mistress from breaking a stick from the woodpile—which Frado had apparently been too slow to retrieve—over her head (Wilson 54; emphasis in original). “You are looking sick [...] you cannot endure beating as you once could,” Mr. Bellmont had warned (ibid). Thus, standing “like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts,” Frado vehemently asserts to Mrs. Bellmont, “Stop! Strike me, and I’ll never work a mite more for you,” at once breaking with prevailing processes of thought and capital accumulation. More specifically, Frado marshals her bodily knowledge, experience, and understanding to disrupt an order of things predicated upon the disavowal of black difference, value, and productivity (54). Mrs. Bellmont’s compliance in this moment, though fleeting—“By this unexpected demonstration, her mistress, in amazement, dropper her weapon, desisting from her purpose of chastisement” (54)—signals the force of Frado’s objection to ostensibly abstract logics of nation and belonging rooted in power and property.

Penning, with amanuensis Susanna (Strickland) Moodie, the first narrative by a black woman published in Britain, Mary Prince similarly invokes embodiment as a politicized site of discernment and recognition. As Prince narrates her exploits at the hands of brutal owners in Bermuda, Turks Island, Antigua, and London in *The History of Mary Prince*, distinctions between indenture and enslavement, region and temporality, collapse as Wilson and Prince submit strikingly consonant and graphic knowledge claims. Of one of her mistresses, Prince reveals, “She taught me to do all sorts of household work; to wash and bake, pick cotton and wool, and wash floors, and cook.

And she taught me (how can I ever forget it!) more things than these” (14). To the generic domestic catalogue, Prince thereafter concludes, “she caused me to know the exact difference between the smart of the rope, the cart-whip, and the cow-skin, when applied to my naked body by her own cruel hand” (ibid). Prince’s own excessively violent and traumatic experiences are also compounded by those forced to endure similar fates, or worse, such as pregnant Aunt Hetty and old, lame Daniel whose savage beatings were, in Prince’s words, “always present to my mind for many a day” (16). Indeed, “In telling my own sorrows, I cannot pass by those of my fellow-slaves—for when I think of my own griefs, I remember theirs,” declares Prince (22). Stylized representations of infected and infested wounds, bloodied and bruised flesh, boils and pinched necks and arms, articulate Prince’s consciousness of the vulnerability and expendability of blackness.

Elizabeth Alexander confirms this in her article ““Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?”: Reading the Rodney King Video(s),” as she writes of Douglass’, Prince’s, and Jacobs’ respective narratives, maintaining, “these corporeal images of terror suggest that ‘experience’ can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in muscle memory as knowledge” (97). Without dismissing the necessarily fraught and potentially essentialist connotations of “race” as organizational construct, Alexander’s essay opens up a space in which to think about what it means to belong to “a people,” and particularly to “a people” whose aggrieved, terrorized bodies consistently circulate as ever-available-for-consumption, public spectacles. For Alexander, blackness constitutes not *the* way, but at least *one* way in which, as a collective, “traumatized African American viewers have

been taught a sorry lesson of their continual, physical vulnerability in the United States, a lesson that helps shape how it is we understand ourselves as a ‘we,’ even when that ‘we’ is differentiated” (95). With a sophisticated theoretical attentiveness to intersections between visibility, aurality, and corporeality, Alexander examines how the “[Rodney] King beating, and the anguished court cases and insurrections that followed reminded us that there is such a thing as ‘bottom line blackness’ with regard to violence, which erases differentiations and highlights race” (ibid). An extension, in many respects, of Hortense Spillers’ argument in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Alexander’s piece prompts a reconceptualization of black spectatorial practice.

Ultimately, Prince—as would Wilson and later Anna Julia Cooper—contests enforced materiality by locating the body as a means to sound a critique of black abjection and the instrumentality of racial and class dominance, and to insist on black meaning in excess of the bounds of chattel. For instance, in a flicker of resistance especially resonant with Frado’s aforementioned stand against Mrs. Belmont, the narrator details a bold proclamation by Prince to her master, Capt. I—: “I then took courage and said that I could stand the floggings no longer; that I was weary of my life, and therefore I had run away to my mother” (18). Here, in a remarkable assertion of black materiality *and* black maternity, Prince shifts dominant standards of knowledge formation; her body and experience theorize a sense of black humanity and kinship consistently demeaned or invisibilized. Reading Wilson and Prince in concert, then, facilitates a denaturalization of universalist imperative. Further, it positions the

problematization of abstract rationality as a prominent intervention by nineteenth-century black women's fiction and prose.

III

Significantly, Wilson's *Our Nig* likewise contributes to the demystification of tropes of liberal compassion and good intentions. As mentioned previously, Fishburn's critical project attempts to salvage the notion of benevolence, stating that "[b]y including in her text many instances of human compassion, gestures that serve to reduce if not eliminate her pain, Wilson does seem to invite us to reach out to her in a similar fashion" (109). While Fishburn does argue for a more capacious use of the term than that exhibited by the Belmont clan, the basic premise of empathy as always already a productive formation remains intact. "Clearly it is compassion [Wilson] is after," Fishburn affirms, "an efficacious compassion that will manifest itself [...] in the pragmatic act of 'buying a book' and in understanding her travails" (110). Yet, I contend that Fishburn's interpretation belies Wilson's condemnation of kindheartedness and concern as mere alibi, an argument she sustains throughout the bulk of *Our Nig* and which no doubt influenced its reception (if not guaranteeing its failure) in the antebellum literary marketplace.⁹ Thus, I, too, inquire into what Wilson is after, but without taking the ameliorative thrust of liberal consideration and care for granted. That is, what happens if we read Wilson's novel principally as an indictment of liberal humanist compassion as a performance with meager returns for black laboring bodies? What does

⁹ On Wilson's critical reception history in the antebellum literary marketplace, see Carby pg. 43-4, Peterson 154, Frink 198.

it mean to take seriously the ways in which an apparent sense of fellow feeling does not diminish, but rather colludes with Christianity and capital to exacerbate Frado's pain?

Indeed, as foils to Mrs. Belmont and her daughter/protégé Mary, Mr. Belmont, Aunt Abby, daughter Jane, and sons James and Jack immediately elicit readerly identification. Unencumbered by the repellent, racist pleasure structuring the domineering Belmont women's relation to their servant, these characters ostensibly shelter Frado from the women's violent machinations. However, as the introduction to this chapter makes plain, it is precisely through the characterization of figures such as James Belmont that Wilson mounts her attack on the well-intentioned. As a collective, the Belmont men and other sympathizers condone Frado's dehumanization by adopting what I refer to as "postures of abettal," by which they simultaneously mask and sanction sedimented hierarchies of power and privilege. James achieves this not only by dismissing Frado's "knotty queries" as it relates to race and religion, but by countenancing her near self-immolation in the weeks leading up to his death. On this subject, the narrator reveals that "[w]ith all his bodily suffering, all his anxiety for his family, whom he might not live to protect, [James] did not forget Frado. He shielded her from many beatings, and every day imparted religious instructions" (40). However, Wilson deftly juxtaposes this with the narrator's subsequent statement that "[n]o one, but his wife, could move him [in and out of bed] so easily as Frado; so that in addition to her daily toil she was often deprived of her rest at night" (40).

As one critic observes, as James "is fixated on the state of Frado's soul, he cannot see that his own selfish need for Frado's ministrations is wearing her out and ruining her

health [...] *Even this caring and compassionate man* has the power—and apparently the will—while he is on his deathbed to work Frado until she no longer has the strength to stand” (Fishburn 112; emphasis added). Part and parcel of James’ posture of abettal, then, are tokens of charity and accommodation which hold out to Frado the promise of spiritual salvation without threatening the Bellmonts’ economic standing. Moreover, Frado “*insisted* on being called,” the narrator explains; “she wished to show her *love* for one who had been such a friend to her” (Wilson 41; emphasis added). In many respects, this coercive display corresponds to Orlando Patterson’s discussion of the transition from classical Protestantism to revivalist fundamentalism in the U.S. South in *Slavery and Social Death*. As Patterson observes, between 1790 and 1830 institutionalized religion became an increasingly more important vehicle through which planters came to enforce ideological control. Due to a dualism inherent in Fundamentalist Protestantism, slave owners were able to simultaneously promote discourses of love, sanctity, and pacifism, while inhibiting literacy in favor of a more “sudden” onset of spiritual conversion; emphasize the rewards of redemption as achievable only in the afterlife; and compel complete and utter pious submission on the part of those in bondage (73). In a similar move, if in a slightly different context, James’ paternalistic compassion signals tacit approval of Frado’s subjection, while transforming any deviance on her part from her ever more diversified work load into the appearance of thanklessness or into a source of profound personal guilt. James relies on liberal and Christian discourses of sanctuary and

asylum to cover over the Bellmonts' mutual investment in extorting Frado's use-value at all costs.¹⁰

Much of this also coincides with an earlier conversation between James and Aunt Abby in which the former recalls overhearing Frado sobbing in despair in the family barn. James proceeds to ventriloquize Frado's bitter, suicidal rant before, in an abrupt shift, he informs his aunt that "I took the *opportunity* to combat the notions she *seemed to entertain* respecting the loneliness of her condition and want of sympathizing friends" (40; emphasis added). During the course of the remembered conversation, James positions the cruelty of his mother as the exception rather than the rule at the North, and declares that Frado surely "might hope for better things in the future" (ibid). In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman usefully critiques such processes of empathetic identification, the slippery politics of which reinscribes an unequal set of power relations along racial lines. According to Hartman, empathy installs a dynamic predicated upon a "phantasmic vehicle of identification," a substitution contingent upon the disappearing, or invisibility of the racialized object. Put another way, interracial empathy "requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible" (19). Within the space of Wilson's novel, Frado's striking claim that "No one cares for me [,] only to get my work" only accrues meaning via its displacement by James' subsequent mediation and opportunistic shoring up of white liberal subjectivity and abolitionism. When James later discloses that "Having

¹⁰ My thinking around the emotionally manipulative effects of James' posture of abettal was shaped by Santamarina's work in *Belabored Professions*, pg. 88-9

spoken these words of comfort, I rose with the resolution that if I recovered my health I would take her home with me,” one indeed wonders, comfort for whom? In fact, Frado remains voiceless for the entire interlude. Her understanding of (black) death as a site of resistive possibility—“Why can’t I die? Oh, what have I to live for?” she cries—is reduced to juvenile ignorance. Making visible the “ambivalent,” “repressive” qualities as well as the “facile intimacy” enabled by the empathy of which Hartman theorizes, James’ relationship with Frado demonstrates precisely how black captive bodies (enslaved or free) persistently serve as fungible commodities for white economies, material and ideological (Hartman 19).

Aunt Abby’s response to James’ anecdote in this scene is likewise symptomatic: “I don’t know what your mother would do without her; still, I wish she was away” (40). Throughout the narrative, Aunt Abby’s posture of abettal merges covert acts of refuge with flickers of apparent defiance. That is, in the wake of Mrs. Belmont’s brutal rages, Aunt Abby secretly supplies Frado with pastries and other provisions. Moreover, she emboldens the young girl’s spiritual yearnings, and intercedes with her male relatives (if futilely) on Frado’s behalf. “I think I should rule my own house, John,” Abby quietly scolds her brother on one occasion, urging him to stand up to his wife and protect the servant girl (25). Yet, Aunt Abby extends considerate gestures only insofar as they do not incite Mrs. Belmont’s “reserved wrath on *her* defenceless head” (ibid; emphasis added). Mrs. Belmont already views Abby’s entitlement to a portion of the family homestead as theft from her husband, the rightful heir, and Aunt Abby risks little in Frado’s name which might imperil her tenuous property rights. Similarly, Aunt Abby’s

attempts to convert Frado are buttressed by a disciplinary, liberal tolerance tethered to the dictates of capital. Indeed, the girl's occasional outbursts of anger are generally met with Aunt Abby's pious alarm followed by an immediate injunction to get back to work (Wilson 43). Contrary to Foreman's reading of Abby's "analogous disenfranchisement" with Frado within the confines of the Bellmont home, I argue that Abby's intercession rarely exceeds the register of tepid protest (53, *Activist Sentiments*); her own plight exists in hierarchical relation to the experiences of her young charge and obscures Abby's implication in Frado's struggles.

Mr. Bellmont, in addition, perhaps epitomizes the effects of what Ellis aptly characterizes as the novel's "quietly savage portraits of the male family members' persistent failure to intervene effectively on Frado's behalf" (110). For Ellis, the conditions which Wilson depicts upset conventional gender formations in the (white) domestic sphere, as male characters cede, for all intents and purposes, free reign to a vengeful matriarch. Indeed, Ellis concludes, at least within the chapters focused on Frado's indenture, Mr. Bellmont's "intermittent assumptions of patriarchal power are precarious" (111). Mr. Bellmont's admission that "Women rule the earth and all in it," in the oft-cited conversation with his sister to which I briefly allude to above, reinforces such an interpretation. In a gesture of self-interest akin to that displayed by Aunt Abby, Mr. Bellmont justifies his complacency by referencing the hellish conditions *he* would likely undergo if he openly opposed his wife's demands, before finally "saunter[ing] out to the barn to await the quieting of the storm" (Wilson 25).

However, Wilson's recurrent choice to cast Mrs. Bellmont's violence against Frado's body as tempests during which Mr. Bellmont casually (as the term "saunter" suggests) disappears at will, indexes not the ambiguity of patriarchal prerogative, but rather its fulfillment. The privilege which structures and sustains patriarchy, in fact, authorizes mobility and absence as appropriate expressions of maleness. Mr. Bellmont's posture of abettal, then, hinges precisely on his capacity to arbitrarily retreat or reassert dominance with impunity. Mr. Bellmont "was a man who seldom decided controversies at home," corroborates the narrator, yet "the word once spoken admitted of no appeal" (Wilson 18). Following one of Frado's displays of "sauciness," or purported affronts to her employers' delicate sensibilities, Mrs. Bellmont viciously kicks Frado until those rushing in to inquire about the noise grant an opportunity for escape. Significantly, Frado's disappearance—a theme to which I will return later in this chapter—lasts far longer than anticipated in this instance, extending beyond the dinner hour and James' arrival on the night coach. "I'll not leave much of her beauty to be seen, if she comes in sight," Mrs. Bellmont nevertheless warns amidst the others' growing panic (26). Having by now returned from his jaunt, Mr. Bellmont subsequently intervenes. "Mr. Bellmont raised his calm, determined eye full upon her, and said, in a decisive manner," the narrator observes, "'You shall not strike, or scald, or skin her, as you call it, if she comes back again. Remember!' and he brought his hand down upon the table" (ibid). Mr. Bellmont's mandate starkly shifts the dynamic of control in the scene; an organized search for Frado commences right away. Yet, his ongoing absent presence affirms his manhood at Frado's expense. That is, his vacillation between neglect and advocacy at

whim solidifies his masculinity without regard for Frado's continuing fight for basic survival.

In a later scenario, Mrs. Belmont again seeks retaliation against Frado, this time for divulging to James that his mother had forbidden Aunt Abby to attend to him on his deathbed. Familiar accoutrement of chattel slavery, including the raw-hide and a block of wood between the teeth of the victim, adorn Mrs. Belmont's spectacle of racial dominance. However, as readers ultimately learn, "Frado was thus tortured when Mr. Belmont came in [...] and seeing her situation, quickly removed the instrument of torture, and sought his wife. Their conversation we will omit; suffice it to say, a storm raged which required many days to exhaust its strength" (49). Again, Mr. Belmont turns up and seizes control of the situation. Presumably, he "sought his wife" for disciplinary action and to reinstate his authority over and above *all* bodies in the Belmont domain. But here, the novel's abiding metaphor of the "storm" as representative of a distinctly feminine chaos also collapses in on itself. It remains unclear as to which Belmont spouse entirely drives this eruption, each perhaps absorbing the other, as Frado is abandoned to seek some semblance of calm. Ultimately, Mr. Belmont's manifestation of white, patriarchal privilege crystallizes, rather than inverts traditional gender roles as Mrs. Belmont's sadism and Mr. Belmont's well-intentioned mediation work in conjunction to maintain the status quo.

Lastly, son Jack Belmont's posture of abettal, too, encompasses other family members' aura of earnest concern, though appears marked by a distinct joviality and playfulness. Indeed, Jack's overflowing laughter permeates the kitchen in an oft-cited

scene in which Mrs. Bellmont prevents Frado from using a clean dinner plate for her meal. In response to James' recent insistence that Nig dine at the table with the rest of the family, Mrs. Bellmont compels Frado to eat from her own soiled dinner plate. "To eat after James, his wife or Jack, would have been pleasant; but to be commanded to do what was disagreeable by her mistress BECAUSE it was disagreeable, was trying," relates the narrator (38; emphasis in original). Thus, Frado lets her dog, Fido, lick the plate clean before carrying on with her dinner. Following the incident, Jack notably retrieves "a bright, silver half-dollar from his pocket, [and] threw it at Nig, saying, 'There, take that; 'twas worth paying for'" (ibid).

Here, Jack cheapens Frado's pointed critique of her dehumanized status in the Bellmont homestead. His patronizing gesture empties Nig's performance of its sarcastic intent, effectively reducing her to an object of personal amusement worthy of minstrel fare. Further, while Frado expressly cites Jack's presence as the source of her bravery, crediting him for a lack of retribution by Mrs. Bellmont in this moment, Jack thoroughly relishes the event without taking into account the consequences for its creator. According to the narrator, after this particular insult, Mrs. Bellmont, "only smothered her resentment until a convenient opportunity offered. The first time she was left alone with Nig, she gave her a thorough beating, to bring up arrearages" (38). Throughout the novel, Jack mocks Frado's experiences, uncovering humor in the material conditions from which his race, gender, and class exempt him.

Moreover, Jack's liberal compassion, informed by seeming delight in Frado's pain, also engages the specter of sexual abuse pervading the novel. During the family's

initial conversation about the possibility of keeping the girl after Mag abandons her at their front door, Jack offers, “Keep her [...] she’s real handsome and bright, and not very black, either” (16). In a subsequent exchange with Frado following Mrs. Belmont’s shaving of the former’s signature “glossy ringlets,” Jack replies, “Thought you were getting handsome, did she? Same old story, is it; knocks and bumps? Better times coming; never fear, Nig” (38). Indeed, Jack good-naturedly sanitizes both Frado’s blackness and his mother’s savagery, frequently calling attention to the attractiveness of Frado’s mixed-raced body in the process.

In fact, a range of critics including Carla Peterson, Katherine Fishburn, Johnnie Stover, and Ronna C. Johnson extend similar claims regarding the Belmont men.¹¹ “The Belmont sons’ repeated references to Frado’s beauty and their frequent presence in her sleeping quarters as well as her presence in their own are particularly sexually suggestive,” adds Claudia Tate (48). Other readings, including those by R. J. Ellis, Cassandra Jackson, and Martha Cutter point to Mrs. Belmont as Frado’s likeliest sexual tormenter.¹² As Nell Painter asserts in relation to Sojourner Truth’s sexual abuse by her mistress Sally Dumont, only implicitly addressed in Truth’s *Narrative*, “Then, as now, the sexual abuse of young women by men is deplored but recognized as common. Less easily acknowledged, then and now, is the fact that there are women who violate

¹¹ See Peterson pg. 167, Fishburn pg. 108, Stover pg. 115, and Ronna C. Johnson’s 1997 essay, “Said But Not Spoken: Elision and the Representation of Rape, Race, and Gender in Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig*.”

¹² See Ellis pg. 114, Cassandra Jackson’s essay, “Beyond the Page: Rape and the Failure of Genre,” in *Harriet Wilson’s New England*, and Cutter’s *Unruly Tongue: Identity and Voice in American Women’s Writing, 1850-1930* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1999).

children” (16). Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman concurs, while simultaneously complicating this analysis, arguing (via Saidiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers), “[t]he slave’s body was rendered ‘neuter’ in that, despite the slave’s anatomical referent, as a non-person she or he did not register gender legibly according to established paradigms of masculinity or femininity” (40). Nevertheless, or perhaps consequently, “The sexual vulnerability of slaves, particularly their slave girls, was not lost on mistresses. Their jealousy over their husbands’ coerced concubinage of female slaves could be attenuated by subjecting slave girls to their own physical, psychological, and sexual torment” (44-5). Without diminishing the significance of Frado’s exploitation at the hands of multiple perpetrators, it remains that Jack’s reproduction of tragic/exoticized mulatta iconography in this way powerfully underwrites her subjection. Jack’s relation to “Our Nig”—“How different this appellation sounded from him; he said it in such a tone, with such a rogueish look!” observes the narrator (38)—in fact, signals an all too familiar, if mirthful iteration of uneven power and possession, put on display by most all of Frado’s ostensible allies.

Finally, Jack’s acquisitive motivations, a willingness to condone Frado’s maltreatment as long as it contributes to his own well-being or to the economic stability of the Belmont family as a whole, likewise surface following his own marriage. Despite Mrs. Belmont’s stern warnings to all of her offspring against choosing a partner from a lower class, Jack marries a poor, orphan woman named Jenny. As Jack travels to seek employment to support his new family, Mrs. Belmont fabricates tales of Jack and Jenny’s respective infidelity, diverts their attempted correspondence to one another, and subjects Jenny to public shaming. Though it is Frado that eventually eludes Mrs.

Bellmont's trap and expedites Jack's homecoming, he returns solely to rescue his wife. Frado—the family's sole laborer—remains, despite far worse handling.¹³ Taken together, Jack, James, Abby, Jane, and Mr. Belmont enact postures of abettal which do not counter Mary and Mrs. Belmont's overtly racist, denigrating conduct, but rather contribute to Frado's manipulation and misuse. Thus, Wilson deploys characterization in her novel in order to problematize dominant discourses of altruism and goodwill, clarifying a spectrum of violent effects attending liberal notions of compassion. In detailing the collusion of empathy, Christianity, and capital as a manifestation of the liberal problematic, Wilson intervenes in self-perpetuating origin stories of the antebellum North and unsettles narratives of a dearth of nineteenth-century black women's literary resistance.

IV

Just as Wilson's novel contests prevailing ideologies of abstract, disembodied rationalism and well-meaning benevolence, *Our Nig* further evokes figurations of blackness and of escape to problematize an Enlightenment ethos of transparency and comprehensibility. Productively, Stephanie M. H. Camp addresses precisely the material *and* theoretical implications of black fugitivity in her 2004 book, *Closer to Freedom*. Though Camp's study focuses on the context of enslavement, in particular, her attentiveness to intersections between spatiality and power coincides with Wilson's critical engagement with opacity in Northern antebellum terrain. Specifically, Camp analyzes the gendered conditions under which black bondwomen were especially (though

¹³ On the relation between Frado and Jenny, see also: Fulton pg. 48.

not exclusively) exposed to sexually demeaning forms of punishment; often made to serve a sort of “domestic second shift” in slave quarters; and given substantially less access to passes to leave plantations. Accordingly, Camp contends, enslaved women often erected “rival geographies,” thereby disrupting planters’ panoptic surveillance and developing alternative epistemologies around the potential for harnessing plantation space (7). Truancy and absenteeism, as well as harboring communities of outlying slaves, typify black women’s resistant cartographies in this regard. Pilfered mobility was likewise evident in the counter-surveillance of white slave patrols, and the proliferation of abolitionist sentiment between and among slave cabins. We might add to Camp’s inventory additional practices utilized by black women in bondage including eavesdropping and quilting, two crucial modes of improvising circumscribed conditions and of transmitting knowledge claims.

Spanning the context of the mid-nineteenth through the first decade of the twentieth century, Daphne A. Brooks’ *Bodies in Dissent* similarly considers the ways in which performers from Henry “Box” Brown to Aida Overton Walker deployed “Afro-alienation acts,” supplanting imposed marginality with a subversive sense of cultural self-expression (5). Juxtaposing what she usefully characterizes as such figures’ “spectacular opacity” with the “colonial invention of exotic ‘darkness’,” Brooks argues, “We can think of their acts as opaque, as dark points of possibility that create figurative sites for the reconfiguration of black and female bodies on display. A kind of shrouding, this trope of darkness paradoxically allows for corporeal unveiling to yoke with the (re)covering and re-historicizing of the flesh” (8). In Brooks’ formulation, spectacular

opacity undermines persistent notions of blackness as criminal, threatening, lack. Contrary to Western imperative toward fixed meaning and a coherent Subject, spectacular opacity positions darkness as a potential site of “narrative insurgency, discursive survival, and epistemological resistance” (Brooks 108). Further, in foregrounding the swamp as an especially powerful signifier through which blackness is re-embodied and re-conceptualized as spectacular opacity, Brooks’ analytic overlaps with that of Camp. As both critics attest, maroonage and separatism in shaded bayous and other wetlands—though often temporary—represent a striking revision of antebellum measures of spatio-temporal authority and control while operating as distinct symbols of black slave revolt. By appropriating obscurity as a mark of rebellion and a competing code of intelligibility, artists articulate blackness in excess of abject difference.

Extrapolating beyond the bounds of spectacle and performance to the terrain of the literary, it is clear that Wilson’s Frado, too, accesses this tradition of insurgency. “Frado is such a wild, frolicky thing, and means to do jest as she’s a mind to,” suggests Frado’s mother, Mag, at the outset of the novel, foreshadowing her daughter’s subsequent disappearance (12). Indeed, when Mag and her partner, Seth, later approach the young girl with the prospect of moving to a new home, Frado immediately flees. Thereafter, “All effort proved unavailing,” reveals the narrator, as neither nightfall nor a small search party produces the outlier (ibid). Finally, both Frado and a second missing “little colored girl” resurface:

and from them and their attendant [Mag and Seth] learned that they went to walk, and not minding the direction soon found themselves lost. They had climbed fences and walls, passed through thickets and marshes, and when night approached selected a thick cluster of shrubbery as a covert for

the night. They were discovered by the person who now restored them, chatting of their prospects, Frado attempting to banish the childish fears of her companion. As they were miles from home, they were kindly cared for until morning. (Wilson 12-3)

As Camp asserts in the context of her own study, “The rival geography did not threaten to overthrow American slavery, nor did it provide slaves with autonomous spaces” (7).

Though Frado’s actions do not instigate widespread insurrection or influence Mag’s and Seth’s intentions to dispose of her, I argue that they do serve a vestibular function as it relates to Frado’s future absenteeism at the Bellmont homestead. Though Frado’s playmate appears panic-stricken and fearful during their predicament, Frado deliberately pursues a dark and wooded course. Rather than haphazard meandering, Frado’s lengthy, nocturnal trek and careful selection of a “thick cluster of shrubbery” might signal a purposeful activation of the coverture of blackness. Moreover, of all those portrayed by Wilson as relieved by the girls’ reemergence, Frado’s name is conspicuously absent. Following Brooks’ call that “[w]e might, then, examine the potential for swamp iconography to signify on the politics of representing black resistance efforts in antebellum popular culture,” I maintain that Wilson’s account of black fugitivity in this instance, if fleeting, establishes a sphere of black political meaning and expression in conflict with dominant standards of knowledge production and to which Frado must necessarily return (105).

In fact, often during the course of her indenture with the Bellmonts, Frado seeks release from torment in liminal spaces, including the woods, as well as in outdoor locales like the family barn. On one occasion, referenced briefly in the discussion of Mr. Bellmont’s posture of abettal above, Mrs. Bellmont’s characteristic violence prompts

Frado's swift retreat from the domestic realm. All but Mary and Mrs. Belmont display trepidation and alarm when Frado still cannot be found after dusk. Then, in a scene resonating with the aforementioned one earlier in her youth, the narrator observes, "Jack started, the dog followed, and soon capered on before, far, far into the fields, over walls and through fences, *into a piece a swampy land*" in order to locate the absent servant-girl (Wilson 27; emphasis added). Finding sanctuary in the doubly dark veil of night and of Northern everglades, Frado mobilizes darkness in this scenario to contest the terms of her containment. As Brooks reminds, "Deeply entrenched in antebellum historical memory, the Dismal Swamp scene synecdochically references a legacy of past slave rebellion as well as future revolts," for "[l]ocated on the borders of Virginia and North Carolina, [it] was a territory linked by legend to the Nat Turner rebellion" (104). Here, in the context of antebellum New England, Wilson draws upon analogous imagery to carve out a space for black solitude and healing, as well as for Northern black female defiance.

Further, as Foreman aptly observes in *Activist Sentiments*, "Transmogrifying into metaphorical slave catchers in this scene, her allies return her to what they call 'safety,' but to what the text, as does Mrs. Belmont, might call her 'rightful place'" (56). As opposed to a mutually agreed upon homecoming, then, the narrator reveals: "Jack followed close and soon appeared to James, who was quite in the rear, *coaxing and forcing* Frado along with him" (Wilson 27; emphasis added). Ultimately, as Rafia Zafar likewise ascertains, Frado consciously substitutes the cipher of darkness for the ineptness of liberal humanist intentionality and compassion (140). In this way, she provisionally forecloses on white processes of valuation which reduce her to little more than property

or to a naïve, domestic charge in need of salvation. For Wilson, opacity does not provoke disorder. Instead, it calls reigning modes of racial and class privilege into question.

Such a reading perhaps gains even more traction if one situates the entire preface to *Our Nig* as a willfully opaque theoretical framework. Here, as would Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent in her wake, Wilson confesses, “I do not pretend to divulge every transaction in my own life, which the unprejudiced would declare unfavorable in comparison with treatment of legal bondmen; I have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home” (4). Fittingly, this gesture—alongside feminine expressions of authorial deference present in the excerpt—often registers as evidence of black women writers’ particular vulnerabilities in light of the tenuousness of antebellum freedom. However, given Wilson’s direct appeal in the preface to an autonomous black community (“I sincerely appeal to my colored brethren universally for patronage”), as well as the invocations of darkness in the novel outlined above, I submit that this passage also functions as a marked refusal of implicitly gendered and ethnocentric Enlightenment touchstones, including transparency and coherence, and thus constitutes an act of resistance. Indeed, Wilson’s oblique words supersede a traditional abolitionist preamble by the likes of Frederick Douglass or Lydia Maria Child. Contrarily, she crafts her own palpably dense prelude, or as Carla Peterson suggests, a “liminal space created and occupied by antebellum black women in which they could give voice to the tense and contradictory impulses of legitimation and subversion that lay within them” (152-2). By opting for opacity as a valid means of not just concealing, but

of thoroughly articulating embodied truths of escape and of black pain, Wilson fundamentally reconfigures Western patterns of knowability.

V

In addition to the question of opacity, the trope of childhood in the novel merits sustained attention as a challenge to liberal humanist notions of purity and innocence. Indeed, critics from Tate to Santamarina, from Helen Frink to Lisa E. Green, among others, have taken seriously over the course of the last thirty years Barbara Christian's deceptively simple insight that Frado "is a child, a being of especially low standing in nineteenth-century society" (28), interrogating the meaning of youth in *Our Nig* in relation to the realities of indenture at the antebellum North as well as to issues of genre and audience. Tate, for instance, troubles modern readings of Frado's appearance at the Bellmonts' home as a product of parental abandonment or neglect, rather than as a predictable consequence of epidemic black indigence during the early nineteenth century (33). This historical context informs her interpretation of the effects of novelization and of the theme of motherhood in Wilson's project, as she argues, "All of the events in the first two chapters must be presumed fictional inasmuch as their factual construction is beyond the competence of a young child's memory and understanding" (35). According to Tate, "these events are part of this autobiographical novel's discourse of maternal desire, that is, Wilson's construction of an inherently good mother and her motives for abandoning a child whom she could not support" (ibid). Santamarina also underscores childhood as narrative framework and strategy, one by which Wilson metaphorizes widespread conditions of disfranchisement, debility, and exposure imposed on black

women laborers as a whole during the period (75), while other critics foreground the literary value of youthfulness and young adulthood as sites of gendered public pedagogy (Frink 183) or as topoi by which to render palatable subversive political critique (Green 152).

In fact, various episodes in the novel work to theorize youth as a fraught construct, both romanticizing Frado's simplicity and goodness *and* casting the sanctity of childhood into unrelieved crisis. For instance, when Mrs. Belmont begrudgingly allows a seven-year-old Frado to attend school for the first time alongside her daughter, Mary, their teacher, Miss Marsh, immediately attempts to recuperate Frado's juvenility. That is, of Miss Marsh's charge to her class as it relates to their new classmate, the narrator declares, she "reminded them of their duties to the poor and friendless; their cowardice in attacking a young innocent child; referred them to one who looks not on outward appearances, but on the heart" (18). Further, the narrator characterizes as "the most agreeable sound which ever meets the ear of sorrowing, grieving childhood" Miss Marsh's subsequent claim to her students that, "She looks like a good girl; I think I shall love her, so lay aside all prejudice, and vie with each other in shewing kindness and good-will to one who seems different from you" (ibid). Apparently, the intervention works, temporarily positioning Mary—rather than Nig—as a social outcast at the school. Notably, Miss Marsh's lecture fixes childhood as inherently moral, reinforcing Victorian-era ideologies of the sacredness of the family and of motherhood (as well as of maternal surrogates, including teachers) as bastions against base, worldly influences in the lives of

youth. Inquiring, in effect, “What would Jesus do?”, Miss Marsh hinges her critique of petty bigotry and intolerance on a duty to preserve the chaste character of childhood.

However, fractures embedded in the same scene crystallize the aforementioned instability of the category “child” in this context, exposing the racial and class privilege underlying Miss Marsh’s formulation. Violent, if familiar racial slurs and other rituals of public shaming announce Frado’s arrival on the premises of the schoolhouse. Depicted “with scanty clothing and bared feet” and looking “chagrined and grieved,” Frado’s experiences incite a slippage from controlling iconography of youthfulness in liberal humanist discourse. Even Miss Marsh’s qualified act of reclaiming leaves something to be desired. Though the schoolteacher asserts that every child deserves early years filled with pleasure and free of turmoil, this inviolable right endures precisely through a neutralization of Frado’s difference. Thus, while Eva Allegra Raimon writes that through Miss Marsh, “Wilson offers a fictional exemplar of the progressive impulse that typified the nineteenth-century movement for education reform but that too often failed to be realized in practice” (168), one might also align Miss Marsh’s tepid performance with that of much of the Bellmont clan as the embodiment of the liberal problematic. Mrs. Bellmont, too, self-interestedly acknowledges Frado’s distinction from other young girls, particularly from previous child-servants in her employ, maintaining, she “felt that she could not well spare one who could so well adapt herself to all departments—man, boy, housekeeper, etc.” (59). Lower-class children and children of color, then, were not deemed fundamentally virtuous or vulnerable, but excessive and exploitable.

Scholar Lisa E. Green, expanding upon the work of Nina Baym and Barbara White, further contextualizes the complex trope of childhood within the landscape of mainstream nineteenth-century American fiction more broadly. Locating Frado's characterization in *Our Nig* as an arrogation of the popular literary figure of "the disorderly girl," Green cites intersections between Wilson's text and novels by the likes of Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. In their respective bestsellers *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and *The Lamplighter* (1854), Warner's and Cummins' wayward young heroines Ellen Montgomery and Gerty appear willful and full of rage. Though, Green suggests, "in both novels the heroine's fury is justified by the mistreatment that provokes it," Warner and Cummins each mobilize their wildly successful sentimental novels "to impose a sense of order on a changing and unstable society by instilling self control and religious faith in 'disorderly' young girls" (143). Additionally, Tate and Green trace coincidences between the corporeal and affective attributes of Frado and Pearl, daughter of Hawthorne's Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, also published in 1850. Strikingly beautiful, as signified by shining eyes and flowing hair, and demonstrating a corresponding spiritedness, Frado and Pearl execute unruly resistance which incisively calls institutionalized religion, circumscribing social customs, and gender norms into question.¹⁴ Even forging a brief, but useful connection between Frado and Topsy of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Green

¹⁴ See Tate pg. 45-6 and Green pg. 143.

articulates the ways in which “the disorderly girl,” angry and rebellious, generates a space to convey truths others cannot (or will) not say.¹⁵

Though for Green, Hawthorne’s, Warner’s, and Cummins’ novels reflect different objectives, each finally contains the radicalism of the girl heroine via dominant discourses of Christianity and domesticity (144). Therefore, even as Green establishes Wilson’s inclusion of a generic “disorderly girl” in *Our Nig* as a means to give voice to the material conditions of racial oppression in the realm of Northern antebellum indenture, she must acknowledge Frado’s departure from Ellen, Gerty, and Pearl’s eventual processes of maturation and womanly development, visions projected by mainstream authors for which Frado’s racialized body implicitly marks the bounds. Accordingly, in my reading, Wilson borrows from the construction of “the disorderly girl” as readily as she reconceptualizes and politicizes the trope of the “picaninny.” A theory of Frado-as-picaninny ultimately extends beyond the terrain of “the disorderly girl” to underscore affinities between enslavement and Northern class exploitation, and simultaneously foregrounds Wilson’s aforementioned critique of capital throughout the course of the novel. Additionally, the notion of Frado-as-picaninny reflects a consciousness which validates black rage at the same time that it advances, in the words of Lindon Barrett, a “politics of joy.”

Significantly, the expression “picaninny” descends from a form of nineteenth-century currency: the picayune. As Jayna Brown observes,

¹⁵ Carla Peterson and Katherine Fishburn likewise forge useful connections between the characterization of Frado and Topsy in their respective texts.

The derivation of the term picaninny signals the interchangeability between the black child bodies and the small bits of money required for their acquisition. Not always purchased but often “made” on the plantation, they embodied the very public marketplace politics of sexualized subjection at the heart of the domestic sphere. Slave children were living currency. The picaninny was a key symbol of the conflation of sex and commerce, which defined the peculiar institution. (24)

Ever cognizant of collapsing the terror of bondage with the tenuousness of black freedom at the North, Wilson nevertheless imports the figure of the picaninny in order to emphasize the manipulation and objectification of Frado’s body. While an overdetermined blackness seemingly subsumes Frado’s mixed-race identity throughout much of the novel, her mulatta standing simultaneously invokes a specter of interracial sex akin to that signified by the picaninny. Indeed, Frado’s sometimes-mirthful, sometimes-irate antics problematize the terms of her containment, unsettling existing logics of value, productivity, and exchange. Further, as Brown reveals in the context of her discussion of black child performers in the early twentieth century, constructs such as the picaninny were buttressed by discourses of scientific racism, evolution, and eugenics in the public domain. “Black children were considered to embody metonymically the condition of the lesser races, locked in a perpetual state of childlike simplicity, prone to excess, always emotional and immediate in their responses. Their ‘natural’ behavior was irrepressible physical and vocal expression,” contends Brown (48). Notably, Wilson turns precisely such essentialist prognoses and gross stereotypes on their heads. Moreover, through Frado, Wilson theorizes the distinct epistemological import of black childhood, particularly its capacity to defy the liberal problematic.

That is, in contrast to the stagnant “happy darkie” image, Frado-as-picaninny displays a nearly unfathomable, ecstatic sense of delight that disrupts ordinary measures of order and control. In readers’ initial introduction to Frado in Chapter 2, the narrator declares, “Frado, as they called one of Mag’s children, was a beautiful mulatto, with long, curly black hair, and handsome, roguish eyes, sparkling with an exuberance of spirit almost beyond restraint” (11). Thus, from the very beginning—in addition to exoticized features commonly associated with “tragic mulatta”-types—the narrator calls attention to Frado’s energy. Inextricable from a palpable slyness on her part, signaled here by her “roguish eyes,” Frado’s dynamism troubles the borders of strictly raced spheres of biological difference and pathology. Instead, she activates a profound, non-rational mode of relation.

“Her jollity was not to be quenched by whipping or scolding,” the narrator adds tellingly, and “in the kitchen, and among her schoolmates, the pent up fires burst forth” (21). Though narrativized in the national imaginary as excessive emotion, Frado’s “pent up fires” emerge, in fact, as a form of self-expression that obscures normative opposition between joy and fury, and flouts dominant registers of coherence and restraint, including whipping and scolding. To be sure, “[s]he would venture far beyond propriety,” the narrator affirms, alluding to Frado’s sundry boisterous pranks, including the simulation of fire by puffing cigar smoke into an unsuspecting teacher’s desk drawer (21). Crucially, however, Frado’s conduct amounts to more than cheap thrills and immature tricks; she gestures to an elsewhere space of creativity and imaginative fulfillment. According to the narrator, “When she had none of the family around to be merry with, she would amuse

herself with the animals,” cavorting in the Belmont barn and teaching lessons to stubborn sheep (30). Simply put, while her gleeful demeanor often invites an audience, it does not require one. “Strange, one spark of playfulness could remain amid such constant toil,” offers the narrator, “but her natural temperament was in a high degree mirthful” (ibid). Frado cultivates, in many respects, a self-sustaining pleasure which opens up alternate possibilities of being.

Frado’s singing likewise personifies her “politics of joy.” Not long after Aunt Abby permits Frado to begin accompanying her to church, the latter “had all their sacred songs at command, and enlivened her toil by accompanying it with this melody” (37). Her “clear voice” and “joyous notes” often ring throughout the Belmont compound (43). While Lindon Barrett does not formally delineate a “politics of joy” in his published writings, in his foundational 1999 volume *Blackness and Value* he asserts that “The singing voice stands as one very important sign of the value of [...] voices situated in the dark [...] it provides a primary means by which African Americans may exchange an expended, valueless self in the New World for a productive, recognized self” (57). Moreover, “It provides one important means of formalizing and celebrating an existence otherwise proposed as negative and negligible” (ibid).¹⁶ Indeed, when Alice Walker remarks in “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” an essay with which *Blackness and Value* is directly in dialogue, to a “sickly little black girl” that “It is not so much what you sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, *the notion of song*,” the black

¹⁶ Though Lindon Barrett did not formally write about the concept of a “politics of joy,” he would often cite it in conversation with colleagues during his brief tenure at UCR. I use it, then, as a critical springboard for thinking about the theoretical implications of Wilson’s text.

child (Phillis Wheatley, in Walker's case) could easily be Frado (237; emphasis in original).

In essence, singing marks a deeply embodied act in Walker's and Barrett's frameworks, and it relies upon an unquantifiable and unquenchable sense of spirit. Taken together with the aforementioned manifestations of Frado's joy, song sounds Wilson's critique of a system of abstract rationality which privileges knowledge formations severed from particularized histories, experiences, and bodies. By appropriating the "picaninny" trope, Wilson engages dimensions of racial politics and class privilege—of power—which many of her contemporaries integrating the generic "disorderly girl" figure into their fiction could afford to overlook. Significantly, Wilson mobilizes childhood as a platform from which to interrogate processes of capital accumulation and liberal authority and to uphold the value of black pleasure.

Another conceptual limitation of "the disorderly girl" within the context of *Our Nig* pertains to Green's assertion that "the heroine's fury is justified by the mistreatment that provokes it" (143). By contrast, in her characterization of Frado-as-picaninny, Wilson demonstrates a keen awareness of leading perceptions of racialized anger, in particular, as always already *unjustified* and threatening. Indeed, as Sianne Ngai argues of the function of traits associated with outrage including "animatedness" and "irritation"—(ambivalent) indexes of racial Otherness which consistently fix people of color as spectacle—"it is the cultural representation of the African-American that most visibly harnesses the affective qualities of liveliness, effusiveness, spontaneity, and zeal to a disturbing racial epistemology, and makes these variants of 'animatedness' function

as bodily (hence self-evident) signs of the raced subject's naturalness or authenticity" (95). Further, extrapolating from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Ngai observes the ways in which a broader Western "emphasis on proportionality and correctness [of anger] clearly raises the specter of the person angry in the wrong ways and at the wrong times" (182). Interrogating precisely how animatedness and irritation straddle borders between emotion and embodiment, and are as often as not imposed through violence, Ngai's ultimate conclusion that such affect constitutes a "nexus of contradictions with the capacity to generate unanticipated social meanings and effects" (125), resonates with Wilson's critique of the liberal problematic as expressed through an inadmissibility of livid blackness.

For example, in one angry exchange between Frado and Aunt Abby, following the departure of Frado's nemesis, Mary, to Baltimore, the narrator relates Frado's at once happy and furious exclamations. "She's gone, Aunt Abby, she's gone, fairly gone" and "I hope she'll never come back again," Frado declares (43). When Aunt Abby tries to remind the girl that Mary is James' sister, the flesh and blood of one to whom Frado is especially attached, Frado retorts that Mary is no better than the Bellmonts' stubborn sheep that Frado recently "ducked" in the river. "I'd like to try my hand at curing HER too," Frado reveals, much to Aunt Abby's dismay (*ibid.*).

Later, upon the occasion of Mary's unexpected death, Frado heatedly, if wittily proclaims to Aunt Abby, "She got into the RIVER again, Aunt Abby, didn't she; the Jordan is a big one to tumble into, any how. S'posen she goes to hell, she'll be as black as I am. Wouldn't mistress be mad to see her a nigger!" (55) According to the narrator,

such statements were “not at all acceptable to the pious, sympathetic dame; but [Aunt Abby] could not evade them” (ibid). As Aunt Abby endeavors, with varying degrees of success, to either channel the girl’s anger into her chores or to deny it altogether—a manifestation of her posture of abettal—readers glimpse both a concerted effort to suppress Frado’s rage and a sense, though fleeting, of the perceptiveness (and thereby the danger) of black anger as a vehicle to contest conditions of subjection. Further, in a remarkable passage later in the text, one seldom referenced in critical scholarship, the narrator observes, Frado “contemplated administering poison to her mistress, to rid herself and the house of so detestable a plague” (56). In this instance, an incensed Frado displays a powerful resistive impulse, one not uncommon within the context of nineteenth-century indenture or enslavement. Nevertheless, she is eventually “restrained by an overruling Providence” (ibid). In the end, Wilson carefully crafts scenarios whereby black anger, in particular, circulates as illicit. However, she simultaneously complicates Green’s reading of order-as-antidote to “the disorderly girl” by evoking the striking power of Frado’s ireful ruptures.

Black feminist critics today continue to articulate and to combat the effects of popular representations of black women’s anger in ways that intersect with Wilson’s theoretical claims. *In All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave*, Michele Wallace explains that “Being a black woman means frequent spells of impotent, self-consuming rage” (11). Indeed, the controversy surrounding her subsequent book, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, proves instructive in terms of the vexed relationship between black women and a politics of wrath. In *Black*

Feminist Thought, Patricia Hill Collins attends to precisely how sedimented notions of black female antagonism, among other factors, sanction the perpetuation of images such as the matriarch, “overly aggressive, unfeminine women” credited with the disintegration of normative black kinship structures (83). As Collins clarifies, distortions of black women’s indignation, as with related biases regarding their sexuality or class status, deflect accountability for systemic oppression and inequality (84). In “Eye to Eye: Women, Hatred, and Anger,” an essay in her volume *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde likewise states that “Every black woman in America lives her life somewhere along a wide curve of ancient and unexpressed angers” (145). In productive dialogue with Collins, Lorde juxtaposes her own personal enmity, or anger—“a molten pond at the core of me, my most fiercely guarded secret”—with hatred, or institutionalized practices of discrimination and violence consistently leveraged against disempowered groups without reprisal (ibid).

This key distinction between “hatred” and “anger” similarly informs yet another essential essay in *Sister Outsider*, “The Uses of Anger.” Usefully, Lorde directly confronts liberal renditions of black anger as “useless,” “disruptive,” and otherwise dysfunctional (127). For Lorde, invalidating black outrage manipulates a “pretext of intimidation” to assuage guilt, reinforce privilege, and maintain the status quo (130, 132). “Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing,” she warns (124). Therefore, Lorde advocates a self-aware and critically conscious fury in excess of Reason that can harness the energy, insight, and creativity embedded in anger in order to effect radical change. In place of self-interested sympathy or compassion, Lorde calls for new modes of listening.

Indeed, by engaging black anger on its own terms, rather than as the pathological site broader cultural mythologies purport it to be, one can uncover a previously neglected agent of survival, growth, and meaningful coalition.

To return to *Our Nig*, Wilson utilizes literature as a platform by which to theorize an equally forceful mode of anger. Through her politicized picaninny figure, Frado, Wilson opens up the possibility of positioning black rage outside the scope of liberal prescriptive, thereby participating in a black feminist discourse relevant far beyond her historical moment. Bypassing narrow readings of black fury as a space of danger, Wilson establishes anger as an epistemological formation. That is, in Wilson's project, black irritation elucidates ever more insidious modes of social control in the antebellum era. By accounting for black exasperation in conjunction with a "politics of joy," Wilson extricates the former from the terrain of unwarranted bitterness, and recuperates embodiment, experience, and feeling as fonts of meaning.¹⁷

VI

By way of conclusion, I turn to a contemporary African American writer widely recognized for her own renderings of "wandering motherless children," Toni Morrison.¹⁸ Indeed, one of Morrison's most recent novels, *A Mercy*, extends a useful framework for understanding Rafia Zafar's claim in relation to *Our Nig* that "Without the normal kin and social network of the African American, even in slavery, the antebellum black

¹⁷ On feeling as a site of knowledge production, see also Audre Lorde's essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," pg. 37-39 in *Sister Outsider*.

¹⁸ For more on Morrison's "wandering motherless children," see Aoi Mori's 1999 *Toni Morrison and Womanist Discourse*.

orphan is more friendless than the worst-off heroine of the era's 'women's fiction'" (129). Published in late 2008, *A Mercy* is the tale of a group of outsiders residing in a town called Milton in late seventeenth-century Virginia. As readers glean by the novel's end, the title of the work refers to the adoption (read: payment from the master of a Maryland plantation unable to cover a debt) of a young black girl named Florens by a Dutch trader named Jacob Vaark and his wife, Rebekka. While previous critical commentary has addressed the effects of the alliterative parallel between young Frado and her canine companion, Fido, I opt instead to close within a Frado/Florens schematic in order to underscore the enduring value of Wilson's liberal ideology critique.¹⁹

Despite considerable differences in context and form between the two novels, Morrison's characterization of Florens in her youth coincides with Wilson's portrayal of Frado in notable ways. In an early passage, as she recalls her mother, a *minha mae's*, impressions of her as a child, Florens offers, "I am dangerous, she says, and wild" (4). Asserting a classed authority, the blacksmith with whom Florens is enamored makes a similar claim as he rejects her mother-hungry love for him toward the text's conclusion: "You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind" (141). Relatedly, Lina, a Native American orphan also taken into the Vaark household, one of just three survivors of a smallpox epidemic which eradicates her entire village, and a survivor of domestic abuse, reflects upon Florens' initial arrival to the homestead in a tone comparable to previous descriptions of Frado. "A frightened, long-necked child who did not speak for weeks," muses Lina of one she has come to love, sharply and deeply, "but when she did

¹⁹ On the rhetorical effects of the Frado/Fido schematic, see Ellis pg. 42.

her light, singsong voice was lovely to hear” (55). Not unlike Frado, then, a measure of unruliness and fierceness mark Florens’ black girlhood. Even as both children demonstrate obedience and docility amidst intense working conditions, irruptions of seeming waywardness and recklessness emerge. Moreover, representations of Florens’ voice as melodic simultaneously gesture toward Lina’s abiding affection as well as to Florens’ own potential “politics of joy.”

Though by her own admission, Florens never cries (69), her engagement via song also cannot be thought outside of her expression of yet another passionate emotion: anger. In a state deemed “feral” by local white, indentured servants Willard and Scully, for instance, Florens displays extreme rage following her rebuff by the free blacksmith, with whom she had become intimate during the course of his temporary employment with the Vaarks (146). At one point in the novel, Florens is sent alone into the countryside to request the blacksmith’s proven healing powers following Jacob’s unexpected death and Rebekka’s dire sickness soon thereafter. The blacksmith subsequently returns to the farm to cure Rebekka, but without Florens, informing Lina of their plan to build a life away from there, or that “When it suits [Florens] she will come [back]” (130). But when Florens manhandles a stray child, Malaik, whom the blacksmith has taken into his home—a reminder of a little brother whom her own mother apparently preferred, and therefore, kept instead of her in the sale with Vaark—her violent reaction, in the blacksmith’s eyes, forfeits their opportunity to ever fashion a home together. As a consequence of this dismissal, Florens unveils a fury so forceful, Willard and Scully “were slow to recognize her as a living person” (146).

Once again, black women's wrath surfaces as excessive and treacherous. Morrison captures the ways in which hegemonic codes of intelligibility often structure black anger as chaotic and frenzied, without accounting in turn for how it might circulate as a site of knowledge production or of critique. Working in tandem with Florens' moments of wildness and of delight, her ire lends a complexity to the trope of black childhood analogous to that imagined by Wilson over one hundred years ago. Hence, both writers utilize youth as a literary construct by which to problematize governing frameworks of antebellum order and control. Indeed, Wilson and Morrison alike posit black childhood, and orphanhood in particular, less as realms of innocence or purity, than as means to make visible raced, classed, and gendered circuits of power and exchange. Akin to Frado, Florens' characterization ultimately indexes resistance to inadequate liberal protections and narrow definitions of black being. "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last," she declares in the final pages of *A Mercy*, finally managing to carve out a sense of self, a self that must be taken on its own terms (161).

And yet, though Frado's and Florens' experiences diverge significantly, the conclusions of both novels likewise invite readers to question one final cornerstone of the liberal problematic: literacy. In *A Mercy*, Florens specifically engages rituals of reading and writing to overcome the trauma of her past. Indeed, the literal frame of Morrison's characteristically non-linear novel encompasses glimpses of Florens releasing her pain by inscribing all of her hurt and agony onto the walls of Jacob's newly erected home. That is, months after Florens leaves the blacksmith and returns to the Vaark property, she

begins surreptitiously entering the grand dwelling each night, one her master constructed, but never lived to see. In fact, Rebekka forbids anyone to pass into the residence so dear to her deceased husband. “She does not know I am here every night else she will whip me too as she believes her piety demands,” Florens reveals (159). Nevertheless, Florens risks reprimand to impart her “telling” and her story.

“In the beginning when I come to this room I am certain the telling will give me the tears I never have. I am wrong. Eyes dry, I stop telling only when the lamp burns down. Then I sleep among my words. The telling goes on without dream and when I wake it takes time to pull away,” Florens recalls (158). But even as embarking on this personal, revelatory “telling” enables her to account for “Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving,” it remains whether or not the blacksmith or a *minha mae* will ever uncover or appreciate Florens’ meaning. “The novel reads like an archive of dead letters,” corroborates Stephen Best in “On Failing to Make the Past Present” of the novel’s overall ambivalence and standoffishness: “What distinguishes these dispatches, however, is that their failure to arrive comes from having never been sent” (468). “You won’t read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk,” Florens soon remembers (160). Hence, Morrison seemingly advances the written word—itsself a commonplace signifier of antebellum black freedom—as a space of healing, only to have Florens’ “telling” undercut such a framework in the end, finally privileging orality and spirituality, the reading of alternate omens and signs, as realms of non-rational possibility (4).

Moreover, as Zafar reminds, unlike “heroines” such as Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* or Cassy in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, “Frado

cannot manipulate interior physical space to her advantage” (145). I would add to Zafar’s insight that twenty-first century re-imaginings such as Morrison’s, too, often authorize modes of resistance which the material conditions of Frado’s Northern antebellum indenture made unavailable. The meager nine months of schooling Mrs. Bellmont permits for Frado, and her constant surveillance within the domestic sphere of the Bellmont compound, seemingly hinder the young girl’s capacity for a “telling” in the vein of Florens’. The failure of *Our Nig* in the marketplace likewise suggests the limits of literacy. Wilson’s inability to mobilize her writing in order to save her son’s life conceivably troubles expectations of literature as a vehicle for social change.

Nevertheless, I argue that the juxtaposition of Frado and Florens, in fact, productively reinforces the contrariness of black women writers about which Barbara Christian theorizes at the outset of this chapter. Contrary to the norm, both Wilson and Morrison de-link literacy from dominant discourses of progress, objectivity, and rationality. Instead, both writers marshal notions of embodiment and of the unknown in their texts to articulate distinct meaning and experience. Indeed, in what a recent critic aptly terms a “politics and aesthetics of curiosity” distinguishing Morrison’s archive more broadly, readers can glean a sense of Wilson’s own willingness to directly confront the taken-for-granted assumptions of Enlightenment and liberal humanist thought.²⁰ As had Mary Prince before her, Wilson invokes conditions of materiality in *Our Nig* to counter systems of thought relying predominantly, if not exclusively, on pretexts of abstraction. Moreover, Wilson exposes liberal “postures of abettal” as tactics by which

²⁰ See Erica Edwards’ *Contesting Charisma*, pg. 181.

to cover over the collusion of empathy, Christianity, and capital, while she conjures opacity in order to call dictates toward transparency and coherence into question.

Through the figure of the politicized picaninny, Wilson also refuses to sever emotional and intellectual production, expanding upon the trope of “the disorderly girl” to envision the mutuality of black anger and of a “politics of joy.” Ultimately, by acknowledging the intertwined histories of Wilson and Morrison in this way, we enrich paradigms of black resistance, productively complicating the trajectory of African American literary pasts and futures.

The Production of “Emancipation”: Race, Ritual, and the Reconstitution of the
Antebellum Order

I

In a public lecture at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles on April 19, 2013, scholar and activist Angela Y. Davis commenced her address with a meditation on anniversaries. Commemorating fifty years of struggle since the publication of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” she urged her audience to remain steadfast in critiquing dominant tactics of historical closure, the production of therapeutic narratives in which Civil Rights signals the triumph of democracy, among them. Lamenting the ways in which communities are often socialized to ignore interpenetrating networks of state violence, due in large part to an insinuation of profit into our imagination, even our dreams, under regimes of global capital, Davis effected a call for capacious vision and a new sense of citizenship. Notably, as she spoke to the type of political action and organizing to which the past *must* inspire us, she cited a dearth of state-sanctioned festivities marking the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 2013. Contextualizing the historic directive as little more than shrewd military strategy by which those loyal to the Union were authorized to *keep* their slaves, Davis inquired of the collective: if the nation engaged in a public, highly visible observance, might it then have to account for the fact that Emancipation wasn’t what we thought it was? It is up to us to make noise on anniversaries such as these, she subsequently pronounced. It is up to us to demand a proper accounting.²¹

²¹ In attendance at the forum, I am paraphrasing Davis’ remarks. Any errors in transcription are my own.

In contrast to the lack of formal, federally-sponsored Emancipation events upon which Davis held forth, academic and popular cultural pursuits pertaining to associated questions of freedom, race, and the limits and possibilities of replay and reenactment abound. Steven Spielberg's award-winning 2012 film *Lincoln*, and the plethora of secondary critical responses generated in its wake, for instance, constitute prominent examples. It is amidst precisely such renewed investments in the life and legacy of Abraham Lincoln, however, that this chapter seeks to make noise. Indeed, given Davis's battle cry, queries such as "Emancipation by whom?", or more importantly, "Emancipation for whom?" become even more urgent. What sort of historical closures ensconce Lincoln as ostensible paragon of governance? At whose expense is the trajectory of his memorialization secured?

Instead of contributing to the intensifying re-mythologization of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator, "The Production of 'Emancipation': Race, Ritual, and the Reconstitution of the Antebellum Order" analyzes the 1868 memoir of Elizabeth Keckly, a black seamstress²² employed by the Lincoln White House, and her problematization of the liberal problematic.²³ Theorizing both the overt and covert ways in which she makes visible the constraints of American liberalism as political economy and affective performance, I undercut gestures of de-authorization within present-day scholarship in

2 Though Keckly is, in fact, mixed-race, I refer to her "blackness" here and elsewhere in the chapter not to elide this fact, but to remain consistent with how her body circulated in a nineteenth-century context.

²³ According to James Emerson in *The Madness of Mary Lincoln* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2007), "Historians have been misspelling Elizabeth Keckly's surname as *Keckley* since 1868. Jennifer Fleischner recently found her actual signatures and revealed the true spelling in her book *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*" (p. 193 n.13). I have chosen to retain the correct usage, rather than the spelling used in the copyright, in my own references to Keckly throughout this chapter, though I do not edit her name when referencing works of secondary criticism.

which Keckly's presence is frequently enlisted exclusively in the service of verifying Mary and/or Abraham Lincoln's humanist impulses. Of all of Keckly's purported motives for penning her autobiographical piece, then,—clearing Mary Lincoln's name regarding the "Old Clothes Scandal," alleviating her own poverty, even procuring revenge—I argue that her interrogation of precisely how liberal ideology informs juridical practice, processes of citizenship, and bodily rituals of decorum and duty remain especially undertheorized.²⁴

Rather than interrogating the nuanced means by which Keckly problematizes liberal policy and practice, contemporary critics across disciplines have appeared preoccupied with questions surrounding the text's inception. For instance, in the oft-cited *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography*, Jean H. Baker positions *Behind the Scenes* as a "ghostwritten expose" whose "testimony is suspicious," inexplicably claiming its initial circulation as a "novel" (212-13). Further, Baker emphasizes the orientation of the memoir as fundamentally vengeful, retaliatory, and aggressive (280). Samuel A. Schreiner, Jr. resuscitates the Baker school of thought almost ten years later by attributing her work to "two enterprising New York newspapermen," despite multiple authoritative studies linking the project to Keckly and the editorship of James Redpath (69).²⁵ Both Baker's and Schreiner's nearly seamless integration of Keckly's insights in *Behind the Scenes* into their modern historical accounts as *fact*—at times without acknowledgment—

²⁴ The "Old Clothes Scandal" refers to Mary Lincoln's infamous attempts to auction off her extravagant wardrobe in the wake of her husband's assassination in order to alleviate her debt.

²⁵ Fleischner's and Foster's respective studies, for instance, had been published in advance of Schreiner's project.

only compounds the offense. In the end, more productive than “did she/didn’t she” critical skirmishes around authorship and authenticity are inquiries into what prompts Baker’s and Schreiner’s attempts to divest Keckly of ownership of her text in the first place. Such moves, I maintain, are predicated upon an uninformed disavowal of Keckly’s relationship with her slave father and his mandate that she always remember to “read/learn her book.” Moreover, they elide Keckly’s subjectivity, ultimately covering over her critical consciousness regarding the drawbacks of the dominant political rationality of the period.

Jerrold M. Packard’s *The Lincolns in the White House: Four Years that Shattered a Family* is likewise symptomatic of reductionist readings in its foregrounding of Mary Lincoln’s interiority at Keckly’s expense. Specifically, he situates the infamous widow’s “attitude toward African-Americans” as “another aspect of Mary’s that has largely gone unmentioned” (179). Centering her outlook on race as grounds upon which the former First Lady might, in retrospect, be redeemed, Packard suggests that her turn away from her upbringing in slave-holding Kentucky toward abolitionism can be attributed to the fact that “she finally saw a black person—Lizzy Keckly—as a fellow human being and friend rather than as a servant or an unfree possession” (ibid). Similarly, Jennifer Fleischner, author of the only full-length history of the relationship between Mary Todd Lincoln and Keckly, writes that “Lizzy’s presence in [Abraham Lincoln’s] family circle also likely contributed to his evolving comprehension of black life in America” (263). She particularly invokes Keckly’s “quiet relationship with the President,” noting that

“while combing his hair or sewing in the sitting room when he happened to enter, they sometimes fell into conversation” (ibid). Thick silences imbue Spielberg’s filmic version, too, framed by an ambiguity which finally dehumanizes Keckly, rather than politicizing her presence.

While such interactions certainly leave open possibilities for a measure of influence on the part of the seamstress, Fleischner typically casts such contact as altogether constructive, namely as a vehicle for Lincoln’s enhanced civility and ethics, while retreating from a fuller interrogation of Keckly’s silence in this necessarily uneven power dynamic. In the instances of both Packard’s and Fleischner’s narratives, then, the Lincolns’ generosity and progressiveness are inflated in inverse relation to Keckly’s humanity. Indeed, Keckly’s exploration of the exploitative nature of liberalism is vacated in order to authenticate the antislavery leanings and general broadmindedness of those in direct control of her labor. As in a notable 1862 article in the New York *Evening Post* in which Washington bureau reporter Mary Clemmer Ames spares readers the details of Keckly’s past in slavery, since “if [she] were to try [her] hand would stiffen with horror, [her] heart, in its strong indignities, would stifle the words [she] might utter,” Keckly’s body functions barometrically as testament to the sanctity and vitality of compassionate white abolitionism.²⁶

In fact, commentary in this vein constitutes a familiar refrain, a rehearsal of journalistic responses to Keckly’s volume disseminated at the time of its release. The parallels between Baker’s assessment and a review appearing in the April 18, 1868

²⁶ On the New York *Evening Post* article, see Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly* 236.

edition of *The New York Citizen*, in particular, are striking. In the months and weeks leading up to its publication, the periodical press persistently hawked *Behind the Scenes* as the next big sensation, a veritable “must-read.” Nevertheless, *The New York Citizen* editorial—typical of perspectives forwarded nation-wide—calls attention to the book’s ostensible indecency and confrontational style. As opposed to a free black entrepreneur and widely sought-after mantua maker, Keckly instead surfaces in the column as “an angry negro servant.”²⁷ For the white reading public, her words register not a distinct epistemological standpoint and worldview—an analysis of the limits of cult (of true womanhood) ideology, for instance—but reflect an act of betrayal. Indeed, if over a century separates the evaluative stances of the nineteenth-century media establishment and those of late-twentieth century historiographers, an inscription of the text as inherently illicit yokes them together. *Behind the Seams; by a Nigger Woman who took in work from Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Davis*, a scathing parody appearing later in 1868 under the copyright of a “D. Ottonlenguel,” likewise epitomizes the nation’s collective censure of a black woman who had plainly stepped outside the bounds of white tolerance. Due to the manuscript’s suppression by Keckly’s former charge, Robert Lincoln, sales proved dismal. Keckly submitted a letter in defense of her project to *The New York Citizen* to no avail.

²⁷ According to Fleischer, “In the hierarchy of dressmaking, Lizzy soon rose to the top and could legitimately advertise herself as a mantua maker. Not all dressmakers could sew the complicated and popular mantua, a dress whose bodice was made to fit snugly through vertical pleats stitched in the back” (*Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly* 134)

In contrast, this chapter examines the strategic means by which Keckly undermines dominant notions of individual sovereignty and progress. I contend that her description of her father's letters and of her uncle's hanging in the antebellum South frames Keckly's understanding of later postbellum conditions of trauma, pain, as well as of possibility. By prompting a reading of death as a mode of sovereignty, and of suicide, in particular, as an expression of black political consciousness, Keckly foregrounds the fraught and nuanced terms of black resistance and freedom. Additionally, *Behind the Scenes* depicts the harrowing conditions facing the previously enslaved at the onset of Emancipation, including homelessness, starvation, and poverty. In this way, Keckly disrupts prevailing mythologies of the North as quintessential racial asylum. Tethered to such critiques, moreover, is an articulation of counter-memory as a force by which Keckly at once stakes provocative claims for herself in the inhumane institution and contests teleological "up from slavery" narratives.

Taken together with politicized acts of witnessing and mediation, Keckly's subsequent engagement in processes of selective self-commodification further problematizes conventional modes of fetishizing and Othering black women's bodies. My reading of black women's textile production as a form of resistance, on the other hand, troubles liberal practices of tokenization by directly linking Keckly to widely recognized slave narrator and activist, Harriet Jacobs. By concluding with an analysis of the violence of white privilege and maternalism, and of the specific tropic function of friendship, intimacy, and the figure of the "mammy" throughout the text, critiques of

liberalism emerge as crucial facets of nineteenth-century black feminist knowledge production.

II

In *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*, Frances Smith Foster cites the transformative influence of *Behind the Scenes* on the genre of the postbellum slave narrative, an effect comparable to the impact of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* on narratives of the antebellum period. Expanding upon the work of William L. Andrews on the fundamentally political nature of Reconstructive-era accounts, especially as it relates to scenes of reunion between former slaves and owners, Foster delves into later tales' themes of transcendence and achievement in contrast to the abjection known to spur earlier abolitionist activity. Keckly's title, for Foster, inaugurates a premise of growth, advancement, and heroism forwarded throughout the memoir. Proffering, in Foster's estimation, a bootstraps ideological framework—the Obama Administration's mobilization of which suggests its ongoing currency—*Behind the Scenes* follows Keckly from the nadir of enslavement to the pinnacle of Western affairs of state. While Foster's analysis of the explicitly raced and gendered dimensions of postbellum depictions of slave culture proves invaluable, I instead draw attention here to the ways in which an understudied rhetor such as Keckly productively signals the progress yet to be made under the aegis of American liberalism.

Keckly, formerly Elizabeth Hobbs, was born in Dinwiddie County, Virginia, in February 1818 to a bondswoman named Agnes Hobbs. "Mammy Aggy," as she was often referenced on the plantation, served as nurse and seamstress in the household of

Armistead and Mary Burwell. Despite Colonel Burwell's status as Elizabeth's biological father, a slave man named George Hobbs dutifully performed the roles of husband and father until the family's permanent dispersal during Elizabeth's childhood. As a slave, Elizabeth dispensed with her labor primarily within the inner sanctums of relatively well-to-do families such as the Burwells. Fleischner speculates that Agnes imparted the skills of stitching, spinning, and weaving to Elizabeth, in particular, at the age of three during occasional reprieves from their respective charges (39).

Not insignificantly, in a text notorious in large part for epistolary display, specifically the written exchanges between Keckly and Mary Lincoln reproduced in the appendix, the political implications and critique embedded in George Hobbs' love letters to his wife and child remain overlooked. Whereas considerable critical attention attends the ostensible intimacy of interracial relationships in *Behind the Scenes*, other meaningful, often familial affiliations, attain brief mention, despite the fact that George's writing surfaces in the opening chapter. Indeed, Keckly deliberately harnesses George's words, a source of personal strength and wisdom, to commence the narrative. Her perspective on slavery and postbellum life in the U.S., I argue, is filtered precisely through her slave father's abiding faith, as well as the acute sense of sorrow, longing, and deprivation expressed in the memoir's lesser known dispatches. Indeed, George's letters relay his struggle to reunite with his kin following his mandated move to Shelbyville; futility and disempowerment infuse his words. He expresses fear over instilling feelings of abandonment in his daughter, further stressing that she "be a good girl, and [that she] learn her book" in his absence (25). Keckly's mobilization of her father's

correspondence in this way suggests appreciation and formative influence, particularly as it relates to her subsequent capacity to identify and navigate unequal hierarchies of power.

Keckly concludes the same chapter featuring George's letters with the story of "an incident...which my mother afterward impressed more strongly on my mind" (30). In the wake of having the second pair of plough-lines loaned to him by Colonel Burwell stolen, Agnes' brother commits suicide. As Keckly relates, "My mother went to the spring in the morning for a pail of water, and on looking up into the willow tree which shaded the bubbling crystal stream, she discovered the lifeless form of her brother suspended beneath one of the strong branches" (ibid). In a manner regarded by critic James Olney in his introduction to the Schomburg Library edition of the text as "surprising and taciturn,"²⁸ Keckly continues in the chapter's concluding lines, "Rather than be punished the way Colonel Burwell punished his servants, he took his own life. Slavery had its dark as well as its bright side" (ibid). Forgoing Olney's stance—one tied to a broader, almost reverential approach to Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative* as touchstone for all slave narrative—I position Keckly's ambiguity as purposeful, her reticence as rhetorical.

Indeed, the reserve embedded in Keckly's reaction connotes not emotional detachment or aloofness, but strikes at the heart of liberal ideologies of contained selfhood. Pivoting upon the possibility of death as, in fact, the "bright side" of slavery, Keckly challenges the concept of bounded, bodily integrity central to individualism. As

²⁸ In this edition, published by Oxford University Press in 1988, see p. xxx of Olney's introduction.

Rafia Zafar notes in her book *We Wear the Mask*, “coming where it does in the chapter [the suicide] serves as a profound full stop” (175). Notably, the force (“her brother suspended beneath one of the strong branches”) and cover (“the willow tree which shaded the bubbling crystal stream”) yielded by the tree taps into the possibility of what Cedric Robinson refers to as the Black Radical Tradition.

In *Black Marxism*, Robinson initiates the recovery of a Black Radical Tradition which exceeds the domain of property and capital in favor of an ontological totality, an epistemology which privileges diverse African rituals of kinship, life, death, and collective resistance. As Robinson clarifies, maroonage, theft, Obeah (magic), and suicide conspicuously signal the contours of a political consciousness informed by, but neither reducible to Western imperialism nor finally legible within the circumscribed lens of European Marxism. Achille Mbembe’s theory of “necropower” likewise disturbs normative notions of democracy, reason, and autonomy, ultimately dislodging the individual Subject as universally constitutive of sovereignty and of “authentic” political meaning and experience.²⁹ Given Keckly’s tendency to “pass rapidly over the stirring events of [her] early life,” this effort to remember her uncle’s suicide certainly bears significance (Keckly 31). Politicizing writers such as Eliza Potter’s, Harriet Wilson’s, and Keckly’s indirection, discretion, and dissemblance as acts of double-veiling, Zafar names this significance as both a means to enact self-protection *and* to make visible at whose expense white privilege and abstract cult of true womanhood ideology circulate

²⁹ See Robinson, pgs. 130, 136, and Chapter 7, “Nature of the Black Radical Tradition.” See also, Mbembe pgs. 12-14.

(154). In my reading, the constraints of liberalism emerge as through-lines by which Keckly binds her history under enslavement to its insidious reconstitution under purportedly progressive postbellum terms of order. In fact, Keckly's representation of (black) death signals possibilities for contestation.

Keckly also specifically calls attention to continuities between bondage and the fiction of Emancipation via a portrayal of antebellum and postbellum conditions at the North. After using her sewing skills to purchase freedom for herself and for her son for the price of twelve hundred dollars, Keckly separates from her intemperate husband in 1860 and moves from St. Louis, to Baltimore, and eventually to Washington D.C. Extreme poverty and business failure plague Keckly upon arrival. Further, blatantly racially-discriminatory laws of the period frequently extracted inordinate sums of money from freedmen and –women for even the right to occupy public space (Keckly 65). Thus, her living conditions prior to becoming the personal modiste of Mrs. Jefferson Davis, and later of Mary Lincoln, closely mirror the deleterious circumstances faced by black denizens after the Civil War, a conflict in which, in Keckly's words, the "people [of the North] would fight for the flag that they pretended to venerate so highly" (72). Accordingly, observes Keckly, "Fresh from the bonds of slavery, fresh from the benighted regions of the plantation, [freedmen and –women] came to the Capitol looking for liberty, and many of them not knowing it when they found it. Many good friends reached forth kind hands, but the North is not warm and impulsive" (111). "For one kind word spoken, two harsh ones were uttered," she adds (ibid). Here, Keckly collapses enduring mythologies of liberal philanthropy and benevolence, introducing instead the

realities of Northern hostility, epidemic black homelessness, and starvation. Intervening in persistent ideological displacement of racism to the South, Keckly confronts illusory notions of teleological racial progress.³⁰

In a later, comparable scene in which Keckly accompanies her employers, the Lincolns, on a trip to Petersburg, Virginia following the fall of the Confederate capitol, Keckly recounts the approach of a “little ragged negro boy” to President Lincoln’s convoy (167). The young boy proceeds to ask if he might “tote” their luggage. In the confusion which ensues as the President and another senator attempt to decipher the boy’s meaning, black dialect emerges as barely tolerable, fundamentally “colloquial,” as “not elegant, certainly”—in essence, as Other (168). “For myself, I should prefer a better word,” notes the Senator, “but since it has been established by usage, I cannot refuse to recognize it” (168-9). Not unlike her portrayal of her uncle’s suicide, Keckly brings the scene to an abrupt close with a single, off-set line: “Thus the conversation proceeded in pleasant style” (169). Indeed, in depicting the stark contrast between executive pleasantries and black poverty, and the apparent unsuitability of black language to the white ear, Keckly slyly articulates the ways in which nineteenth-century Republican practice often hinged upon notions of the illegibility of blackness. As with the emaciated rather than emancipated bodies of the “contraband of war,” this misapprehension of

³⁰ Significantly, such representations parallel her labor as a pioneering relief organizer. As presiding officer of the Contraband Relief Association of Washington, D.C., Keckly served the community by procuring food, clothing, and shelter for those dubbed expendable, or mere “contraband of war.” Under Keckly’s leadership, the organization also secured funds for a flag for the first “colored” unit of the U.S. Civil War Infantry, thereby expanding strictly raced and classed notions of charity and goodwill. See: Forbes on the activities of the Contraband Relief Organization (106).

blackness as excess renders liberal discourses of recovery and reconciliation as fallacies. The fact that *Behind the Scenes* ends with the image of an utterly impoverished Keckly—sewing and writing in a “garret-like” space to make ends meet—further establishes the contingency and privilege (as opposed to the universality) of the dominant progressive ethos.

III

In addition to racialized ideologies of progress, Keckly confronts pastoral processes of memorialization. Usefully, Fleischner locates memory as a mode of survival passed down to Elizabeth from her mother Agnes, and to her from earlier generations of Burwell slaves from both the West African coast and the Niger Delta (*Mrs. Lincoln*, 32). Relatedly, I maintain that Keckly engages in subversive performances of cultural memory throughout *Behind the Scenes* in ways that problematize conventionally archivable, state-sanctioned systems of knowledge production. Indeed, as Diana Taylor understands, performance functions as an embodied site through which epistemologies, identities, and memories are diffused.³¹ Further, as scholars such as Andrews, Foster, and Saidiya Hartman suggest, bondsmen and –women, as well as recently emancipated slaves, often asserted insurgent nostalgia despite the agonies of captivity.³² In particular, Keckly activates a keen sense of personal belonging and place in her memoir via recollections which, even when coincident with dominant transcripts, cannot finally be reduced to the instrumental designs of the slaveholding regime.

³¹ See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

³² See Andrews’ “Reunion in the Postbellum Slave Narrative” pg. 14, Foster pg. 127, Hartman pg. 72.

For instance, in response to Northern suspicion of her curiosity regarding her former owners in the wake of the Civil War, Keckly replies, “You forget the past is dear to everyone, for the past belongs [to] that golden period, the days of childhood. The past is a mirror that reflects the chief incidents of my life” (241). Continuing on, she writes, “To surrender it is to surrender the greatest part of my existence—early impressions, friends, and the graves of my father, my mother, and my son. These people are associated with everything that memory holds dear, and so long as memory holds dear, and so long as memory proves faithful, it is but natural that I should sigh to see them once more” (241-2). Memory, in Keckly’s formulation, exceeds the Western domain of rational retrieval. Instead, her incarnate reminiscences move in the realm of faith. In a distinct shift to first person, she selectively recalls “the chief incidents of my life” as a means to forge her own worldview, while never finally submitting the full details of “the greatest part of my existence” for public consumption. Hence, to take into account those directly culpable for her enslavement marks not a concession to the conditions of subjection, but registers an attempt to create meaning and purpose apart from violent circumstances. Such a gesture resonates with Keckly’s commentary in the preface that Southerners “were not so much responsible for the curse under which I was born, as the God of nature and the fathers who framed the Constitution of the United States” (xii). That is, Keckly refuses to privatize racism, seeking instead to expose its juridical sanction and naturalization as law. For her, anti-black terror functions institutionally, rather than on the level of the individual.

However, just as Keckly foregrounds counter-memory as a vehicle through which to access her own “truths,” she also does so specifically to launch a broad-based critique of liberal sentimentality. Therefore, readings which associate the significance of Keckly’s July 1866 reunion with the Garlands, the family of a former master, in Rude’s Hill, Virginia, with the latter’s capacity to bolster Keckly’s self-esteem, affirm her humanity, or to more generally assuage white fears of black resentment, miss Keckly’s insight into the underside of liberal affective economies³³. Frances Smith Foster’s repeated emphasis on the manifestation of progress in such scenes proves problematic in this regard (125).

An example of precisely how such analyses fall short relates to Keckly’s literary depiction of a postwar visit to the home of her former charges, at least one of whom concludes a letter to Keckly about her impending visit with the conspicuous imperative, “Come; I will not take no for an answer” (246). After an elated chorus of “It is Lizzie! It is Lizzie!” at the sight of their former slave, the Garlands “carr[y her] to the house in triumph” (250). Yet, amidst the euphoric fanfare, the voice of the Garlands’ nameless black cook notably intervenes: “I declar, I nebber did see people carry on so. Wonder if I should go off and stay two or three years, if all ob you wud hug and kiss me so when I cum back?” (252) Aside from the notable shift into dialect, the passage produces a crucial slippage. Indeed, the cook’s testimony—“I nebber did see people carry on so”—positions the celebratory response as far from common practice in this household.

³³ See Fleishner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*, p. 298 and Andrews, “Reunion in the Postbellum Slave Narrative,” p. 12.

Though both are ostensibly free women at the point of this exchange, Keckly and the anonymous cook garner starkly divergent treatment. I argue that this critical difference, the gap between placation and servitude, renders the Garlands' sycophancy as a thinly veiled expression of a liberal discourse of exception, or a species of individualism whereby singular ascent supersedes collective justice. By remembering the words of the cook in this way, Keckly authors a performance in which the "faithful slave returned to the homestead" cannot be severed from the postbellum "faithful servant." Put differently, it is precisely the exploitation of the unidentified laborer which makes the excessive praise of Keckly possible in the first place; they constitute flip sides of the same dehumanizing coin.

Keckly also deploys counter-memory to make visible the coerciveness of liberal affect as she and Mrs. Garland muse over the exploits of a perhaps less celebrated, though no less important antebellum aunt than Douglass' Aunt Hester, Agnes' sister, Charlotte. "A maid in the old time meant something different from what we understand by a maid at the present day," observes the Southern matriarch, nostalgically (255). "My mother was severe with her slaves in some respects, but then her heart was full of kindness," she adds, reinforcing the by-now-stagnant trope of the "feeling plantation slave mistress." I reproduce Mrs. Garland's story at length below:

My mother] had your aunt punished one day, and not liking her sorrowful look, she made two extravagant promises in order to effect a reconciliation, both of which were accepted. On condition that her maid would look cheerful, and be good and friendly with her, the mistress told her she might go to church the following Sunday, and that she would give her a silk dress to wear on the occasion. Now my mother had but one silk dress in the world [...] and yet she gave this dress to her maid to make friends with her. Two weeks afterward mother was sent for to

spend the day at a neighbor's house, and on inspecting her wardrobe, discovered that she had no dress fit to wear in company. She had but one alternative, and that was to appeal to the generosity of your aunt Charlotte. Charlotte was summoned, and enlightened in regard to the situation; the maid proffered to loan the silk dress to her mistress for the occasion, and the mistress was only too glad to accept. She made her appearance at the social gathering, duly arrayed in the silk that her maid had worn to church on the proceeding Sunday. (255-6)

Though the two women proceed to laugh together, and even to chide those doubting their loyalty to one another, the sincerity of these acts is undercut by the arresting counter-memory of Aunt Charlotte. Just as the dominant transcript seeks to recuperate Charlotte's body as testament to white female compassion and generosity, Keckly subversively recalls what Lori Merish characterizes as "a familiar ritual of domestic seduction" in which "the mistress gives Charlotte the dress in exchange for the slave's evident pleasure in serving her" (248). As Merish likewise observes, Charlotte is voiceless in this recollection: accordingly, "the narrative's silence [...] underscores that the sympathetic exchanges envisioned here are dictated by the mistress's desire, and constitute a species of narcissism" (249). Given the scene's strategic placement in the memoir—on a continuum with Keckly's depiction of her own silencing by multiple patrons from Mrs. McClean, to Varina Davis, to Mary Todd Lincoln—I contend that Keckly memorializes Charlotte by elucidating a compulsory liberal production of black acquiescence.

In fact, when the former mistress poses the final query "Do you always feel kindly towards me, Lizzie?," Keckly declines to give the emphatically affirmative answer Mrs. Garland craves. "What Ann Garland wants here is Keckley's sentimental consent," Merish confirms, "a performance of sympathy that would legitimate Garland's identity as a 'good mistress,' and she stages a ritual in which Keckley refuses to participate" (250).

Though Joanne Braxton claims that “the bond between freedom and literacy” constitutes “a theme noticeably absent from Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes*,” in this moment, Keckly rejects the posture of docility expected of her, forgoing complicity specifically by challenging the Garlands’ suppression of her access to formal education (Braxton 44). “To tell you candidly, Miss Ann, I have but one unkind thought, and that is, that you did not give me the advantages of a good education. What I have learned has been the study of after years,” Keckly admits frankly, if euphemistically. Demonstrating precisely the unintended irony by which Mrs. Garland purports that “a maid in the old time meant something different from what we understand by a maid at the present day,” Keckly goes off script in a way in that Charlotte most likely could not. Mrs. Garland’s desire to recapitulate and renew her mother’s “kindness” subsequently rings hollow, as Keckly denaturalizes interracial dynamics of domination and control.

IV

Throughout *Behind the Scenes*, Keckly also mobilizes her mix-raced body to trouble the politics of race and national belonging subtending the liberal problematic. Indeed, critics have long established the ways in which mulatta figures yield particular tropic effects within nineteenth-century literature and public discourse. Extrapolating from Frances E.W. Harper’s 1892 novel *Iola Leroy* in order to productively complicate circumscribed readings of such effects, Hazel Carby writes, “As a mediating device the mulatto had two narrative functions: it enabled an exploration of the social relations between the races, relations that were increasingly proscribed by Jim Crow laws, and it enabled 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). Carby historicizes the “in-between-ness” of the mixed-raced body in this instance, politicizing processes of mediation in a mode deeply resonant with Keckly’s project. Throughout her life, Keckly actively manipulated broader cultural investments in her intercessory potential to her own advantage. Most famously, she facilitated the October 1864 visit between Abraham Lincoln and spiritual leader, abolitionist, and women’s rights activist, Sojourner Truth, at the White House. Hence, though Nell Painter rightly notes that “Keckley’s autobiography said much about the Lincolns but nothing about Sojourner Truth,” as compared to repeated references in the memoir to male figures including Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet, Painter expressly underscores Keckly’s “keen sense of relative power” and enthusiastic participation in brokering the historic meeting (204). Keckly also intervened on behalf of the lesser known Maria W. Stewart of Boston, the first African American rhetor to speak in public before a mixed-gender assembly. Stewart’s memoir, “Suffering during the War,” reflects sincere gratitude for Keckly’s personal and financial support upon her arrival to Washington D.C. in 1861; Stewart credits the arrangements, associations, and contacts of her “ardent friend” for the development and eventual success of her school (Richardson 102; Forbes 68). Ultimately, Keckly’s re-appropriation of the mediating role imbues her writing in *Behind the Scenes* as well, locating her as a discreet, watchful witness.

In this vein, Xiomara Santamarina suggests, “When she narrates the various scenes that she views, Keckley describes her position of privileged witness as derived entirely from her competent, deferential, and trust-inspiring performance of labor” (151).

“As such an authorized working spectator,” Santamarina continues, “Keckley emphasizes the ‘inside’ knowledge she has of these families as opposed to the ‘eavesdropping’ or ‘listening at keyholes’ form of illicit access commonly associated with the public speech of servants” (ibid). Indeed, I contend that acts of tact, restraint, and unobtrusiveness complement Keckly’s expert sewing skills, granting her widespread access to whiteness, private and uncensored. For instance, as a laborer in the Washington D.C. household of Varina and Jefferson Davis, soon-to-be First Family of the Confederacy, I argue that Keckly personifies her intermediary status precisely by marshaling at once legitimate *and* unauthorized channels of knowledge in order to process the impending fracture of civil war. Thus, just as Keckly claims that “the prospects of war were freely discussed in my presence by Mr. and Mrs. [Jefferson] Davis and their friends” (67), the preceding line in the narrative reveals that, “Almost every night, *as I learned from the servants and other members of the family*, secret meetings were held at the house; and some of these meetings were protracted to a very late hour” (66-7; emphasis added). In this scenario, gossip and rumor are syntactically hinged to more open, casual dialogue. Ever invisible and hypervisible as a mulatta woman worker, Keckly binds the intelligence gleaned from both sites to assess the consequences of the ensuing conflict for black denizens and to determine her own future course of action.

However, when Mrs. Davis proposes the possibility of Keckly traveling South with her to avoid alleged retaliatory measures, acts to be instigated by Northerners incensed by the prospect of imminent secession, Keckly feigns ignorance. To Mrs. Davis’ query, “You know there is going to be war, Lizzie?,” Keckly supplies an emphatic

“No!” Further prodding on Mrs. Davis’ part meets with equally false incredulity: “Who will go to war?”; “And which do you think will whip?”; “But, Mrs. Davis, are you certain that there will be war?” offers Keckly (70-1). She counters Mrs. Davis’ display of liberal trepidation regarding her safety, motivated more accurately by the fact that Mrs. Davis deems Keckly a “so very handy” employee, with a show of bewilderment and surprise. “As a slave, [Elizabeth] had negotiated the mulatto house slave’s double life, moving between the white world in the Big House and the black world in the slave quarters,” corroborates Fleishner, but now “she could distance herself from the white world, and reflect back on it” (*Mrs. Lincoln*, 191). Slyly capitalizing upon her standing as an ostensibly neutral onlooker, Keckly accumulates vital insight and issues subtle critiques of white self-interest.

In a similar fashion, Keckly’s privity to the inner sanctum of the Lincoln White House yields insurgent discursive effects throughout *Behind the Scenes*. As modiste, nurse, hairdresser, caregiver of the Lincoln brood, among other miscellaneous duties, Keckly dispenses with myriad services; each role permits unique contact with the President and his family. One such instance, just prior to Lincoln’s assassination, results from Keckly’s fleeting, if unsolicited glimpse “through the half-open door” of the room of the Commander-in-Chief. “Seated by a desk was the President,” Keckly reports, “looking over his notes and muttering to himself” (175). Yet, proceeding to thicken her initially straightforward account, she adds, “His face was thoughtful, his manner abstracted, and I knew as I paused a moment to watch him, that he was rehearsing the part that he was to play in the great drama soon to commence” (*ibid*). Though the scene

effectively conveys the preparation and anticipation surrounding Lincoln's first public speech following his second inauguration, it simultaneously marks Keckly's usurpation of the panoptic gaze and strategic insertion of self into the strictly raced and gendered sphere of citizenship. Keckly's deliberate lingering just beyond Lincoln's half-open door punctures the abstractness of the American body politic which the President envisions in that moment, thrusting her onto the plane of History. As witness to the man at the helm, silent spectator to the leader of a faltering country, Keckly's presence—in her particularity as a mixed-race woman—contests the state's universal and avowedly disembodied prescriptive of national belonging. Further, she implicitly challenges Lincoln's emancipatory policy, an opportunistic political agenda, as Angela Y. Davis reminds, finally founded upon the abjection of difference

Elizabeth Young's important work on American Civil War narrative bears out such a reading. Usefully, she points to Keckly's immersion in a cultural imaginary convinced of the metonymic function of the presidential body, an atmosphere in which "meeting Lincoln signals [...] direct access to the prerogatives, white and male, of citizenship" (129). Moreover, Young identifies the distinct parallels Keckly draws between herself and Lincoln in her text, from the timing of their initial terms of service in the White House, to the death of their sons, to their second inaugurations as presidents of the United States and the Contraband Relief Association, respectively (121). I would add that Keckly's capacity to leverage her proximity to her employers achieves rhetorical effect not only in the register of formal politics, but in the realm of spirituality. As a notable 1863 vignette in *Behind the Scenes* illustrates, one set in times which the author

characterizes as “sad, anxious days to Mr. Lincoln” and in which “those who saw the man in privacy only could tell how much he suffered,” Keckly again utilizes her “privileged” position as witness.

As Keckly pins a dress to Mary’s frame, Mr. Lincoln enters, dark and despondent over the most recent news from the war front. Keckly observes:

He reached forth one of his long arms, and took a small Bible from a stand near the head of the sofa, opened the pages of the holy book, and soon was absorbed in reading them. A quarter of an hour passed, and on glancing at the sofa the face of the President seemed more cheerful. The dejected look was gone, and the countenance was lighted up with new resolution and hope. The change was so marked that I could not but wonder at it, and wonder led to the desire to know what book of the Bible afforded so much comfort to the reader. Making the search for a missing article an excuse, I walked gently around the sofa, and looking into the open book, I discovered that Mr. Lincoln was reading that divine comforter, Job [...] What a sublime picture was this! A ruler of a mighty nation going to the pages of the Bible with simple Christian earnestness for comfort and courage, and finding both in the darkest hours of a nation’s calamity. (119-20)

Here, Keckly foregrounds the select cohort to which she belongs, the exclusiveness of the group with access to the President at his most vulnerable. Yet, her laboring, raced body stipulates inconspicuousness nonetheless. In other words, freedom of movement in the (white) domestic sphere—for a free black or mulatta woman—always entails an alibi.

Nevertheless, via tactful performances both as attendant and as author, Keckly simultaneously illustrates the value of black faith. Indeed, Keckly’s reference to the Book of Job, in its appeal to the downtrodden and outcast, would have especially resonated with nineteenth-century African American readers (Foster 119). In his “simple Christian earnestness,” Lincoln closely resembles bondsmen and –women in their turn to the Word, rather than to the abstract sphere of Western rationality, for “comfort and courage” in times of trial. Thus, her surveillance in this moment harnesses the presence

of her mulatta body, antebellum blacks' penchant for Old Testament Verse, even Job's own status as intercessor, in order to dislodge Lincoln and install God as the "Great Emancipator" of all suffering. In the end, she subtly collapses the distance between Lincoln's authorized reprieve from worldly sorrows and blacks' purportedly illicit spiritual practices, an appropriation of religious doctrine which opens up alternative epistemological possibilities. As with her aforementioned exchange with Mrs. Jefferson Davis, Keckly's politicized mediation and witnessing within the space of the White House enable forceful social critique of the dominant meanings of reason, race, and nation.

V

Accompanying Keckly's incisive deconstruction of liberal tenets of progress and individualism, and her assertion of insurgent nostalgia and politicized witnessing in *Behind the Scenes*, is an ethic of selective self-commodification. Indeed, attuned to the commercial dimensions of the text, literary critics have taken into account a spectrum of rhetorical effects produced by Keckly's seemingly market-oriented concerns. For instance, Susan S. Williams situates Keckly's memoir, along with Mary Abigail Dodge's *A Battle of the Books*, as evidence of "a pivotal moment in women's understanding of authorship as a business as well as an aesthetic practice" (126). Santamarina, too, in her focus on literary representations of women's labor, cites "the way in which [Keckly's] coerced labor performance could provide a form of self-production that countered mechanisms of racial and gender inferiority and dependence" (148). Zafar, in a similar vein, maintains that Keckly "needed no degree in economics to gauge her own value as a black female *ex-slave* commodity in the book-buying market, and allotted space to her

own life accordingly. That sense of the buyer's market, in terms of herself as a black female seller, forms or de-forms her book accordingly" (171). Finally, in one of the earliest contributions to this critical conversation, Andrews argues, "Rejecting idealism and moral absolutism in favor of *a materialist and pragmatic measure of self-valuation* empowered Keckley to redefine the terms in which a black woman in a postbellum slave narrative might explain 'whether [she] was really worth [her] salt or not'" (236, "The Changing Moral"; emphasis added). Keckley's relegation to sporadic sewing engagements in her last years, and eventual consignment to the National Home for Destitute Colored Women and Children—not unlike Harriet Wilson's recourse to pushing handmade hats and copies of *Our Nig* in the 1850s in order to survive—no doubt acutely underscores the pragmatism of developing alternative systems of value.³⁴

Yet, I depart from readings which attempt to recuperate Keckley's strategic representation of self into broader narratives of federal reconciliation or of her uninterrogated complicity with the dictates of Northern capital.³⁵ Such interpretations work to contain the theoretical scope of Keckley's project, especially as it pertains to the ways in which self-commodification, as an analytic, makes visible the interpenetration of liberal notions of freedom, individual sovereignty, and property. As Hartman clarifies, "Liberal discourses of freedom enable forms of subjection seemingly at odds with its declared principles, since they readily accommodate autonomy and domination, sovereignty and submission, and subordination and abstract equality" (122). Further,

³⁴ On Keckley's final years, see: Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*, p. 323.

³⁵ See: Santamarina, p. 141 and Andrews, "The Changing Moral," p. 237, respectively.

Hartman reminds, the alliance between independence and ownership attests to the convergence of American liberalism with Lockean economic philosophy, with the latter advancing “an ideal of liberty *founded* in the sanctity of property, and the vision of liberty forwarded in the originary narrative of the Constitution, which wed slavery and freedom in the founding of the nation and the engendering of ‘we the people’” (ibid; emphasis added). While Williams engages the tradition of liberalism by theorizing Keckly’s reconfiguration of conventional contract theory and rights discourse in relation to authorship, I draw specific attention to the non-conciliatory ends of her confrontation with racialized market ideology.

In this regard, a turn to Houston A. Baker, Jr.’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* proves instructive. Therein, Baker observes that Gustavas Vassa’s autobiography of spiritual awakening extends an insightful critique of “commercial deportation” and the “economics of slavery,” two governing tropes in African American discourse according to Baker’s foundational paradigm. “*The Life of Olaudah Equiano* can be ideologically considered as a work whose protagonist masters the rudiments of economics that condition his very life,” asserts Baker. “It can also be interpreted as a narrative whose author creates a text which inscribes these economics as a sign of its ‘social grounding’” (33). For Baker, the double-voiced mode of address in the 1789 narrative reflects a “self-conscious, mercantile, self-evaluation” (34), evincing Vassa’s realization “that only the acquisition of property will enable him to alter his designated status *as property*” (35). Put differently, Vassa’s path to freedom is marked by a mutual fluency, or bilingualism, in Anglicanism and the ethics of capitalism, in Christian piety

and laissez faire sensibility. His spiritual strivings and quest for literacy, as means to secure manumission, cannot be understood outside of his savvy rhetorical manipulation of the commercial landscape.

Keckly's skill in the art of textile production, akin to Equiano's success in the arena of small trade, generates an opportunity for her to purchase her own (nominal) liberty as well as that of her son. Surveying her business prospects upon moving to St. Louis with the Garlands, she notes, "[...] when my reputation [as a seamstress] was once established I never lacked for orders" (45). In fact, "With my needle I kept bread in the mouths of seventeen persons for two years and five months," Keckly maintains, before scoffing at those whites who dared deem her "not worth her salt" (45-6). Thus, as the chapter title "How I Gained my Freedom" intimates, Keckly finally manages to attain freedom, precisely by developing quality product, brokering profitable exchange rates, and carefully maneuvering relationships with high-status clientele. However, I argue that just as her performance in the rational marketplace stimulates near surplus demand for her services, it also productively problematizes her condition as chattel. Indeed, the shrewdness she exhibits in an economic terrain in which she circulates as flesh *and* as supplier of a specialized, embodied form of labor—and later as disenfranchised freedwoman *and* as public author—flouts traditional modes of valuation during the period. Contrary to Western discourses of reason and will, Keckly's unmediated projection of self into the sphere of capital signals resistance to her object status.

Keckly's subsequent rebuttal of her master's claim that she intends to run away, as well as her refusal of another suspicious white male patron's assistance in raising the

twelve hundred dollars required for her emancipation, further demonstrate this point. Vexed by Keckly's continued broaching of the subject of manumission, Mr. Garland offers her a quarter, encouraging her to take a ferry to the nearest free state if she desired liberty so keenly. "No, master, I do not wish to be free in such a manner. If such had been my wish, I should never have troubled you about obtaining your consent to my purchasing myself," Keckly replies (48). A later conversation with Mr. Farrow, from whom Keckly needs a signature verifying that she will return to the Garland home following a trip North to raise funds to meet her purchase price, evokes a comparable response from Keckly. Aiming to diminish Mr. Farrow's skepticism about her return, Keckly declares, "But I assure you, Mr. Farrow, you are mistaken. I not only *mean* to come back but *will* come back, and pay every cent of the twelve hundred dollars for myself and child" (52; emphasis in original). As with her adept entree into the free market economy as a dressmaker, Keckly's rejection of truancy asserts a self-commodifying stance which disturbs the contemporary racial order. Indeed, in each of the aforementioned scenarios, Keckly displays pecuniary eloquence and agility. By slyly leveraging her knowledge of dominant standards of accumulation in this way, Keckly accrues white favor. Nevertheless, her engagement with (white) faith in the principles of the market ultimately exceeds the purposes of concession or accommodation. Rather, her acquaintance with the fiscal lexicon of the day simultaneously reorganizes her relationship to the conditions of labor and bondage structuring her world, thereby initiating possibilities of defiance. Ultimately, Keckly's self-commodification undercuts gendered processes of dehumanization by exposing the conditionality and tenuousness of

freedom, while making legible the nexus of autonomy and property within the liberal state.

However, Keckly's artisanship extends a critique of liberalism hinged on more than the latter's intrinsic investment in property. Accordingly, I contend that textile work functions at once critically and aesthetically throughout *Behind the Scenes* in order to contest an overt privileging of order and abstract reason within the Western philosophical tradition. Indeed, rather than emphasizing the exclusively utilitarian objectives of black cultural production, Keckly's memoir taps into the ways in which embodied practices such as quilting often granted African American women a space from which to improvise their subjectivities within and against systemic white hegemony. Specifically, Keckly strategically activates embedded cultural histories in which nineteenth-century black women's handicraft and patchwork frequently contributed to vital intergenerational contact, to an undermining of slavery's patterns of dispersal, and to a performative archive of communal memory. As Merish suggests, "Black women's appropriation of fashion commodities can be read as an effort to dislodge the black female body, symbolically, from slavery's process of ungendering and inscribe that body as 'feminine,' thus claiming the privileges of gender in nineteenth-century civil society" (236). Thus, I argue that the process of dressmaking recurs in the narrative less as an articulation of style or facile adornment, than as an affirmation of a nascent black feminist politics.

Similarly, in *Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Experience*, Bettina Aptheker theorizes what she terms the "dailiness" of women's lives, or "the patterns women create and meanings women invent each day

and over time as a result of their labors and in the context of their subordinated status to men” (39). Of contemporary fiction by women of color, particularly that of Sandra Cisneros, Aptheker writes: “The stories are pieced together like a quilt, arranged so that women can see how it is and has been, can see the lines of connection between themselves as women [...] can think about how they might want it to be, how they could get there” (67). Locating Cisneros as more than mere domesticated “exception”—as part of a broader community of women writers bound not by race but by a commitment to survival—Aptheker continues, “That Cisneros, like Alice Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks, chose to piece her stories like a quilt speaks to the significance of the quilting process as a way of thinking” (ibid). Moreover, recognizing textile work as politicized art, Aptheker calls attention to its capacities for healing (73). Despite divergent temporal terrain, Keckly shares with many of the aforementioned twentieth-century authors an understanding of weaving and material design as inherently epistemological, as non-empirical modes of intellectual production and awareness, and as enactments of worldview.

Though *Behind the Scenes* primarily features instances of Keckly sewing for white benefactors, rather than for herself or the surrounding black community, cutting, fitting, and spinning remain skills imparted to her by her mother. Agnes Hobbs instills in young Elizabeth the value of textile work as a collective, felt performance of witnessing and survival, not unlike Harriet Jacobs’ grandmother, “Aunt Marthy,” had done for her own descendants. “I would sit by her side for hours, sewing diligently with a heart as free from care as that of any free-born white child,” recalls Jacobs/Brent in her 1861

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, likewise citing embroidery as bodily and spiritual salvation during her containment in the garret (133, 265). Keckly, too, positions needlework as hermeneutic in her postbellum slave narrative; in particular, she grapples with questions of ontology and liberation through its distinct lens.

Furthermore, both seamstresses import this ancestral, kinesthetic practice into their later relief work. Indeed, in addition to fundraising and other philanthropic pursuits, Keckly and Jacobs instituted sewing circles amongst newly freed bondsmen and –women in post-Emancipation Washington D.C. (Forbes 72). In this way, the activists mitigated anti-black prejudice reconstituted in the wake of Jubilee through the assembly of clothing and medical supplies, while simultaneously cultivating complex philosophies of reciprocity and belonging. Disrupting the arousal of an individualistic, liberal indignation predicated upon the terms of self-seeking intervention rather than justice,³⁶ Keckly’s and Jacobs’ stitched patterns effect public pedagogy. That is, they reconceptualize meanings of black freedom, and following Jacobs in the preface to *Incidents*, seek not “to excite sympathy for [personal] sufferings,” but to “arouse [...] a *realizing sense* of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage” (126; emphasis added). Theorizing Keckly’s and Jacobs’ narrative representations of textile labor as dialogic ways of knowing, then, undoes the logic of exceptionalism typically cohering around each writer, heralding their participation in a far more expansive culture of nineteenth-century black women’s embodied, theoretical discourse.

³⁶ My thinking here is informed by Dylan Rodriguez’s article, “Beyond ‘Police Brutality’: Racist State Violence and University of California” (64.2/June 2012) and Native feminist thinkers’ 2008 *AQ* article, “Native Feminisms Engage American Studies.”

Thus, the worth of black women's sartorial production is not finally contingent upon recognition by dominant culture. Accordingly, Young expressly identifies black clothing as steeped in political, imaginative, and resistive potentialities with interracial and intra-racial effects (126). "The origin, manufacture, cost, color, cut, and display of clothing were all significant features of black women's self-representation," Young claims, "as constituted both in opposition to white ex-masters and in affirmative relation to communities of free African-Americans" (127). Stephanie Camp and Jacqueline Jones echo this point, noting the interimbrications of attire with feelings of black leisure, pleasure, and community.³⁷

Such crucial insights notwithstanding, I submit that the construction and exhibition of white fashion likewise enabled seamstresses such as Keckly to image freedom, develop alternate systems of meaning-making, and to mete out penetrating critiques of the liberal nation-state. Ascending to the exclusive rank of mantua-maker, a position to which even the most talented seldom rose, Keckly consistently impressed elite patrons with her intricate design and ability to pin to form. Yet, she just as routinely *exceeded* conventional dress codes, elaborately bedecking the First Lady while under her employ. "[T]he mourning dresses Lizzy Keckly made for Mary assumed a highly luxurious quality, and mourning jewelry—often crafted of then popular tightly woven hair—decorated the first lady's fingers, wrists, neck, and ears," observes one historian.³⁸ Even Baker concedes Keckly's remarkable overhaul of styles initially inspired by the

³⁷ See: Camp p. 80-3 and Jones p. 29

³⁸ See: Packard, p. 123

French Empress Eugenie, yet ultimately transformed into masterful, previously unimaginable costumes, many of which boasted over twenty-five feet of material, ultramodern angles, and bold hues. The often duplicated 1861 Matthew Brady portrait of Mary Lincoln, in particular, showcases Keckly's productively manipulative techniques: sixty velvet bows and as many black dots embellish the otherwise relatively plain silk frock for which Lincoln's widow is now widely known (Baker 193, 195).

In her own words, Keckly modestly allows for only a measure of elegance in her designs—of the gown she creates for Mrs. Captain Lee of Washington, for example—though she makes sure to note that it “attracted great attention at the [Prince of Wales] dinner-party” (78). Likewise, it is one of the stunning “chintz wrappers” that Keckly fashions for Mrs. Davis, just prior to the pre-war Confederate exodus from the capitol, which Jefferson Davis reportedly sports at his moment of capture by Union forces. A wax figurine of Davis at a charity fair, outfitted in Keckly's unique creation, still inspires awe from crowds years later (74-5). In this respect, Keckly effectively shifts established conventions of dress; she modifies the relation between traditional aesthetic standards of ostentation and originality, uniformity and multiplicity. In fact, as Camp summarizes, “At least since the eighteenth century, with roots in African visual arts, black style had distinctively stressed the dynamic interplay of color and texture over the harmonies of similar elements, and surprise, movement, and argument over predictable patterns and order” (84). In essence, the introduction of geometry and play into her patterns offers a striking reinterpretation of dominant models of coherence and decorum.

Similarly, the memoir itself reflects a tangible intertextuality with theoretical implications. As Williams rightly discerns, *Behind the Scenes* “is thematically held together by accounts of [Keckly] sewing, which foreground the material means of its production as well as the metaphor of narrative threads” (129). Evidencing a quasi-vignette, if predominantly chronological structure, each chapter of Keckly’s narrative is pieced to the next via the thread of a memory, image, or relationship whose full meaning often only becomes legible when a subsequent piece brings the larger arrangement into view. Striking in its layering and texture, *Behind the Scenes* laces and plaits together flashbacks, reveries, and remembrances, with bits of omniscient narration and foreshadowing. Incidents from the past are ever emerging in the narrative present, and vice versa, and the weaving in of reluctance and omission, shifts in point of view and other strategies of subversion, yield an arresting pattern of political import.³⁹

In one particularly important strand, one which pertains directly to textile production, Keckly discloses the grievances of a “good, old, simple-minded woman, fresh from a life of servitude,” and I quote:

“Why, Missus Keckley,” said she to me one day, “I is been here eight months, and Missus Lingom an’t even give me one shife. Bliss God, childen, if I had ar know dat de Government, and Mister and Missus Government, was going to do dat ar way, I neber would’ve comed here in God’s wurd. My old missus us’t gib me tow shifes eber year.” (141)

Ascertaining that the woman “thought the wife of the President of the United States very mean for overlooking this established custom of the plantation,” Keckly confesses that

³⁹ See: Stover, p. 109.

she “could not restrain a laugh at the grave manner in which this good old woman entered her protest” (ibid). Though literary critics and historians frequently detect mocking and ridicule in Keckly’s representation of the exchange, I am drawn to other latent rhetorical effects within the passage and to its placement within the chapter titled “Behind the Scenes.”⁴⁰ Resonating with the stifled voices of the Garland’s cook as well as that of Aunt Charlotte, the “protest” of the newly emancipated bondswoman marks an irruption. That is, I argue that the “pith of the joke” which Keckly later suggests “Northern readers may not fully recognize,” in fact, pivots as much upon the notion of clothing as a means to induce pliancy as its propensity for manipulation toward alternative epistemological ends. Thus, Keckly—as author—stages a performance which channels the improvisatory possibilities of black women’s understandings of “freedom as two shifts.”

Hence, the unidentified freedwoman does not merely install a nostalgic hierarchy wherein plantation-era coercion is exonerated. Rather, Keckly plays upon the trope of what Patricia J. Williams terms black antiwill in order to expand the context of racialized subjection to account for Northern complicity. Northern readers’ misrecognition of the apparently comedic scene makes visible a liberal self-justification whereby racial brutality at the South remains discreet from similar, if less spectacular practices at the North. In this scenario, however, the North and South alike emerge as sites of dispossession. Appositely, this narrative thread follows Keckly’s depiction of blacks’ “exaggerated ideas of liberty” in Washington, and the shattering of their “beautiful vision

⁴⁰ According to Young, “Keckley’s laughter underscores the other woman’s ignorance, compounding it with ridicule. Despite Keckley’s own committed efforts on behalf of the Contraband Relief Fund, this moment mocks the ex-slave who is unable to understand the fashion of the body politic” (128).

[of] a land of sunshine, rest, and glorious promise” in light of the extreme deprivation many faced (139). After Keckly recalls the ostensibly amusing scene, she details former bondmen’s and women’s sincere efforts to restore a sense of humanity and home in the Freedmen’s Village. Ultimately, the anecdote knits together antebellum conditions of repression at the South, postbellum landscapes of Northern deficiency, while still opening up possibilities for change. By specifically appropriating the image of the dress—a symbol of embodied knowledge in the lives of black women—Keckly issues a call for freedom and for accountability on the part of the liberal state.

VI

Another central preoccupation of *Behind the Scenes* is the at once ritualized and invisibilized performance of white privilege reinforcing the liberal problematic. Keckly’s literary representation of interracial patron-client relationships in the mid-nineteenth-century North exposes maternalism, in particular, as an insidious mode of compulsion. Often striking in its instrumentality, the maternal relation deploys fictive kinship ties, amongst other less explicit filial logics, to extract docility and submission. Indeed, Keckly dramatizes precisely such a dynamic when detailing an exchange with Mrs. General McClean, the daughter of General Sumner, upon Keckly’s initial arrival to Washington. Euphemistically referring to Mrs. McClean’s ensuing conduct as her “emphatic way,” Keckly depicts the influential customer’s urgent demand for a new frock. “I have just purchased material, and you must commence work on it right away,” commands McClean. To Keckly’s response vis-à-vis the unfeasibility of such a project on such short notice, McClean retorts, “Pshaw! Nothing is impossible! I must have the

dress made by Sunday.” Not surprisingly, Keckly’s subsequent attempts to reiterate her position, as well as to apologize, are met with irritation. “Now don’t say no again. I tell you that you must make the dress,” interjects McClean imperatively (79).

McClean thereafter propositions Keckly by offering to help her gain employment at the White House—as long as her dress is complete in time for Sunday’s soiree. In the end, Keckly depletes significant resources to meet the looming deadline. Yet, despite the narrative’s characterization of this final incentive as “the best [inducement] that could have been offered,” it is arguably McClean’s preliminary invocation of privilege which secures Keckly’s consent (80). Under the *belated* guise of potential liason between Keckly and Mary Lincoln, McClean *first* forcefully asserts her race and class advantage over and above her black counterpart. As the script of white supremacy—even when cloaked in a liberal spirit of (commercial) collaboration—stipulates Keckly’s categorical assent, McClean wrests the requisite response from her interlocutor. Brusquely, if smilingly silencing the one whose services she so desperately desires, McClean infantilizes Keckly by de-authorizing her speech. As author, Keckly rhetorically stages an acquisition of fidelity rooted in strictly hierachized terms of order, an all too familiar and violent scenario of dominance.

A related instance features Keckly’s interaction with one of her white patrons in St. Louis, a woman aptly named Mrs. Le Bourgeois, prior to the former’s emancipation from slavery. Following Mr. Farrow’s disclosure of his belief that Keckly will likely fall prey to abolitionists’ schemes during her trip up North, Le Bourgeois arrives unannounced at Keckly’s door. “Lizzie, I hear that you are going to New York to beg for

money to buy your freedom,” she declares. “I have been thinking over the matter, and told Ma it would be a shame to allow you to go North to *beg* for what we should *give* you. You have many friends in St. Louis, and I am going to raise the twelve hundred dollars required among them” (54; emphasis in original). In the wake of Le Bourgeois’ pronouncement, “the flowers no longer were withered, drooping” (55). “Again, they seemed to bud and grow in fragrance and beauty,” observes a third-person narrator (*ibid*).

Notably, tropes of brightness and sweetness scaffold the entire conversation between the two women: “Like a ray of sunshine [Mrs. Le Bourgeois] came, and like a ray of sunshine she went away,” relays Keckly (55). The overt logic of the passage, then, christens Le Bourgeois as Keckly’s savior. Seemingly impervious to the rigorously policed constructions of the social to which her surname alludes, Le Bourgeois accumulates redemptive capital in the eyes of readers by relieving Keckly and her son of the “bitter heart-struggle” of slavery (*ibid*). However, given Keckly’s earlier theorization of suicide as the “bright side of slavery,” I maintain that the effects of light as a framing device exceed the affective register of unconditional gratitude and praise. As evidenced by Douglass’ *Narrative*, “sunniness” indexes a (black) opacity at odds with Enlightenment-era injunctions toward rationality and comprehensibility.⁴¹ Embedded with political meaning and experience, Keckly’s sunbeams and blossoms, in fact, subtly conjure the saccharinity, posture, and pretense of liberal racial sentimentality.

⁴¹ Of “apparently incoherent [slave] songs,” Douglass observes in his *Narrative*, “They would sing, as a chorus, words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do” (27).

Thus, proposes Luciano, “Lebourgeois’s offer reads alternately as expressing the ‘human’ kinship of sympathy, responding generously to another’s display of grief, or, less sentimentally, as expressing a kind of genteel feminine modesty on behalf of Southern custom” (255). And yet, Le Bourgeois’ unsolicited appearance at Keckly’s residence, not to mention her ability to casually mull over “the matter” of Keckly’s basic survival at her leisure, belie the sympathetic orientation of her pitch. Le Bourgeois remains principally, if not exclusively concerned with safeguarding the status of the local white community. The narrative act of “saving face,” choreographed so carefully by Keckly in this instance, positions white etiquette as little more than an expression of privilege meant to instate a relation of longstanding indebtedness and childlike dependence. Indeed, Keckly’s performance illuminates the ease with which whites’ saving face often comes at the expense of any substantive engagement with black life.

Similarly, privilege surfaces in *Behind the Scenes* through the projection of a staple of the white liberal imaginary: interracial intimacy. Modern historical scholarship and commercial publications alike constantly reproduce this falsehood when addressing Keckly’s legacy, interring Keckly and Mary Todd Lincoln’s dynamic in pastoral, wistful longing. Presumably mistaking physical proximity or a shared employment landscape for mutually sustaining emotional ties, biographers routinely spotlight Keckly and Lincoln’s special acquaintance, their “genuine friendship.”⁴² According to Fleischner, “It is easy to see why well-dressed women considered themselves almost intimates with their dressmakers,” for “[t]he laborious dressmaking techniques of the day made close

⁴² See: (Stiller 51, Packard 29, 120).

relationships between women and their dressmakers largely impossible to avoid” (*Mrs. Lincoln*, 133). Interestingly, despite Fleischner’s initial suspicion in her monograph of a “too easy use of the word” friendship with respect to Keckly and Lincoln’s entwined histories, she finally retreats from the asymmetry inherent in the relation, granting a unique “warmth, understanding, and intimacy” between the two given the nature and duration of their business together (5-6).

Nevertheless, as Lauren Berlant argues, intimacy constitutes a kind of affective artifice. At once ideologically and materially violent, intimacy as normative institution fails to acknowledge its own intrinsic idealism and ambivalence, if not its virtual impossibility. “[I]ntimacy...involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way” (281), corroborates Berlant in a twentieth-century, though not unrelated context: it “builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation. Its potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity” (282). Further, as Berlant theorizes, the intimate remains tethered to the performative, trafficking in hollow iconography and gestures of deep feeling. Deemed natural, rites of intimacy imported across divergent terrain, in fact, cover over the acuteness and specificity of uneven contexts of subjection.

The artificiality of interracial intimacy emerges on multiple occasions in the memoir, especially in scenes in which Keckly is cast as a “mammy” figure. Though

Keckly's relationship with the Garland daughters most readily prompts such a reading,⁴³ I contend that Keckly's association with Mrs. Lincoln likewise invokes the increasingly stale "mammy" image, a trope Patricia Hill Collins refers to as the quintessential "asexual woman, a surrogate mother in blackface" (80-1). Katherine Helm, niece of Mary Lincoln and author of *The True Story of Mary: Wife of Lincoln*, too, invites such an assessment, claiming that her aunt often "reverted to the impulse of her childhood, which had been to seek the love and help she had unfailingly found in her black mammy. In the faithful, sympathetic colored woman, Elizabeth Keckley [...] Mary saw the only available substitute, and to her she turned blindly for sympathy and advice" (266). In Helm's configuration, Lincoln collapses Sally, a black bondswoman employed by the Todd family during Mary's childhood, with Elizabeth, a free black entrepreneur in postbellum Washington, D.C. For Lincoln, "mammy" represents an anonymous, yet ever-present reserve of black sustenance, while Helm, in her uncritical reproduction of the term "mammy" as an expression of endearment, renders Sally nameless, thereby extending her foremother's legacy.

In this vein, pictures of exploited labor—conceived by the dominant group in a matrix of motherly affection, autonomy, and consent—abound in *Behind the Scenes*. Indeed, as the extensive array of services for which Keckly is responsible in the Lincoln household increases, the institutionalized character of white privilege enables this escalation to circulate as intensified care and nurturing shared *between* employer and

⁴³ Of Nannie Garland, Keckly writes, "She slept in my bed, and I watched over her as if she had been my own child" (239).

employee. As Sau-ling C. Wong argues, “[...] by conceding a certain amount of spiritual or even physical dependence on people of color—as helpers, healers, guardians, mediators, educators, or advisors—without ceding actual structural privilege, the care-receiver preserves the illusion of equality and reciprocity with the caregiver” (69). Following Wong, the fantasy of “Keckly-as-mammy” presumes black volition while precluding any significant access to power or authority. According to the prevailing political rationality, Keckly’s progressively more intensive, if diversified mentality indexes not obligation or duress, but mutuality and shared investments in buttressing “the biopower of white comfort.”⁴⁴

Importantly, mythologies of superhuman black female strength remain central to the traction of the dehumanizing “mammy” stereotype and to the liberal production of interracial intimacy. Hence, Helm cites the ostensibly “unfailing” quality of Sally’s support for Mary Lincoln. Likewise, in *The Spy, the Lady, the Captain, and the Colonel*, an illustrated biography for young adults featuring a section on Keckly, the historical tendency to de-emphasize black women’s subjectivity in order to accentuate their physical potency asserts itself. While the text arguably offers complex perspectives on Keckly’s ambivalent relationship to Emancipation, as well as on her spiritual grounding and commitment to political activism, it appears unable to relinquish the worn trope of black women’s unyielding fortitude. “She was the rock of strength on which Mary Lincoln leaned,” notes the narrator in one prominent example (58). In this case, Keckly’s

⁴⁴ See: Nunley, p. 16.

resilience coincides with little more than her apparent stamina in staving off Lincoln's mental and emotional collapse in the wake of her husband's assassination.

Usefully, bell hooks locates at least one of the problems inherent in such a move. As she traces continuities between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Women's Movements in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, hooks maintains, "When feminists acknowledge in one breath that black women are victimized and in the same breath emphasize their strength, they imply that though black women are oppressed they manage to circumvent the damaging impact of oppression by being strong—and that is simply not the case" (6). As hooks clarifies, black endurance does not yield panacean social transformation. Instead, liberal stereotypes of extraordinary black female strength—relics of antebellum conditions of containment—facilitate a mode of (white) self-exoneration whereby accountability for structural domination is elided. Though, in and of itself, the interracial dimension of patron-client relationships during the period does not preclude shared understanding of any sort, the violence of sedimented perspectives of blackness must not be minimized.

Alongside the "mammy" caricature, Keckly often turns up as the First Lady's dearest companion. Nevertheless, as in many of the previous scenarios, acts of interracial respect and regard—of friendship—frequently obscure rigid power dynamics. For example, just prior to the President's assassination, Keckly requests permission from her "friend" to attend what would become Lincoln's final public speech. "Certainly, Lizabeth; if you take any interest in political speeches, come and listen in welcome," Mary replies. "Thank you, Mrs. Lincoln. May I trespass further on your kindness by

asking permission to bring a friend with me?” continues Keckly. “Yes, bring your friend also,” answers Lincoln, adding immediately thereafter, “By the way, come in time to dress me before the speaking commences” (175). Though hallmarks of intimate familiarity adorn the scene, from the use of a pet name to a general aura of hospitality, I suggest that competing rhetorical elements are simultaneously at play.

That is, Keckly strategically situates interracial friendship as a rapport rooted in tolerance, for Lincoln does not actually “welcome” Keckly to witness the lecture. Rather, she *allows* her to do so with the caveat that she must first dispense with her requisite domestic tasks. Despite an ethos of seeming congeniality, Keckly cannot acknowledge Lincoln’s informality with equivalent signs of acquaintance. Indeed, she cannot refer to her employer by her first name, apply the term “friend” to their patron-client relationship in her employer’s presence, or exceed her careful, deferent stance very much at all. This, Trudier Harris contends in *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature*, corresponds to an unspoken “ethical code that governs the relationships between Blacks and whites” that relies less on overt expression, than on entrenched Southern, but to which I would add, nationwide convention and legal precedent (20). Therefore, Lincoln, in fact, only reconstitutes the terms of forced intimacy inflicted by Keckly’s past owners/patrons from Mrs. Garland; to Mrs. McClean; to Mrs. Jefferson Davis, First Lady of the Confederacy.

Another moment in the memoir, involving the Lincoln family’s move to Chicago following President Johnson’s inauguration, especially resonates with these previous experiences with white privilege, but manifests itself through the trope of friendship, in

particular. According to Keckly, “When Mrs. Lincoln first suggested her plan [to take Keckly with her to Chicago], I strongly objected; but I had been with her so long, that she had acquired great power over me” (209). While the ambiguity of the passage leads some critics to attribute Keckly’s hesitancy to a deep “emotional bond” between the two women,⁴⁵ the episode as readily provokes a reading of Keckly’s muted critique of the coerciveness of interracial intimacy. Thus, as Keckly attempts to explain to her employer that she cannot possibly desert her own business and philanthropic pursuits in Washington to travel to Illinois, Lincoln sternly interrupts: “Now don’t say another word about it, if you do not wish to distress me. I have determined that you shall go to Chicago with me, and you *must* go” (209-10; emphasis in original). In an all too common gesture of silencing, construed by the figure of authority as an articulation of fondness and devotion, Lincoln compels Keckly’s compliance.

It is on the first night in transit to Chicago, though, that Lincoln explicitly invokes the notion of friendship. As Keckly attends to the former First Lady’s latest ailment, Lincoln announces, “Lizabeth, you are my best and kindest friend. I wish it were in my power to make you comfortable for the balance of your days. If Congress provides for me, depend upon it, I will provide for you” (210). In another, off-script moment, however, Keckly supplies quite the telling response to Lincoln’s declaration: silence. Countering Lincoln’s routine suppression, both her allocation of erratic hours and wages and the continued stifling of Keckly’s voice, with an abrupt, self-imposed quietness on her own terms, Keckly withdraws from her employer’s performance of intimacy. “The

⁴⁵ See: Fleischer, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*, p. 293-4.

trip was devoid of interest,” resumes the narrator unemphatically. “We arrived in Chicago without accident or delay” (ibid). In place of the affirmation, gratitude, or approval prescribed by the hegemonic racial order, Keckly offers a resounding calm. Her refusal to speak back to Lincoln’s assertion forces readers to linger, to borrow from Berlant again, with Lincoln’s haunting “failure to stabilize closeness.” As with her previous address of both suicide as the “bright side of slavery” and prevailing Republican notions of blackness as fundamentally illegible, Keckly enacts a rhetorical disjunction which at once exposes the racialized rites and rituals—as well as the slippages—at the heart of the project of liberalism.

In closing, however, it is important to signal the ways in which Keckly contrasts the intimacy driven by dominant ideological and fetishistic impulses with that motivated by nonrational forces. Of the latter, Berlant asserts, “in practice the drive toward [intimacy] is a kind of wild thing that is not necessarily organized [in a conventional] way, or any way” (284). Keckly’s relationship with her son, to take just one example, epitomizes precisely such a dynamic. The apparently peripheral mention of George’s life and death throughout the course of the memoir, not unlike details around her sexuality or her mother’s continued residence at the South after Keckly’s move North, confounds many critics. Yet, the ostensibly tangential affiliation with her son not only concretizes her reduction to the status of “mammy,” a role in which—by definition—her own family’s needs must be overlooked, but reconceptualizes black maternal affection. In fact, in admitting that “God knows that she did not wish to give him life,” Keckly conveys a fierce connection to her offspring (39). She expresses an unruly closeness to

her child, a love profound enough to encompass her labor for his freedom and formal education *and* her ambivalence and pain over the violent circumstances of his birth.⁴⁶ Keckly's passion for her son, then, is not effortless or inborn. It is not a space of privilege, but a site of struggle.

In this regard, Keckly's contestation of circumscribed understandings of family, motherhood, and intimacy coincide with the broader critiques of liberalism which this chapter outlines. Indeed, *Behind the Scenes* problematizes prevailing discourses on sovereignty, progress, and individualism. In like mind with other subjects in this study, Keckly challenges entrenched ethics of tolerance and exceptionalism, privilege and decorum, literacy and self-possession. By mobilizing her role as witness, and deploying practices of counter-memory and self-commodification, as well as textile work as a way of knowing, Keckly literally stages an intervention into the dominant political rationality of the day. Though conventional wisdom contains the significance of Keckly's life and writings, fixing her alternately as Mary Lincoln's arch nemesis or best friend, a closer reading reveals her insights into the inner workings of liberalism as political, economic, and affective machine. By century's end, educator and social reformer Anna Julia Cooper will pick up where Keckly leaves off, sounding a critique of the liberal problematic founded in similar discernment of the limits embedded in frameworks of tolerance, objectivity, and intention. Though both activists are typically cast beyond the

⁴⁶ Keckly is raped by a white man named Alexander Kirkland, rival of the "pious" slave-breaker, Mr. Bingham, depicted in the memoir.

pale of legitimate black resistance, Keckly—and later Cooper—extend theories of power, authority, and value of enduring consequence today.

“‘Wondering under Which Head I Come’: Sounding Anna Julia Cooper’s Fin-de-Siècle

Blues

I

“Only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.’”

“There can be no true test of national courtesy without travel.”

“The cause of freedom is not the cause of a race or sect, a party or class—it is the cause of human kind, the very birthright of humanity”

Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South*

In an oft-cited chapter of Anna Julia Cooper’s 1892 treatise *A Voice from the South* titled “Woman Versus the Indian,” a section named after Anna Shaw’s 1891 speech to the National Woman’s Council, Cooper starkly depicts the constraints of occupying public space under the fin-de-siècle Jim Crow regime. Notably, one’s surroundings do not emerge in Cooper’s rendering as indifferent or empty, as a vessel simply to be moved through or acted upon. That is, in contrast to a Cartesian model of spatiality, space does not solely *reflect* subjectivities for Cooper. Rather, in her manifesto, space *produces* acutely raced, gendered, and classed meaning. In her focus on railroad systems, for instance, Cooper portrays a typical conductor as “a great burly six feet of masculinity” (95). Effective “bullies” or attack dogs, as she alternately describes them, are prone to extreme brutality against black female passengers, up to and including forcibly removing them from cars (91-2). Nevertheless, Cooper adroitly shifts the critical lens back toward the “society holding the leash” of said dogs (92). According to Cooper, if the conductor’s “bread and butter are conditioned on his managing his part of the

machinery as he is told to do,” culpability for the manufacture of public blackness as inherently suspect lies squarely with the state (94).

Performatively, Cooper then proceeds to detail another striking railway scene, observing, “I see from the car window, working on private estates, convicts from the state penitentiary, among them squads of boys from fourteen to eighteen years of age in a chain gang, their feet chained together and heavy blocks attached—not in 1850, but in 1890, ’91, and ’92” (96-7). A patent reconstitution of the conditions of enslavement, the utter deprivation and exploitation to which these youth are subject is at once jarring and familiar. The scene is likewise coupled with another dilemma Cooper realizes upon gazing out of the window of the coach one final time. “[L]ooking a little more closely, I see two dingy little rooms with ‘FOR LADIES’ swinging over one and ‘FOR COLORED PEOPLE’ over the other,” Cooper reveals, “wondering under which head I come” (96). Cooper concludes her meditation by puncturing the hypocrisy of a nation which condemns “Russia’s barbarity and cruelty to the Jews,” while denying meager provisions to a black traveler “driven by hunger [to seek] the bare necessities of life at the only public accommodation in the town,” in the very same breath (97).

Notably, several contemporary literary and cultural studies practitioners recognize the value of Cooper’s analysis of blackness as a site of trespass and criminality, a cornerstone of what I am calling here the liberal problematic. Moreover, a number of critics rightly note the aforementioned existential crisis occasioned by having to “wonde[r] under which head I come,” the indispensability of understanding racial discrimination and gender bias as systemic rather than aberrant forces in the U.S. nation-

state. Indeed, counter to Houston Baker's emphasis on a perceived strain of essentialism in *A Voice*, Mary Helen Washington's uneasiness over Cooper's apparent elitism, and Kevin K. Gaines' suspicion of Cooper's purported nativism and anti-labor views, an interdisciplinary cadre of scholars including Paula Giddings, Elizabeth Alexander, Vivian May, and Hazel Carby have endeavored to more fully recover and reclaim Cooper's life and writings. Hence, in Giddings' by now classic 1984 text *When and Where I Enter*, she harnesses Cooper's initial iteration of those words—a direct challenge to the gender norms sutured into the black radical stance of one of Cooper's contemporaries, Martin R. Delany—to ground her inquiry. Ultimately, Giddings revises W. E. B. Du Bois' telling omission of Cooper's name, following an invocation of her remarks, in “The Damnation of Women” in 1920's *Darkwater*. Further, she mobilizes Cooper's antiracist praxis in order to give voice to black women's experiences with respect to migration, education, labor organizing, and tokenization. In “In the Quiet, Undisputed Dignity of My Womanhood,” the fifth chapter of *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Carby mirrors Giddings' earlier channeling of Cooper's words in order to frame her own theoretical intervention into Cooper's incisive deconstruction of legacies of American racism and imperialism. Both Giddings and Carby, then, expand the archive of black feminist knowledge production by establishing the ongoing relevance of Cooper's intellectual contributions in the present.

Yet, while Giddings, Carby, and others amend a palpable critical reticence around Cooper and her most well-known monograph in substantive ways, they do not pursue in depth the politics of space, courtesy, and neutralist liberalism to which the last two

epigraphs to this chapter refer. In fact, in illuminating the danger attending black railroad travel, Cooper introduces a key, if understudied dimension of her theoretical project: the recuperation of civility as virtue. Indeed, when Cooper declares that “there can be no true test of national courtesy without travel,” she laments the absence of movement governed by an ethic of egalitarian responsibility. She politicizes and juxtaposes a sense of grace I term “critical regard” with the provincial, self-interested diplomacy which abounds in its stead, most railway conductors unwilling to muster even the latter. Indeed, the broader context of “Woman Versus the Indian,” its particular attentiveness to blacks’ compromised access to mobility, yields an ironic twist to the words in the final epigraph above—currently the only quotation by a woman (of any color) featured on the U.S. passport. The well-intentioned, self-justifying placement of these words on modern citizenship documentation attempts to cover over, though cannot finally contain, I would argue, Cooper’s consistent problematization of myths of American democracy as all-encompassing. In fact, Cooper’s public pedagogy of civility and appeal to an anti-racist universalism yet to be realized in her era or our own, critique liberal ideological formations—and their dangerous, if often subtle effects—with a cogency we can no longer afford to overlook.

Therefore, this chapter attends to Cooper’s analysis of the limits of tenets of American liberalism, such as inclusion and autonomy, in her most famous theoretical work, the possibilities of which have been previously explored, but not fully recognized. Specifically, it augments inquiry among Cooper scholars vis-à-vis the ways in which the resistive potential of her rhetoric is frequently rendered illegible as activism—owing to,

among other reasons, Cooper's complex multi-vocality. Foregrounding Cooper's perceived class status, late-Victorian social standards, and intermittent Christian ethnocentrism as relevant, yet finally insufficient grounds for reducing her interventions solely to staunch conservatism, or to a facile mimetic impulse in relationship to whiteness, this project forwards another perspective. That is, it shifts the critical register away from a narrowly historical and sociological bent toward a focus on precisely *how* Cooper dislodges fundamental liberal precepts enmeshed with, as Fred Moten terms it, "what-has-been-called-enlightenment" discourses of reason, individualism, and of what it means to be human.⁴⁷ Put differently, I explore here Cooper's refusal and subsequent reconceptualization of dominant notions of civility, freedom, and equality, thereby complicating understandings of the relation between resistance and discursivity and deepening our sense of Cooper's engagement with contemporary discourses of black feminism.

Accordingly, chief among Cooper's contributions in *A Voice* to be addressed herein is her condemnation of prevailing ideals of abstraction and universality within Western philosophical thought more broadly, but especially those ensuing from the traditions of U.S. Constitutionalism and of institutionalized religion under the auspices of the Episcopalian Church. In dialogue with other nineteenth-century black female public intellectuals including Maria W. Stewart, Frances E. W. Harper, and Ida B. Wells, Cooper also extends a compelling indictment of the provinciality and elitism of the (white) Women's Movement, honing in on practices of white middle-class female

⁴⁷ See: Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (205).

discomfort as a mode of cultural policing still relevant today. An avowed embrace of difference, pluralism, and conflict likewise characterizes Cooper's prose. These facets of her analysis, in particular, problematize the preeminence of a fixed and self-contained transcendental Subject. Likewise, her criticism of the maintenance of hierarchies of racial oppression, of reigning cultural mythologies of the U.S. North as fundamentally emancipatory, and of black male gender bias in the realm of higher education, signal keen insight into the nuances of ostensibly progressive politics of the era. Finally, my turn at the chapter's end to subversive, yet still undertheorized dimensions of *A Voice*, including its framing via musical metaphor and irruptions of sarcastic wit, compels a radical reevaluation of our ways of knowing and recognizing social change.

II

Born Annie Julia Haywood in Raleigh, North Carolina in approximately 1858, Cooper was the daughter of a bondswoman named Hannah Stanley Haywood. Hannah imparted to her daughter an “outsider-within” critical consciousness informed by a twinned set of beliefs in the value of labor—both its import and its capacity to be exploited—as well as the significance of a formal education and the opportunities it enables.⁴⁸ Cooper's written account of the identity of her father, composed much later in life, states that “...I owe him not a sou and she [her mother] was always too modest and & shamefaced ever to mention him,” suggesting that paternity could be attributed to her

⁴⁸ Given that Patricia Hill Collins commonly, though not exclusively, situates the “outsider-within” perspective within spaces of domestic labor, I argue here that it functions as a vestibular site as it relates to Cooper's political consciousness. Young Annie gains the opportunity for schooling, but also witnesses the many modes of violence to which her mother, and others, was frequently subject (*Fighting Words* 6).

mother's master, Dr. Fabius J. Haywood (May 14). In the wake of the Civil War, Hannah astutely steered nine and a half year old Annie toward a scholarship to Dr. J. Brinton Smith's St. Augustine's Normal School and Collegiate Institute. Consistently challenging the institution's status quo, which then permitted only male students to partake in Greek language curricula, Anna independently and successfully organized for women's participation in the course at St. Augustine's in 1873. On July 27, 1881, she wrote to the president of Oberlin College for admission to the university, eventually ranking among the first African-American women awarded a Bachelor's degree in the United States. After three years of pedagogical development establishing her competency as a teacher at the university level, Oberlin granted Cooper a Master's degree in mathematics in 1887.

In September of 1887, Cooper began her pioneering role as principal of M Street High School in Washington, D.C. This marked a formative experience in her life for a number of reasons, not the least of which was her ousting in 1906 as a result of the joint machinations of whites on the D.C. Board of Education and other associates of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Machine. Cooper also pursued graduate studies at Columbia University and later at the Sorbonne. Successfully defending her doctoral thesis on the relation between Haitian slavery and the democratic ideals of the French Revolution in Paris in March 1925, she was the fourth African American woman to earn a doctoral degree. Providing decades of material labor as an educator and intellectual until her death in 1964, Cooper was also the only black female invited to speak at the American Negro Academy and to attend the first meeting of the Niagara Movement. Her foresight

and insight were likewise integral to the formation of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs in 1896, and to the development of Frelinghuysen University, an institution dedicated to educational access for the black working poor and disabled in Washington.⁴⁹ Cooper is also known for important appearances in the public sphere at sites including the Hampton Conference in 1892, the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, and London's Pan African Conference in 1900.

One such performance was a speech titled "Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race," delivered in Washington, D.C. in 1886 preceding the convocation of "colored" clergymen of the Protestant Episcopal Church, and later integrated as the first chapter of the opening section of *A Voice*. Many of the performative elements of the text, then, are not incidental. As Elizabeth Alexander confirms in her essay "'We Must Be About Our Father's Business': Anna Julia Cooper and the In-Corporation of the Nineteenth-Century African-American Woman Intellectual," "the spoken quality of Cooper's text is crucial to understanding her own narrative strategizing" (345). Thus, the orality of "Womanhood"—its quite literal voice—speaks to an intertextuality, cutting across genre, and reclamation of speech from the differentially privileged spheres of white masculinity and femininity, ever present in Cooper's oeuvre.

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, one critique central to Cooper's epistemic project regards problematizing pretenses towards unqualified abstraction and

⁴⁹ One of the affiliated institutions within Frelinghuysen was the Hannah Stanley Opportunity School, named in honor of Cooper's mother, and as Mark S. Giles notes, the university was an important early model for the contemporary community college system.

universality. Indeed, on several rhetorical occasions in *A Voice*, I would argue, Cooper's voice embodies a central premise of black feminisms by specifically attending to the limitations of broad-based theorization severed from the contexts and realities of lived experience.⁵⁰ At precisely one such juncture in "Womanhood" Cooper observes, "A conference of *earnest* Christian men have met at *regular* intervals for some years past to discuss the best methods of *promoting the welfare and development of colored people* in this country" (37; emphasis added). The earnestness and regularity of the aforementioned Christian ethics of promotion and uplift, nevertheless, belie their veritable impact. Accordingly, Cooper continues, "Yet, strange as it may seem, they have never invited a colored man or even intimated that one would be welcome to take part in their deliberations. Their remedial contrivances are purely theoretical or empirical, therefore, and the whole machinery devoid of soul" (ibid). Here, in the vein of Sojourner Truth before her, Cooper de-centers a logocentric approach founded in disinterestedness and detachment. She contests processes of empiricism which pivot upon static notions of "welfare and development" vested with an ostensibly all-encompassing applicability, yet finally eliding racial difference. Cooper's articulation of "soul," though not fully fleshed out in the volume, articulates a desire for less facile, more consequential terms of engagement; she understands, in the words of Patricia J. Williams, that "it is a liability as much as a luxury to live without interaction" (72). Soul, for Cooper, stands in stark contrast to a positivist politics of objectivity in which a disembodied and masculinist rhetorical tradition circulates as hegemonic.

⁵⁰ See: Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (28)

Later in the same essay, Cooper adds, “Men are not ‘drawn’ by abstractions. Only sympathy and love can draw, and until our Church in America realizes this and provides a clergy that can come in touch with our life and have a fellow feeling for our woes, [...] the good bishops are likely to continue ‘perplexed’ by the sparsity of colored Episcopalians” (41). While much contemporary scholarship justifiably draws attention to Cooper’s tendencies in *A Voice* to value a Protestant ethos of containment and restraint over ecstatic, demonstrative forms of worship characteristic of other denominations, this passage marks Cooper’s explicit advocacy of “sympathy,” “love,” and “fellow feeling” amongst church leadership. Cooper effects a call for “touch” across the borders of the rational self, for effusiveness attentive to black pain and black suffering. Indeed, her charge is to embrace resonance above the ruse of rationality. On objectivity as ruse, Williams again proves instructive, noting that “in a world of real others, the cost of such exclusive forms of discourse is empowerment at the expense of one’s relation to those others; empowering without communion” (93). Without accounting for “sympathy” and “love” as disciplinary, coercive constructs in Christian proselytizing and missionary efforts throughout history, Cooper nevertheless powerfully mobilizes the perplexity of “the good bishops,” as she playfully dubs them, to illustrate the inevitable breakdown of exclusively theoretical modes of thought.⁵¹

Cooper extends this analysis of abstraction into the realm of the literary in a later essay in the collection, “One Phase of American Literature.” Citing her own abundance

⁵¹ Cooper does, however, more explicitly address such histories of imperialism in other sections of the text, including “Woman Versus the Indian.” See also: Cooper’s critique of the abstraction of philosophers such as Hume and Kant (*A Voice* 291-3)

of “respect for the autonomy of races”—or in more pious terms, “too much reverence for the collective view of God’s handiwork to speak of any such condition, however general, as characterizing the race”—Cooper intervenes into misrepresentations of blackness in popular culture, especially among establishment writers of the day (204). Juxtaposed with what Cooper deems as the politicized prose of Albion Tourgee, the “humility and love” imbuing the narratives of Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the “enlightened” self-critique present in the fiction of George Washington Cable, the writing of William Dean Howells notably bears the brunt of Cooper’s critique of stereotypical imagery (Cooper 186, 191). And yet, in Giddings’ most recent study of Ida B. Wells, the former qualifies portrayals of black experience by figures such as Tourgee as “encouraging,” yet shortsightedly “hing[ed] on the breakdown of law and order and on questions about the ability of the South to reform itself” (*Ida* 216). Thus, I put pressure on Cooper in terms of exonerating even the most progressive nineteenth-century artists and public intellectuals of any racial bias. To restate, when Cooper explains that “We meet it at every turn—this obtrusive and offensive vulgarity, this gratuitous sizing up of the Negro and conclusively writing down his equation, sometimes even among his ardent friends and bravest defenders” (Cooper 203), I contend that characterization within Cable’s New Orleans-inspired realism and the sentimental world of “everybody’s protest novel,” merit parallel scrutiny. Nevertheless, still quite accurate in its evaluation of the reductionist effects of Howell’s work, “One Phase” productively locates problematic universalizing inclinations in journalism, criticism, and mainstream fiction, including Howells’ 1891 novel *An Imperative Duty*. Notable for its circumscribed treatment of “mulatta”

protagonist Rhoda Aldgate, amongst other black figures, this late-century literary effort by one of the most prolific and influential writers of the era functions as a prototypical cultural site immersed in precisely the raced and gendered relations of power and privilege that Cooper seeks to overturn.⁵²

Interestingly, from the beginning of the essay, Cooper establishes that depictions of blackness as fundamentally without fault, or a sort of inverse of existing dynamics, are myopic in scope: “Our grievance then is not that we are not painted as angels of light or as goody-goody Sunday-school developments,” she clarifies (206). Rather, her assessment of Howells, like the representative terrain she demands, carries far-reaching implications, yet is simultaneously particularized. In grappling with the relationship between the particular and the general in this way, Cooper’s claims reverberate with late-twentieth century black feminist debates around the contours and effects of experiential knowledge claims.⁵³ Hence, Cooper subsequently asserts, “[W]e do claim that a man whose acquaintanceship is so slight that he cannot even discern diversities of individuality has no right or authority to hawk ‘the only true and authentic’ pictures of a race of human beings” (ibid). Indeed, she bemoans the fact that one equipped with such a limited understanding of black folk, in her words “at long range and only in certain

⁵² See: Vivian M. May, *Anna Julia Cooper: Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction* (196n25): “In *An Imperative Duty* (1891), the only one of his thirty-eight novels to focus on race relations, Howells writes about a white woman who discovers her black lineage, but his descriptions of Black womanhood are filled with references to subhuman, ugly, animal natures. Many would have been familiar with this novel, as he was already a man of influence in American letters.”

⁵³ As Collins discusses in relation to Sojourner Truth, “Just as Truth grounded her struggles in concrete experience but refused to limit them to her particular experience, contemporary Black feminist thought might emulate a similar relationship between the particular and the general” (*Fighting Words* 241).

capacities,” determines the very standards by which “authentic” blackness is to be consumed by the reading public. As gate-keeper, observes Cooper, Howells peddles black “Truth,” manipulating its status as a commodity in the literary marketplace. Significantly, “In arguing that all such stereotyped representations reveal nothing about African Americans but are merely a ‘revelation of the white man’,” Vivian M. May discerns, “Cooper anticipates the work of Toni Morrison, Addison Gayle, Paule Marshall, Barbara Christian and others who analyze how Black characters lack interiority, agency, and subjectivity in white-authored, canonical ‘American’ literature” (97). To my mind, Cooper’s interrogation of the interpenetration of race and narrative here—of the ways in which American (literary) identities are often forged against the bodies of racialized Others—remains especially important in a “post-racial” era.⁵⁴

Finally aligning Howells not with vituperative racists, but with more conventionally liberal factions, such as international attendees of the 1893 Columbian Exposition, Cooper condemns Howells’ privileging of an abstract, inherently subservient blackness. Couched in complex, class-inflected terms which almost diametrically oppose black bootblacks and hotel waiters with more “quiet, self-respecting, dignified” blacks, Cooper’s logic productively exposes the famed critic’s acute misapprehension of black integrity. Reminiscent of his major misreading of black anger as aesthetic lack and “bitterness” in his review of Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), and of dialect use in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s second volume of poetry, *Majors and Minors* (1896), Howells’ archive more broadly emerges in Cooper’s narrative as complicit in the

⁵⁴ See: Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

trafficking of demeaning tropes of blackness.⁵⁵ By situating her critique of critical abstraction beyond the scope of religion, Cooper's influence upon cultural landscapes including literature and law, both in her day and beyond, become more readily apparent.

Indeed, as Janice Fernheimer asserts in an essay in Kristin Waters' and Carol B. Conaway's important 2007 edited collection *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds*, African American rhetors' address of critical abstraction on a broader and formally juridical terrain—by explicitly citing the slippage between U.S. legal mandates embedded in such sites as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and Emancipation Proclamation, and lived black realities—gained quite a bit of traction within mid-nineteenth century abolitionist discourse (288). Cooper, she notes, was no exception. Filtered at the dawn of the twentieth century through what Vorris Nunley aptly theorizes as podium-auction block rhetoric, Cooper speaks in *A Voice* to the crux of the liberal problematic, to the hypocrisy embedded in a tradition of constitutionalism in which autonomy is inextricable from property, freedom yoked to enslavement.⁵⁶ She recognizes, as Saidiya Hartman suggests in *Scenes of Subjection*, that the “universality or unencumbered individuality of liberalism relies on tacit exclusions and norms that preclude substantive equality; all do not equally partake of the resplendent, plenipotent, indivisible, and steely singularity that it proffers” (122). To restate, “the arrival of the citizen into free, open, and rational public debate—the hallmark of democratic organization—was made possible by a decorporealizing public

⁵⁵ See: Matthew Wilson, *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt* (142).

⁵⁶ See: Vorris Nunley, *Keepin' It Hushed* (171).

abstraction,” as Robyn Wiegman argues (via Michael Warner) in uncanny coincidence with Cooper’s manifesto, “an abstraction that, while theorized as universal, was not universally available” (49). Without ever fully relinquishing a narrative of promise and possibility for reconciliation of the divergent originary interests embodying the liberal problematic, Cooper problematizes the state’s production of abstract citizenship at the expense of certain raced and gendered bodies, and of black women, in particular. She unsettles the sedimented excess which U.S. liberal imperative typically relegates to the realm of the private (Ferguson 12).

As referenced earlier, “Woman Versus the Indian,” too, foregrounds precisely this representational excess as it relates to the violence and brutality endured by blacks from slavery through the post-Reconstruction era. During a historical moment and in a political imaginary, as Claudia Tate observes, in many ways still teeming with optimism about the potential for national renewal and opportunities for social justice, Cooper instead confronts the limits of a Lockean constitutional legacy by directly engaging the history of enslavement and the ongoing material conditions of its aftermath in the daily lives of black women.⁵⁷ In addition to her attentiveness to cruelty to black women on railroad cars, Cooper especially focuses on black women’s “forced association” with white men, the latter her appropriation of a term commonly deployed by whites panicked by even the slightest prospect of equality between the races, as a euphemism for interracial rape (Cooper 111). In this way, Cooper demonstrates the spuriousness of, in

⁵⁷ See: Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century* (112).

the words of Hartman again, the “unencumbered individuality” of the nation’s denizens (Hartman 122). Similarly, Cooper attests later in the chapter that “if one intimates that some clauses of the Constitution are a dead letter at the South and that only the name and support of that pet institution are changed, while the fact and essence, minus the expense and responsibility, remain, he is quickly told to mind his own business [...]”(106). Here, Cooper usefully highlights a pervasive, state-sanctioned dissimulation of terror at the turn of the century. Even more provocatively, she theorizes the instrumentality of patriotism (that is, if one merely “intimates” dissent, dire consequences arise) and the finally mythic nature of substantive equality.⁵⁸ In the end, she pinpoints an institutionalized, liberal ethic of critical abstraction—from religion, to literature, to law—contingent upon the vehement repression of (black) difference.

III

Notable continuities exist between the aforementioned “Woman Versus the Indian” and the lead essay in the second part of *A Voice*, “Has America a Race Problem; If So, How Can it Best Be Solved?” in terms of precisely the question of difference. In both essays, Cooper advances pluralism and community as means to counter two cornerstones of liberal thought: individualism and binary opposition. Indeed, strictly racialized and gendered notions of the self-possessed, contained, rights-bearing individual engaged in an inevitable march towards progress denote hallmarks of Western rational modernity. And yet, blacks’ access to this realm of sovereignty and entitlement following Emancipation remained severely compromised. Cooper counters the

⁵⁸ For an analogous critique of patriotism, see Ida B. Wells’ *A Red Record* (Royster 131).

circumscribed nature of the post-Reconstruction era in “Has America a Race Problem” by supplanting the reigning liberal telos of what she eventually terms singular, “despotic” development with a palpably textured theorization of harmony.

Though for Gaines, Cooper’s epistemological intervention via harmony bears pastoral and paternalistic connotations, corresponding to a pandering to white elites not uncommon among prominent black writers and public intellectuals of the period, in fact, I argue that it departs from widespread notions of harmony as pleasant unity by striking at the heart of dominant discourses of possessive individualism which pivot upon an abjection of blackness.⁵⁹ As Penny Weiss maintains, “[Cooper’s] work contains a deep critique of individualism and constantly appeals to more communitarian concerns, emphasizing women’s social influence and responsibilities and stressing the importance of civility, humility, and commitment to helping others” (84). With a discerning eye towards Cooper’s strategic mobilization of discourses around conventional gender roles and of gender complementarity, as well as to the layeredness of Cooper’s appraisal of American liberal ideology, Weiss suggests the ongoing importance of examining the rhetorical *effects* of Cooper’s insight, rather than focusing solely on its possible use-value as a mechanism of appeasement. “[I]t is both the simultaneity and the sounding against one another that Cooper emphasizes in her argument,” affirms Fernheimer (293).

The section in question, “Has America a Race Problem” commences audaciously: “There are two kinds of peace in this world. The one produced by suppression, which is the passivity of death; the other brought about by a proper adjustment of living, acting

⁵⁹ See: Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race* (150).

forces” (Cooper 149). The “secret of true harmony,” she suggests then, necessitates not merely the presence of diversity, but of constituents’ mutual sustenance and simultaneous capacities to thrive (ibid). Adopting an array of symbols to represent often competing, yet finally indispensable parts of a whole—from a macro-level metaphor of planets and suns to a micro-level comparison of negative and positive electrodes in elements such as water and air—Cooper sculpts a conceptual space for peace and harmony secured not by violence or individual tyranny, but by the combination of multiple identities and perspectives. This coincides with Patricia J. Williams’ assertion in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* that “Justice is a continual balancing of competing visions, plural viewpoints, shifting histories, interests, and allegiances. To acknowledge that level of complexity is to require, to seek, and to value a multiplicity of knowledge systems, in pursuit of a more complete sense of the world in which we all live” (121). Overall, difference and conflict prevail in Cooper’s model at the expense of “unity without variety,” “sameness,” “stagnation,” or “death” (Cooper 152).

Not insignificantly, though also not uncharacteristically in the nineteenth century, Cooper also relies on evolutionist language to distinguish between the potential for the U.S. and vaguely defined “Asiatic types of civilization” to achieve harmony. In my reading, this does not denote “pandering,” but rather a cognizant, politicized appeal. In fact, it marks an only *apparently* ethnocentric lure by one perpetually mindful of her rhetorical context: that is, as to how and by whom she would predominantly be read and

heard.⁶⁰ After drawing her audience in with America's inevitable fixity at the apex of a Western civilizationalist framework, Cooper extends a separate argument that "not all conflict is undesirable or destructive, just as not all absences of conflict represent egalitarian or communitarian victories" (Weiss 96). With this move, she contradicts liberal prescription towards individual achievement and advancement above the needs of a heterogeneous collective. For Cooper, "healthy, stimulating, and progressive" conflict yields a harmonious juxtaposition of "radically opposing or racially different elements," thereby locating resistance and productive dissonance as central to the democratic project (151).

In this vein, Cooper's theories of conflict and community likewise destabilize binaristic modes of thought, as the scholarship of Fernheimer, May, and Kathy L. Glass emphasizes.⁶¹ The non-dichotomous approach of her writing, Cooper's issuing of multiple points of view to multiple audiences, posits a "both/and" approach to knowledge production antithetical to the Western rational tradition. As Gloria Anzaldúa asserts, acceptance of divergent, plural, even overtly ambiguous thought—of occupying and embodying a crossroads—facilitates awareness and generates political consciousness, while "either/or" logic perpetuates (and naturalizes) violence and tethers oppressed populations to their oppressors (100). Building upon the work of Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval's theory of "differential consciousness" likewise eschews narrow, constricting

⁶⁰ See: Bailey, "Anna Julia Cooper: Dedicated in the Name..." (59) and Chapter 3 of Hartman's *Scenes* on narrative seduction.

⁶¹ See: Fernheimer, "Arguing from Difference" (296); Glass, *Courting Communities* (89); May, *Anna Julia Cooper: Visionary Black Feminist* (93).

patterns of thought in favor of a variable and dynamic epistemological standpoint. Ever attentive to the given circumstances and itinerant within hierarchical systems of power, differential consciousness derives from the interchanges and intersections between political experience and a diverse range of ways of knowing. Exploring Cooper's critiques of American liberal ideologies of individualism and binary opposition—of how one can be at once oppressed and privileged, simultaneously disempowered as black and as a woman—ultimately situates her as a participant within a confluent black and Chicana feminist dialogue which crosses time and space, underscoring the ongoing relevance of Cooper's interventions in the present.

I would add to the insights above that Cooper also takes up the issue of difference in a manner resonant with contemporary feminist scholarship in "Woman Versus the Indian." In general, a crucial dimension of her argument in this chapter is the perversity and pervasiveness of "Southern influence, Southern ideas and Southern ideals" upon post-Reconstruction governance at the federal level (101). Without reproducing in full an extended passage containing perhaps Cooper's most scathing indictment of the South, her striking analysis of the suppression of difference—emerging from a memorable stew of metaphors of race, ethnicity, family, and blood—merits consideration at length.

For two hundred and fifty years [the Southerner] trained to his hand a people whom he made absolutely his own, in body, mind, and sensibility. He so insinuated differences and distinctions among them, that their personal attachment for him was stronger than for their own brethren and fellow sufferers. He made it a crime for two or three of them to be gathered in Christ's name without a white man's supervision, and a felony for one to teach them to read even the Word of Life; and yet they would defend his interest with their life blood; his smile was their happiness, a pat on the shoulder from him their reward. The slightest difference among themselves in condition, circumstances, opportunities, became barriers of jealousy and disunion. He sowed his blood broadcast among them,

then pitted mulatto against black, bond against free, house slave against plantation slave, even the slave of one clan against like slave of another clan; till, wholly oblivious of their ability for mutual succor and defense, all became centers of myriad systems of repellent forces, having but one sentiment in common, and that their entire subjection to that master hand. (102)

Importantly, this particular passage is hinged to Cooper's subsequent characterization of white paternalism as fundamentally manipulative, coercive, and in her words, a mode of "manage[ment]" and "hoodwink[ing]," the result of which blacks supposedly "wouldn't be free if they could" (103). Functioning less as an affirmation of black "antiwill" (Williams 219-20), or an anticipation of twentieth-century historical views of slavery as totalizing (i.e. Stanley Elkin's "Sambo" thesis), Cooper's words undermine pastoral rubrics of representation and crystallize entanglements of pleasure and subjection during the era of enslavement and beyond. Further, Cooper's depiction of the surveillance, deprivation, and sexual exploitation endured by black bondsmen and women at the hands of Southern whites clarifies the violent structure of feeling undergirding fin-de-siècle racial politics, an ethos predicated upon an eradication of black difference.

However, this passage also historicizes and literalizes a key component of Audre's Lorde's argument in her foundational 1984 volume *Sister Outsider*. Significantly, Lorde's essays extend a theory and a performance examining how difference might operate as a force of creativity, sustenance, and social change rather than as a site of pathology. Situating readings of gender, racial, ethnic, sexual, and class variance as a dissimulation of patriarchal ideology, subjection, and control, Lorde complicates interracial and intraracial suspicion, anti-lesbian hysteria, and other modes of what she refers to as "horizontal hostility." Such preoccupations, Lorde establishes in an

echo of Cooper's initial critique, foreclose possibilities for collective justice, reproduce white supremacist values, and keep the oppressed engrossed with the majority's concerns. Reading Cooper and Lorde's essays with and against one another reveals possibilities of the former's attenuated focus upon her own potential complicity with hegemonic structures, but also of the scholars' mutual carving of a necessarily heretical space for coalition. An understanding of the ways in which Cooper's insights into a liberal politics of objectivity and universality, possessive individualism and binary logic, overlap with Lorde's vision, necessarily expands the very framework through which black feminist resistance attains legibility.

IV

Another one of the primary lines of critical inquiry in Hazel Carby's materialist analysis in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, a text referenced at the beginning of this chapter, corresponds to problematizing and contextualizing late twentieth-century mainstream feminists' urge to "discover a lost sisterhood and to reestablish feminist solidarity" (Carby 6), a task taken up by many black feminist intellectuals in their work including bell hooks, Valerie Smith, Ann duCille, and Deborah McDowell.⁶² Significantly, Carby activates Cooper's keen sense of the provinciality and the circulation of liberal affect within ostensibly progressive political movements to structure her reading of impediments to modern interracial coalition-building. More specifically, Carby taps into

⁶² See: bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women in Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Valerie Smith, "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other'"; Ann DuCille, *Skin Trade* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996) and "On Canons: Anxious History and the Rise of Black Feminist Literary Studies"; Deborah McDowell, "Recycling: Race, Gender, and the Practice of Theory"

the power of Cooper's critique in the aforementioned "Woman Versus the Indian," to unearth the previous life of late twentieth-century feminism's origin narrative of itself. Indeed, as I have suggested elsewhere, and as Cooper's analyses make abundantly clear, much contemporary feminist conflict marks "a reprisal of earlier hegemonic scripts, a reformulation of prior regimes of ownership" (Mann 576).

Thus, I argue that Cooper's third chapter opens in an only apparently celebratory tenor as she applauds Susan B. Anthony and Anna Shaw of *Wimodaughsis*—an elite organization of wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters in support of the cultural and professional advancement of women—for their censure of the group's secretary for refusing to admit a woman of color. Cooper's account of the Southern secretary's "grief" and "horror" at the prospect of permitting a black woman access to the club—of the "painful possibility of the sight of a black man coming in the future to escort from an evening class this solitary cream-colored applicant"—encapsulates quite compellingly what Vorris Nunley terms the "biopower of White comfort" (Cooper 81-2; Nunley 16). Concerned, as was Audre Lorde in "The Uses of Anger," with the ways in which white middle-class ease and contentment function as modes of policing blacks' "reputations, their jobs, their safety, and too often, their very lives," Nunley grapples with a vestige of cult (of true womanhood) ideology which Cooper's work ardently sought to disrupt, yet which still holds sway in present-day feminist debates (Nunley 16).⁶³ Nevertheless, Cooper's fundamentally kairotic account, alerting us to the importance of what rhetorical scholar Shirley Wilson Logan terms "arrangement," in fact, merely seduces her audience

⁶³ I'm thinking here of Susan Gubar's 1998 *Critical Inquiry* article, "What Ails Feminist Criticism?"

with outward relish for Shaw's compassion and a meditation on the moral failings of the South. According to Logan, "Arrangement is important in persuasive discourse [...] because changes in the audience are contingent upon the order in which the elements in an argument are presented" (117). Indeed, *kairos* and arrangement alike reflect a complex manipulation of the elements of time, place, culture, audience, decorum, and style. Attentiveness to rhetorical pace in these ways facilitates engagement by defusing potential audience skepticism or suspicion. In the end, Cooper's project undercuts dominant notions of narrative progress and Northern empathy, culminating in a stunning rhetorical skewering of Shaw's privileged ethos of tolerance.

Accordingly, Cooper's initial suggestion "[t]hat Miss Shaw is broad and just and liberal *in principal* is proved beyond contradiction," and as Frances Smith Foster observes, the imprecisely Native American undertone of *Wimodaughsis*, are key (Cooper 80; emphasis added). Granting Cooper a "fine opportunity to pun upon the arrogance and fallacy of [*Wimodaughsis*'] use" in the first place, Cooper's strategic rhetorical manipulation in "Woman Versus the Indian" exposes Shaw's implicit endorsement of racial hierarchies and her acute proximity to, rather than moral high ground over and above, her organization's Southern secretary (Foster 188). Indeed, Cooper collapses the distance between the venerable, liberal-minded "lady" at the North and the secretary who "who really would like to help 'elevate' the colored people (in her own way of course and so long as they understand their places)" (Cooper 81). Furthermore, of Shaw's 1891 speech at the National Woman's Council in Washington, the namesake of Cooper's chapter, the latter argues forcefully, "Is not woman's cause broader, and deeper, and

grander, than a blue stocking debate or an aristocratic pink tea? Why should woman become plaintiff in a suit versus the Indian, or the Negro or any other race or class who have been crushed under the iron heel of Anglo-Saxon power and selfishness?" (123).

That is, in a section of *A Voice* keenly attuned to the violence of American expansionism and imperialism, Cooper explicitly links the contexts of black, Native, and others' subjection under the force of the U.S. settler-colonial project and signals mainstream white feminists' historic contribution to and ongoing complicity with such a system. "If the Indian has been wronged and cheated by the puissance of this American government," she adds, "it is woman's mission to plead with her country to cease to do evil and to pay its honest debts" (124). Perceptively, Cooper sounds a critique of the ranking of oppression which would become central to women of color feminisms in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and indicts a liberal politics of inclusion predicated upon white supremacy.⁶⁴

In fact, "[w]e too often mistake individuals' honor for race development," Cooper continues regarding the limits of a palatable, "exceptional" blackness, "and so are ready to substitute pretty accomplishments for sound sense and earnest purpose" (29).⁶⁵ Cognizant of the cruel underside of such "pretty accomplishments," Cooper demonstrates special attention to the violence enacted through language in ostensibly progressive circles. In this vein, she further asserts in "Woman Versus the Indian," "Woman should

⁶⁴ See: Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1981).

⁶⁵ See: Carby (*Reconstructing* 99) and DuCille and McDowell (as cited in note xxii).

not, *even by inference, or for the sake of argument*, seem to disparage what is weak” (117; emphasis added). In a passage evocative of what I deem to be a broader epistemological move on the part of black female scholars of the period, including intellectual-activist Ida B. Wells, Cooper problematizes practices of what Scott Richard Lyons refers to as “rhetorical imperialism.” Though Cooper is frequently compared and as often de-politicized as Wells’ antithesis on a continuum of radicalism, I argue that they extend analogous critiques of the limits of liberal ideological formations as expressed through language.

Significantly, Wells palpably echoes Cooper’s claims regarding the denigrating impact of well-intended speech in the by now classic *A Red Record*, published just three short years after *A Voice* in 1895. In the eighth chapter of this crucial text of the anti-lynching movement, Wells directly addresses commentary dispensed by Frances Willard, president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, at their annual convention in Cleveland in November 1894. In terms akin to Cooper’s concerning Shaw, Wells avers,

I desire no quarrel with the W. C. T. U., but my love for the truth is greater than my regard for an alleged friend [Willard] who, through ignorance or design misrepresents in the most harmful way the cause of a long suffering race, and then unable to maintain the truth of her attack excuses herself as it were by the wave of the hand, declaring that ‘she did not intend a literal interpretation to be given to the language used.’ When the lives of men, women, and children are at stake, when the inhuman butchers of innocents attempt to justify their barbarism by fastening upon a whole race the obloque [sic] of the most infamous of crimes. It is little less than criminal to apologize for the butchers today and tomorrow to repudiate the apology by declaring it a figure of speech. (Royster 147-8)

Here, Wells strikes at the heart of mythologies of black bestiality, hypersexuality, white male chivalry, and the lynching-as-rape-prevention thesis, but also of progressive white

leaders' implicit reinforcement of such positions. Her notable qualification—"through ignorance or design"—shifts the critical register away from intention and public apology as alibi towards the realm of rhetorical effects. As Nunley argues, "While individual intention matters, [political] rationalities mediate intentionality, operating on the level of power, categories, and framing"; that is, "framing who gets to speak as a citizen and how, and what behaviors, rhetorics, knowledges, and identities are deemed legitimate, acceptable, normative, and natural within the American imaginary as citizenship" (Nunley 12). Wells challenges Willard's governing assumptions of blackness as excess within the American polity, pinpointing the ways in which white privilege frames and informs precisely which lives can hold value. Citing an ongoing tradition within liberal discourse of a violent troping and effacement of blackness to metaphor, perhaps most (though by no means exclusively) evident in contemporary dehumanizing representations of Sojourner Truth, Wells underscores the dire stakes of even the most subtle of lynching apologia.⁶⁶ In an expression of epistemic continuity rather than polarity, then, Cooper and Wells situate notions of blackness as expendable, though embedded as "inference" or mere "figure of speech," as forces of containment, an extension of a violent, if well-meaning agenda.

One means by which Cooper counters the limits of this manifestly instrumental, if liberal ethos of tolerance and inclusion, I would argue, is by positing an alternative social theory, a public pedagogy of civility I call "critical regard." Playing with contemporary astronomer/writer Percival Lowell's theory in his *Soul of the Far East* that America is

⁶⁶ See: Mann, "Theorizing 'What Could Have Been'..." (579).

“the least courteous nation on the globe,” Cooper sets the stage for her final condemnation of Shaw’s prejudice (qtd. in Lemert and Bahn 36). She declares in “Woman Versus the Indian,” “...I have determined to plead with our women, the mannerless sex on this mannerless continent, to institute a reform by placing immediately in our national curricula a department for teaching GOOD MANNERS” (Cooper 99; emphasis in original). With this move, Cooper simultaneously engages and appropriates prevailing definitions of refinement and dynamics of educability to subversive ends. Indeed, as Candice M. Jenkins observes in *Private Lives, Proper Relations*, “...the dominant notion of ‘civilization’ is...a loaded one, heavy with the burden of white supremacy, Western imperialism, and the so-called ‘savagery’ of nonwhite people across the globe” (2). Yet, Cooper extricates decorum from the gendered, racialized, and colonial realm of etiquette alone. Instead, Cooper politicizes courtesy as an ethical performance grounded in faith in “substantial democracy.”⁶⁷ Taken together with her emphases on difference, ambiguity, and conflictive “harmony” throughout *A Voice*, “critical regard”—Cooper’s charge for reciprocal dignity, decency, and respect—exceeds the space of comportment to one of imagining social change.

Accordingly, Cooper speaks of “the secret of universal courtesy,” which she situates as at once an “art,” “science,” and “religion” (117). Rather than a disciplining formation concerned with codifying and naturalizing purportedly objective standards of

⁶⁷ See: Nunley, *Keepin’ It Hushed*: “Substantial democracy goes beyond voting to create new or usable knowledge by members of the body politic that offers some possibility of altering the dominant political and social rationalities. Substantial democracy holds out the hope that, through various kinds of participation, citizens can have a measurable effect on their daily lives” (164).

appropriate conduct, “critical regard” functions within Cooper’s framework as an agile font of meaning, subjectivity, and worldview. “[W]hen race, color, sex, [and] condition, are realized to be the accidents, not the substance of life, and consequently as not obscuring or modifying the inalienable title to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness,” maintains Cooper, “then is mastered the science of politeness, the art of courteous contact, which is naught but the practical application of the principal of benevolence, the back bone and marrow of all religion” (125). Courtesy, in this sense, stands for liberation and collective justice. Decorum entails parity on the terrain of the human and on that of the citizen-subject.

Just as “critical regard” foregrounds the liberal problematic—the disparity between liberalism’s professed aims and its uneven effects—Wells crystallizes a similar break between theory and lived black realities. In *A Red Record*, Wells demonstrates the slippage between abstract chivalry and the institutionalized rape of black women, as well as the harassment of Northern white teachers laboring to educate blacks following Emancipation. “Whatever faults and failings other nations may have in their dealings with their own subjects or with other people, no other civilized nation stands condemned before the world with a series of crimes so peculiarly national,” Wells declares, exploiting the aforementioned gap to censure America and to expose meanings of civility which exceed the sphere of whiteness (Royster 81-2). “It becomes a painful duty of the Negro,” she continues, “to reproduce a record which shows that a large portion of the American people avow anarchy, condone murder and defy the contempt of civilization” (ibid). Though Cooper never gestures towards the prospect of black dignity independent

of the U.S. nation-state, her seizure of juridical parlance in the passage above—near verbatim—renders constitutional mandate hollow. At the same time, she forges a pathway for Wells and others by opening up liberal propriety to possibilities for dissident reconfiguration.

“Though she seems to be calling for greater courtesy, she is actually demanding a better sense of ‘self,’ of personhood—one might even say of womanhood,” confirms Lemert in his introduction to the most complete edited collection of Cooper’s essays, papers, and letters to date. “She means, I think, to trifle with [Lowell’s] half-baked theory of good manners in order subtly to emphasize the deeper values of personal character (with which, of course, her work as a teacher was preoccupied)” (Lemert and Bahn 37). Formerly privatized by white “ladies” at the North and South alike, good manners serve in Cooper’s project as sites of political consciousness and expression. Though Cooper takes pages upon pages to execute her critique of Shaw—a performance of “studied uncertainty,” Lemert observes, by one fully “aware of what she has been doing” (38)—her conclusion is plain: progressive liberal advocates’ reliance on circumscribed notions of belonging enable violent practices of exclusion. By redefining civility, and precisely who can and cannot occupy such a domain, Cooper contests raced and gendered asymmetries of power and envisions alternative ways of achieving freedom.

Hence, “critical regard” is buoyed not by false optimism or by naiveté on Cooper’s part. Rather, it is rooted in and by an abundant faith. “Religion for this reformer was an embodied, intuitive form of reason,” observes Karen Baker-Fletcher,

enabling Cooper to harness non-empirical and material knowledge claims, New Testament scripture, Christian symbolism, and other redemptive figurations in an attempt to dramatically alter conditions in the political public sphere (20, 169). To Baker-Fletcher's insights, I would add that Cooper's faith surpasses institutional bounds. As her critique of abstract policies privileged by the Protestant Episcopal Church indicates, Cooper models a supple and discerning spirituality. Evoking Patricia Hill Collins' yoked theorization of "visionary pragmatism," "faith," and "deep love" in 1998's *Fighting Words*, Cooper illuminates the imbrication of secular struggle and sacred ardor in securing equality.

As Collins asserts, "...faith constitutes a *process* whereby individuals and groups use an ethical framework grounded in deeply felt beliefs to construct meaningful everyday lives" (199-200). Cooper advances a sacredness which, in a different, though not unrelated context, Lawrence Levine defines not as a "rejection of the present," but as a "process of incorporating within this world all the elements of the divine" (31). Ultimately, belief contained by doctrine remains static. The faith of Cooper and Collins, by contrast, is abiding and processual, compassionate and collective. The political exigency and accountability which Collins witnesses growing up among the black women in her Philadelphia neighborhood link them to Cooper and her revolutionary striving for a mutually sustaining, civil society.

Similarly, I would suggest that the "politics of black respectability," as a rubric, is not broad enough to account for the capaciousness of Cooper's articulation of decorum as critical public pedagogy. In astute and nuanced critical readings, scholars Cindy White

and Catherine Dobris, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Elizabeth Higginbotham attend to both the effectiveness and the limits of such a politics among figures like Cooper, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin in the black women's Club Movement; of black female parishioners in post-Reconstruction era Richmond; and of the black women of the National Black Baptist Convention, respectively.⁶⁸ Moreover, demonstrating specific attention to the association of individual behavior modification as a means to attain citizenship with histories of white supremacist civilizing discourses, Rod Ferguson's and Farah Jasmine Griffin's respective work speak to the ways in which ideologies of black respectability are strictly policed along the lines of gender, class, and heteronormativity. Serving a managerial function in relationship to often poor and rural black communities, those championing such positions in the nineteenth and early twentieth century frequently acted in complicity with the interests of state capital by holding out false promises of protection and covering over institutionalized modes of repression.⁶⁹ Further, Jenkins usefully characterizes instantiations of the politics of black respectability into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as expressions of a "salvific wish." A response to the very real vulnerabilities of what Elizabeth Alexander calls "bottom-line blackness," the salvific wish attaches salvation to a compulsory containment

⁶⁸ See: White and Dobris, "The Nobility of Womanhood"; Brown, "Negotiating the Transformation of the Public Sphere"; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993).

⁶⁹ See: Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, and Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001) (pgs. 72-3).

of desire, to the suppression of black women's bodies, and to the erasure of sexual nonconformity.⁷⁰

To be sure, the severing of the spiritual from the erotic in *A Voice*—the presence of which in black feminisms is by no means reducible to Cooper's oeuvre—forecloses on the unique potential embedded in deep sensuality. As Lorde reminds, the erotic as an innately political, nonrational force yields a profound sense of satisfaction, fulfillment, and understanding (56). It simultaneously inspires wisdom and change. Cooper's silence on this score, her rhetorical enactment of what Lisa B. Thompson aptly theorizes as a performance of middle-class black womanhood, at once signals a missed opportunity and reinscribes a false dichotomy between the production of knowledge and the production of joy. At the same time, Cooper's muteness around the erotic underscores the specific challenges black women face when presenting a public, sexual self, and the need to take seriously (rather than to pathologize) Cooper's personal affinities, intimacies, and life patterns apart from *A Voice*.

And yet, focused precisely on combating structural subjection enacted across the domains of law and public policy, post-secondary education, religion, and popular culture, Cooper's philosophy of "critical regard" does not pivot upon liberal notions of uplift and self-help. She does not propagate distinctly individual correctives, promote a culture of self-policing, or fetishize autonomy and volition as conduits to social and political mobility. More accurately, Cooper underscores solidarity and accountability amidst groups of various racial, gender, class backgrounds and abilities. Not

⁷⁰ See: Alexander, "Can you be BLACK" (95).

fundamentally therapeutic or ameliorative in orientation, but rather proactive, Cooper's approach poses a direct challenge to prevailing regimes of power and privilege.

"Cooper...advises her readers not to buy into bootstraps ideology in which the victims of oppression are blamed for their lowly status, lack of education, and poverty, as if these are freely chosen," corroborates May; "[s]he therefore advocates a bottom-up approach...not reliance on external forces, for other people's 'benevolent wisdom,' no matter how pious or well-intended, can be both short-sighted and patronizing" (162).

Therefore, her recuperation of the meaning of civil subjectivity shifts the epistemic frame of citizens' political relationships and responsibilities to themselves and to one another.

With this paradigm, I contend, Cooper expressly foregrounds egalitarian imperatives, thereby influencing critical registers of embodied knowledge and black resistance in fundamental ways.

V

Along with its content, the very organizational structure of *A Voice* is suffused with a politics which undermines liberal ideology. The first section of the text bears the title "Soprano Obligato" and contains the following chapters: "Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race," "The Higher Education of Woman," "Woman vs. The Indian," and "The Status of Woman in America." "Tutti Ad Libitum" constitutes the heading of the second part of the volume, in which the chapters "Has America a Race Problem; If So, How Can It Best Be Solved?" "The Negro as Presented in American Literature," "What are We Worth?" and "The Gain from a Belief" appear. Thus, in a nod to the title of the collection as a whole, Cooper mobilizes a

fluency in musical theory to situate “Soprano Obligato” and “Tutti Ad Libitum” as parts of a political intervention that is at once textual, but also acutely preoccupied with sound and voice.

Aptly, Cooper qualifies soprano—the highest and overwhelmingly feminized of the vocal registers—with the term *obligato*, which references the essential nature and crucial contribution of a particular melody to the fullness of a musical performance. Hence, as a vestibular site simultaneously denoting distinctiveness and independence—in particular, a cue that a part be played only by a specified instrument—soprano *obligato* ushers in the precise segment of *A Voice* grounded by Cooper’s caveat that “[o]nly the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter.’” In defiance of the silencing constraints of racist and sexist subjection, Cooper emphasizes the singularity of black women’s voices—“a counter-melody that stands out in the listener’s ear and is used to add drama”—in overcoming outwardly hostile as well as more subtly oppressive political and economic regimes (Baker-Fletcher 136).

In fact, Cooper frames “Part First” as testimony, or as an offering (Baker-Fletcher 191). As Collins confirms, “[...] breaking silence, speaking out, and talking back in academic settings constitute public testimonials,” politically and epistemologically resonant experiences accessible beyond the bounds of organized religion and readily distinguishable in black feminist thought from Maria W. Stewart’s and Sojourner Truth’s formative influences in the early nineteenth century through to the present day (*Fighting Words* 237-8). “Tutti Ad Libitum,” conveying a more ensemblic and improvisational tenor, both supplements and reinforces Cooper’s initial claims in “Soprano Obligato.”

With a focus on a collective quest for human rights and an intersectional attentiveness to issues of gender, race, and class, the latter half of the text de-naturalizes a privileging of the individual extant within the American liberal tradition. Indeed, “the second title describes the Black community as a whole, its men and its women [...] There is no set plan, no set ending. Rather they are in the process of a creative event even as they are heard by their listeners” (Baker-Fletcher 136). Read with and against one another, the two sections foreground black women as agents within a fundamentally dialogical system.

Following Cooper, Baker-Fletcher calls up one of the former’s musical metaphors to propel her 1994 text *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper*. Citing Cooper’s de-linking of notions of democracy and liberty from an originary realm of Western European modernity or whiteness, Baker-Fletcher activates Cooper’s perception that the “urge for freedom and equality, this Singing Something within humanity, can never be truly suppressed by a dominating race or nation” (190). Instead, “it eventually rises up, comes to voice, and actively moves in the world to demand social reform,” a critical lens through which Baker-Fletcher orients and enlarges the scope of twentieth-century womanist theological activism (ibid). Usefully, Baker-Fletcher also deepens Cooper’s archive for subheadings such as “Soprano Obligato” beyond the commonly observed allusion to the operas and oratorios of German-English Baroque composer George Friedrich Handel (1685-1759). In many ways, such a reading traffics in discourses of authenticity and circumscribed understandings of Cooper as classist or elitist, evaluations to which Baker-Fletcher’s monograph overall is not finally

immune. Yet, in this case, Baker-Fletcher suggests a productive link between politicized acts of self-definition in relation to Cooper's subtitles and to the genre of black spirituals (194). Though Baker-Fletcher ultimately makes mention of Du Bois' characterization of such spirituals as "sorrow songs" in order to recommend that "[w]omanist theologians must turn to African American song as one of the cultural forms in which Black Americans have expressed and recorded their feelings and thought about Black experiences in America," I conjure *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880* for their reverberation with Cooper's own musical poetics.

Indeed, *A Voice* and *Souls*, as confluent analytics, reflect interrelatedness on multiple levels: Du Bois' "problem of the Twentieth century" is Cooper's "perplexing cul de sac of the nation." For the purposes of this project, however, I draw attention to a key claim articulated by Carby in *Race Men* regarding *Souls*—that is, that the aural framing in which Du Bois engages at the start of each chapter carries out a particular form of epistemological and rhetorical work which the text then reinforces. In contrast to the ethnographic reading of the sorrow songs put forward by Eric Sundquist in *To Wake the Nations: Race and the Making of American Literature*, or—I might add—the anthropological bent implicit in Baker-Fletcher's interpretation, Carby argues, "I believe that the text of each chapter has a specific performative role: each is a composition of improvised lyrics upon the musical fragments that precede them. Du Bois does not reflect directly upon the lyrics of the sorrow songs prior to his conclusion precisely because he intends that his chapters be regarded as new lyrics, new improvisations" (88). As a consequence, for Carby, the project of *Souls* is inherently political, while also

signaling “the actual imaginative creation of a national, African American... cultural presence, a presence which becomes a forceful participant in a cultural struggle over defining exactly what should constitute not just ‘black culture,’ but American culture” (89). What has been overlooked in critical scholarship more broadly are not only the ways in which Carby’s insights might extend to the poetry which concludes each of the chapters in Du Bois’ later 1935 volume, composed at Cooper’s behest, but how *A Voice* is likewise shot through with concerns with black music as theoretical, rather than purely sociological, and with sonic dimensions and effects as frameworks through which to revise the standards of national community.

Cooper’s *Singing Something*, Baker-Fletcher also notes, marks a gift from God, a blessing discernible on the horizon of sound. Accordingly, “For Cooper humankind’s creation in the image of God is more than merely imagistic,” Baker-Fletcher argues; “It is vocal. It is musical. It is auditory [...] She was interested in the sound, the words, the composition of God’s voice” (191). Underscoring the texture and tangibility of God’s tone, Cooper further explores the nature of what it means to function as a channel for His democratic intonation, a vessel for His revelatory telling. Hence, Baker-Fletcher foregrounds Cooper’s express linkage of the meaning of speech with the power of physicality and embodiment, locating the “divine Spark” of the *Singing Something* as a dynamic which finally exceeds normative patterns of feminine passivity and masculine authority *and* of mental transcendence versus bodily groundedness.

Thus, “Cooper’s metaphor of voice involves the body in a very expressive sense,” Baker-Fletcher continues: “The entire body is engaged in voice: the lungs, the diaphragm,

the voice box” (192). Elizabeth Alexander apprehends as much in her own work around Cooper, maintaining similarly, “Using the voice is a physical act, one that first announces the existence of the body of residence and then trumpets its arrival in a public space. The physicality of that metaphor [“of the unheard voice of the African American woman”] asserts corporeal presence in the space of imagined absence” (“We Must Be” 345). Correspondingly, I would argue that a more explicit engagement with the political and rhetorical implications of Cooper’s spiritual meditations in this regard would enhance Baker-Fletcher’s insights into the overall richness and reach of Cooper’s project. That is, how do Cooper’s aural scaffolding and theorization of harmony challenge the apparent discreteness of Western theology and rationality? Rather than limiting Cooper’s conclusions to the fact that “through voice one can assert the sacredness and beauty of the body” (ibid), how might one similarly account for the ways in which *A Voice* defies the liberal problematic by refusing a mind-body split endemic to Western philosophical thought?

A brief turn to Lindon Barrett’s incisive *Blackness and Value* is instructive in response to such queries. As Barrett contends, eighteenth-century gendered discourses of progress, possessive individualism, and perfection codified a violent expenditure of blackness and inaugurated an intellectual regime privileging reason, rationality, and literacy over opacity, materiality, and embodiment. Central to the project of Enlightenment, and of especial relevance here, was the attendant rise of a purportedly objective occularcentric thrust policing the realm of the human precisely by delegitimizing aurality as an authentic site of meaning and experience. However, drawing

upon the works of Du Bois, Douglass, and Alice Walker as to the potential of political redress rooted in black song, Barrett theorizes black music as a means of problematizing dominant inscriptions of blackness as valueless as well as primitivist reductions of blackness to exclusively oral ways of knowing. Via its “sly alterity,” insists Barrett, the black singing voice reclaims rational authority in the name of the body and permits the exchange of the body-as-chattel for an existence in excess of hypervisibility and commodification. Whether in the form of the ring shout in black spiritual communities, scatting within blues and jazz performances, or even dance, Barrett’s conceptualization of an-Other form of black value initiates a call not for the worth of black labor, but for the importance of what it means to be both black and human.

Critical consideration of the musicality of not only Du Bois’, but Cooper’s spiritual strivings, then, yields understanding into how the narrative of *A Voice* sounds, and into the ways in which its sounding undermines Western reliance on predominantly visual terms of order and coherence. In other words, Cooper’s composition—its musical framing, metaphor, and theory—cannot be relegated to the cosmetic domain of style alone. Rather, Cooper’s textual and phonic substance coalesce to produce new modes of valuing black womanhood and oppressed peoples more broadly. Recuperating what Erica R. Edwards refers to as the “erotic and nonrational,” Cooper testifies to the failure of Reason to transcend material presence (71). Her recovery of the body through music, her own fin-de-siècle blues, re-frames civic equality and American civil subjectivity. For another critic, Cooper inaugurates an entire tradition of embodied discourse, a metonymic performance which confronts what she appositely calls the “myth of the muted body,”

that extends even to First Lady Michelle Obama's self-presentation in the contemporary public sphere (B. Cooper 40-2).⁷¹ "[T]he challenge lies in developing flexible interpretive strategies able to attend to Cooper's different vocal registers or resonances without silencing them," adds May, "and more expansive notions of political action or of counter-publics able to recognize a broader range of activities as, in fact, activist" (50). Consequently, Cooper's dissonance within larger rubrics of black resistive performance speaks less to her racialist accommodation and more to ossified practices of mishearing in need of transformation.

VI

There is one other quality of Cooper's prose that is both hard to miss, and arguably, one of the primary sources of her inaudibility. Simply put: she's funny. Less simply put: her sarcasm at once indexes and diverges from a broader tradition of African American humor invested in laying bare "epistemologies of ignorance" within dominant liberal ideological formations.⁷² In their respective and by now quasi-canonical texts, Lawrence Levine and Mel Watkins note the ways in which black wit as early as the antebellum period often hinged upon exposing the absurdity of racism in both its

⁷¹ On embodied rhetoric, see also: Jay Dolmage's "Metis, Mestiza, Medusa."

⁷² On "epistemologies of ignorance," see May: "To comprehend more fully how Cooper's relationship to writing and speaking is inherently both fraught and freeing, it is vital to understand that she had to develop a particular set of political, rhetorical, and philosophical techniques to negotiate her different audiences' investment(s) in what Mills and others characterize as 'epistemologies of ignorance.' In order to maintain 'conferred dominance' and to uphold the predominant and powerful 'myth of meritocracy' in the United States, Mills underscores how beneficiaries of an 'epistemology of ignorance' have 'structured opacities' built into their knowledge practices, such that 'evasion and self-deception' about privilege, power, and inequity become the de facto epistemic norms, even as truth, objectivity, and transparency are the *declared* epistemic norms" (89).

institutionalized and more individualized manifestations. “The humor of absurdity worked through a straight-faced assumption of the rationality of the system and the belief structure upon which it rested,” writes Levine (310). Of black jokes about segregation, specifically a comic anecdote by a former slave woman regarding the pervasive, if illogical anti-integrationist sentiment in the pre-Civil War North, Levine explains that “[t]he note of absurdity struck by Mrs. Prosser remained the chief thrust of black humor concerning American racial codes” (310), adding later, “[t]hese jokes acknowledged black fear and subservience even as they stressed the inanity and fantasy nature of the system which bound them” (311). Watkins, too, speaks of African American humor as an idiom, or the “shared ironic vision of a group,” characterized by an exploitation of the very breach between procedural and substantive equality—or the liberal problematic—which *A Voice* brings cogently to the fore (568).

In many ways building upon and extending the work of Levine and Watkins, Glenda Carpio’s 2008 *Laughing Fit to Kill* simultaneously adopts a more narrow focus on the hilarity of black literature and art as a direct “response to the situation of forced migration and [to] transatlantic alienation” while duly underscoring the heterogeneity and epistemological import of purportedly harmless black jest (8). By offering an understanding of humor as a site of pleasure and release, denigration and distress, Carpio positions laughter as a source of knowledge about what it means to be black and what it means to be human in contested terrain—terrain with which Cooper was quite familiar.

Darryl Dickson-Carr, in his study of contemporary African American novels, similarly observes a privileging of *reductio ad absurdum* in black satirical practice. Yet,

as does Carpio, he calls for an expansion of the very terms by which African American humor is recognized in the first place. In particular, at least two theoretical dimensions of Dickson-Carr's analysis hold significance for this project. Hence, I draw attention to his interrogation of the ways in which satire "transgresses boundaries of taste, propriety, decorum, and the current ideological status quo" (1) and in which certain veins of ironic performance are overwhelmingly gendered masculine (5). Accordingly, I argue that Cooper's wry remarks must be thought and contextualized within an explicitly raced and gendered sphere of black performativity and emergent modernity, as her sly quips register contestation of normative readings of black ontology as lack and of women as inherently inferior to their male counterparts. Moreover, Cooper's sarcasm contributes to a textured critical voice suspicious of white supremacist violence, but also of what Lauren Berlant refers to in *The Female Complaint* as considerate and concerned "soft supremacy," or "compassionate liberalism," which compels compliance via a well-intentioned non-racism and installs an abject relation to any difference that cannot be fully recuperated (6). Thus, I maintain that in a work penned by one rendered perpetually accommodating and restrained by critics in our contemporary moment, Cooper not only introduces her own subversive public pedagogy of "critical regard" in *A Voice*, but directly engages in an unruly mode of discourse which negates reigning cultural dictates and rationalities of politesse.

In *ReWriting White*, Todd Vogel concurs, identifying language and other rhetorical skills—specifically, signification and irony—as Cooper's "cultural capital," the means by which she forged incisive social critique (86). Though he does not concentrate

on sarcasm in particular, Vogel usefully describes the ways in which nineteenth-century scientific racists' prognoses constrained and relegated black oratory to the realm of "feeling" and inadvertent comic relief. Citing prevailing sentiments of black rhetors' overuse of allegory and Biblical parable, but also of their "grotesque inventions in grammar and rhetoric" and "'characteristic fondness for big words' that they did not understand," Vogel contends that Cooper, via at once humorous and deductive reasoning, "tackle[s] head-on ideas about blacks as unintentionally comic orators and accept[s] no compromise on her argument" (92). For Vogel, Cooper's divergence from the seemingly more self-deprecating, deferent, and feminized rhetorical styles of other public intellectuals of the period, including Mary Church Terrell and Francis Willard, is predicated upon deeply deliberate and sardonic word play.

However, in *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory*, Tavia Nyong'o perhaps most closely crystallizes the political consequences of the dry wit of a figure like Cooper through a detailed focus on antebellum deployments of black sarcasm. Locating sarcasm as a "linguistic and performative mood" distinct from expressions of nihilistic despair in the wake of necropolitical oppression, Nyong'o examines the way orators including Frederick Douglass, William Cooper Nell, James McCune Smith, William G. Allen, and Martin Delany (especially in his novel, *Blake*) invoked such humor in order to defy Enlightenment, Christian, and sentimentalist dogma, and to problematize dominant historical and archival memory (158). Of elite black rhetors' use of parody and anger as a "way of inflecting ideas," Nyong'o suggests that "[a]ntebellum black activists used sarcasm to distance themselves from their present

condition, not only in relation to an ostensibly glorious past in Africa but also in relation to an ambiguous future in which racial justice might indeed be secured” (155). Not before noting that “a recurrent outcome of a successful act of sarcasm is the metamessage ‘I don’t mean this’,” and that “what distinguishes sarcasm is the clarity and intentionality of the alienation of the speaker from his or her words,” Nyong’o demonstrates the assertive, overtly disruptive, and epistemological nature of this particular form of black irony, as well as its reliance on an outsider-within methodological approach (158).⁷³ Furthermore, given Nyong’o’s even more productive turn in his work to the etymology of *sarcasmus* as “a gnashing of teeth or tearing of flesh,” I argue for an express linkage between his analysis of early nineteenth-century lampoons of American liberalism and Cooper’s comic post-bellum politics (157). Accounting for sarcasm as “a bodily practice as much as a spoken register,” Nyong’o speaks to Cooper’s and her contemporaries’ critical investment in dismantling binaries between mind and body, emotion and intellect, Emancipation and freedom (ibid).

Despite Cooper’s translation of the notably parodic eleventh-century epic, *The Pilgrimage of Charlemagne*, from medieval to modern French during her lifetime (May 81), and contemporary cultural critics’, including Albion Tourgee’s, public allusion to the sarcastic elements contained in *A Voice* (Hutchison 103), sustained attentiveness to the rhetorical effects of such humor remains scarce. Indeed, Nyong’o’s brilliant reading of an alternative canon of nineteenth-century sarcasts, in its male-centeredness, reinforces

⁷³ I refer to sarcasm as an outsider-within perspective given Nyong’o’s point that: “Sarcasm displayed what Haiman describes as a ‘divided self,’ one that placed the sarcast in but not of the linguistic world in which what she or he spoke” (160).

Dickson-Carr's aforementioned insight into the gendering of black humor. But what of Cooper's clever observations in *A Voice* of the trite excuses leveled by whites to disarm calls for racial equity, her claims that "one would think they were words to conjure with, so potent and irresistible is their spell as an argument [against integration] at the North as well as in the South" (101)? What of her acerbic anticipation of Ruthie Gilmore's incisive definition of racism, when she asserts, "society, where it has not exactly said to its dogs 's-s-sik him!' has at least engaged to be looking in another direction or studying the rivers on Mars" (92)? How might one account for her ireful critiques of the privileging of blood ties at the South, her statement that "if your great great great grandfather's grandfather stole and pillaged and slew, and you can prove it, your blood has become blue and you are at great pains to establish that relationship" (103)? Or her commentary to the Episcopal priests, mentioned at the outset of this chapter, that "the doctors while discussing their scientifically conclusive diagnosis of the disease, will perhaps not think its presumptuous in the patient if he dares to suggest where at least the pain is" (36)? In these moments, as with her oft-cited rejoinder to the question of how increased education might hinder women's chances for marriage—that "strong-minded women could be, when they thought it worth their while, quite endurable" (72)—I maintain that Cooper upends conventional expectations of black comedic performance in order to pillory dominant alibis undergirding state-sanctioned violence and exclusion. Yet, while participating in a broader tradition of African American humor, Cooper also refracts this legacy by opting for a multi-vocal approach with appeal for heterogeneous contexts and audiences (Alexander "We Must Be" 347, May 60). Via a defiant mock

deference, Cooper marshals the patently gendered attribute of reserve to pinpoint the significant expense at which race and male privilege are customarily accrued.

Two examples from *A Voice* prove instructive. “In a manner illustrative of prevailing discriminatory conceptions of rights,” establishes Gaines in *Uplifting the Race*, “Cooper vehemently rejected the arguments of white women suffragists that they [...] were more entitled to the vote than what she sarcastically called ‘the great burly black man, ignorant and gross and depraved’” (144). As Gaines rightly, if briefly intimates, Cooper’s sarcasm in “Woman Versus the Indian” signals deep-seated imbrications between black disfranchisement and cultural mythologies of black hypermasculinity, sexuality, criminality, and infantilization (Cooper 123). Her ventriloquizing of demeaning tropes of blackness in this instance insinuates complicity with the dominant ethos, but ultimately derides the emptiness of abstract rights discourse and of parochial feminist praxis. Similarly, in a memorable scenario which Alexander dubs “sarcastically imaginative” (347), Cooper casts women’s suppression worldwide as a form of blindness—the equivalent of seeing out of just one eye—the elimination of which ensures that “the whole body is filled with light” (Cooper 122). Mimicking figures such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, specifically their opportunistic self-appointment as the select bearers of any and all luminosity, Cooper ridicules the “travesty of its case for this eye to become plaintiff in a suit, *Eye vs. Foot*” (123).⁷⁴ “There is that dull clod, the foot allowed to roam at will, free and untrammelled; while I, the source and medium of light, brilliant and beautiful,” proceeds Cooper facetiously, “am fettered in darkness and doomed to

⁷⁴ On Stanton’s opportunism, see Angela Davis *Woman, Race, and Class*.

desuetude” (ibid). Subsequently coupling anti-black and anti-native stances on suffrage adopted by prominent members of the mainstream Women’s movement, Cooper problematizes representations of these respective groups as uncivilized and bestial. Further, she draws attention to a commonplace metaphorization of slavery deployed by well-meaning majority feminists well into the twentieth century in order to spectacularize conditions of gender discrimination. Through humor, Cooper testifies to the limits of liberal notions of entitlement which negate the fitness of racialized bodies for citizenship.

And yet, I would argue that commentary along the lines of Lemert’s, who on one occasion states that “[t]hough Cooper could be biting in her criticism of men, including men in general, she does frequently display a striking reluctance to denounce them altogether” perhaps misses the point (26). That is, ironic critiques such as the one cited by Gaines above are consistently hinged to calls for male accountability. In general, when hooks writes in 1984’s *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* that “it is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony,” she solidly positions her volume as active participant in Cooper’s theoretical project of subverting voicelessness (16).⁷⁵ But of especial salience here is hooks’ subsequent claim that, though often overlooked in progressive movements of Cooper’s era and our own, “internal critique is essential to any politics of transformation” (xiii). Overall, Cooper’s

⁷⁵ The same might be argued in relation to Collins’ groundbreaking articulation of black feminist standpoint epistemology in *Black Feminist Thought*.

enduring defense of her male counterparts amounts to more than the apparent fact that she “thought in the manner of the times” (Lemert 26). That is, Cooper’s determined justification of the value of black manhood must be read alongside, to return to hooks again, an as insistent demand that “men have a tremendous contribution to make to feminist struggle in the area of exposing, confronting, opposing, and transforming the sexism of their male peers” (hooks 83).

Accordingly, in a second case in point in “The Higher Education of Women,” a speech initially delivered to the American Conference of Educators in 1890, Cooper offers almost overlapping sarcastic passages instigated in ostensibly deferential registers, both of which I quote at length:

It seems hardly a gracious thing to say, but it strikes me as true, that while our men seem thoroughly abreast of the times on almost every other subject, when they strike the woman question they drop back into sixteenth century logic. They leave nothing to be desired generally in regard to gallantry and chivalry, but they actually do not seem sometimes to have outgrown that old contemporary of chivalry—the idea that women may stand on pedestals or live in doll houses, (if they happen to have them) but they must not furrow their brows with thought or attempt to help men tug at the great questions of the world [...] The three R’s, a little music and a good deal of dancing, a first rate dress-maker and a bottle of magnolia balm, are quite enough generally to render charming any woman possessed of tact and the capacity for worshipping masculinity. (75)

Cooper follows this declaration with an autobiographical anecdote, what she refers to as “a little bit of personal experience” (76), which discerning readers understand as a euphemistic spin on her history of organizing at St. Augustine’s Normal School and Collegiate Institute:

Finally a Greek class was to be formed. My inspiring preceptor informed me that Greek had never been taught in the school, but that he was going to form a class *for the candidates for the ministry*, and if I liked I might join it. I replied—

humbly I hope, as became a female of the human species—that I would like very much to study Greek, and that I was thankful for the opportunity, and so it went on. A boy, however meager his equipment and shallow his pretensions, had only to declare a floating intention to study theology and he could get all the support, encouragement and stimulus he needed, be absolved from work and invested beforehand with all the dignity of his far away office. While a self-supporting girl had to struggle on by teaching in the summer and working after school hours to keep up with her board bills, and actually to fight her way against positive discouragements to the higher education. (77)

As May warns, “it is...important to realize the risk [Cooper] took in asserting such notions, even under the guise of a joke or under the irreproachable cover of theological reflection” (60). In these closely allied excerpts, Cooper’s professed concerns with polish and poise defuse dominant audiences before giving way to biting analyses of pervasive sexism and of the coerciveness of cult ideology and purported male courtliness. Through strategic recourse to counterfeit docility, Cooper contests women’s status as ornate instruments by which to shore up hegemonic masculine authority. Without minimizing gentlemanly protection as an uneven, privileged context (only “if they happen to have them,” she says of “doll houses”) and by gesturing towards many black women’s genuine desires for equitable and loyal relations with black men (“they leave nothing to be desired generally in regard to gallantry and chivalry”), Cooper effects a broad-based call for institutional reform. Indeed, she agitates for educational access in order to expand the realm of possibilities for women within patriarchy, but also for those beyond the bounds of traditional domestic configurations, including impoverished, single, and widowed women (Cooper 68). Ultimately, foregrounding economic, social, and ideological impediments to gender parity—and embedding this critical move away from women’s

peripherality towards collective social justice in witty covertures—constitute powerful and necessary political interventions.

Rather than the paradigmatic liberal subject, then, Cooper joins the voices of Wilson and Keckly to account for how normative political reason is lived and felt, how it infuses the rhythms of everyday life in significant, often violent ways. Cooper's fin-de-siècle blues, in its reclamation of embodiment and of civility as virtue, diverge from traditional discourses of rights and inclusion, even as scholars continually reduce the epistemological scope of her project to such parameters. Through sarcasm and auralty, among other means, Cooper sounds a productive critique of privilege and of power which links her to contemporary feminist intellectuals and activists, then and now. The next chapter examines the writings of precisely one of the latter figures, twentieth-century African-Americanist scholar Sherley Anne Williams, and her dialogical engagement with nineteenth-century black women's critical thought *as* resistance.

“Mammy Ain’t Nobody Name”: Power, Privilege and the Bodying Forth of Resistance

I

“These are fictions that must stand in for what we cannot know but must assume to be true, in order to believe in our own humanity in the present”

Arlene Keizer, *Black Subjects*

A substantial body of scholarship has emerged in the last thirty years pertaining to the literary genre commonly referred to as “neo-slave narrative.” Coined to encompass texts as varied as Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966), Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976), Edward P. Jones’ *The Known World* (2003), and Attica Locke’s *The Cutting Season* (2012), among others, neo-slave narrative as catchall pivots upon temporal logic, signaling a recurring, if heterogeneous engagement with nineteenth-century slave culture and racial politics evident in modern-day fictional pursuits. In the essay “‘Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something’: African-American Women’s Historical Novels,” for instance, black feminist intellectual and literary critic Barbara Christian returns to the work of writers and activists Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, Frances E. W. Harper, and Harriet Wilson in order to contextualize, deeply and richly, the rise of neo-slave narrative in the late twentieth century. Christian situates such works as Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prize-winning novel *Beloved* (1987) as modes of redress, as *answers* to the thick silences and strategic omissions which inform much antebellum slave narrative and even postbellum black poetry, fiction, and prose (89). In a different vein, critics Marisa Anne Pagnattaro and Angelyn Mitchell understand neo-slave narrative, particularly those volumes penned by women writers, as extensions of contemporary unrest, social movement, and political organizing, and even more narrowly, of Second

Wave feminist agitation. Accordingly, both theorists underscore the urgency and opportunity embedded in “our” present moment. Indeed, artists “[...] present [...] feminist engagement with race, so that we can imaginatively consider what might have been in terms of interracial feminist coalition during slavery as well as what should be in terms of interracial feminist coalitions now,” Mitchell maintains in relation to the writing of Sherley Anne Williams (65). “For [Sherley Anne Williams’] *Dessa Rose*, as a twentieth-century text, [the] future is to recognize the value of interracial collaboration right now,” affirms Pagnattaro (135).

However, as Arlene Keizer’s *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* productively suggests, extant paradigms and reading practices around neo-slave narrative—those extended by Mitchell, Ashraf Rushdy, Bernard Bell, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, among them—remain limited. Issuing a call “to cast a wider interpretive net,” Keizer (a student of Christian’s) instead posits a theory of “contemporary narratives of slavery” in both African American and Afro-Caribbean literary contexts. Notably, Keizer’s concept of contemporary narratives of slavery diverges from the work of Rushdy and Bell by shifting aesthetic standards away from a mimetic relation to teleological, first-person, literate, antebellum slave experience. Further, it expands the critical lens beyond novels authored by women alone and insists upon a diasporic reach (3-4). For Keizer, then, slavery becomes a vehicle through which writers theorize black subject formation, claim agency, and reconceptualize self.

Narratives by Paule Marshall, Derek Walcott, and Carolivia Herron, she continues, likewise enable processes of collective witnessing, acting as reservoirs of

cultural and historical memory in the increasingly inevitable absence of living testimony concerning conditions of bondage (5). Moreover, Keizer's project consistently refuses circumscribing terms of black empowerment. Hence, of the writings of Morrison, Charles Johnson, and others, she offers, "As a response to the overvaluation of direct, armed slave resistance or successful escape, the contemporary narrative of slavery demonstrates how fraught with difficulty resistance is and has been" (9). Building upon, without dismissing, received notions of the intentions and the effects of neo-slave narrative, Keizer's intervention prompts a fuller treatment of imaginative interrogations of the consciousness, humanity, and flesh of the enslaved *as* theory and as viable assertions of power.

Following Keizer, I, too, tackle underexamined dimensions of neo-slave narrative discourse, specifically within critical dialogue surrounding Sherley Anne Williams' aforementioned novel, *Dessa Rose* (1986). Here, I concede Christian's claim that texts including Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975) and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) address gaps within nineteenth-century literature, but not at the expense of exploring contemporary texts' affinities (and conflicts) with what previous narratives *have* explicitly said that has subsequently been misread or overlooked. Significantly, in response to Mae G. Henderson's foundational work on Williams' fiction, particularly her appeal for attentiveness to both the explicit and implicit Signification and intertextuality of *Dessa Rose*, scholars have delved into the novel's allusiveness, mining its connections to Angela Davis' "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" (1971), Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1947), and William Styron's

The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967). In addition to these texts, each directly cited in Williams' "Author's Note," Henderson examines *Dessa Rose*'s dialogical relation to Williams' earlier short story "Meditations on History" (1976) and Pauline Réage's *Story of O* (1965). Jacquelyn A. Fox-Good and Amy K. Levin, on the other hand, locate *Slave Songs of the United States* (1876) and *Jane Eyre* (1847), respectively, as critical reference points. Conversely, I deliberately position Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), Elizabeth Keckly's *Behind the Scenes* (1868), and Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South* (1892), as key intertexts in this chapter in order to uncover the ways in which Williams provokes interchange with her precursors' legacies of resistance.

By foregrounding Williams' problematization of abstraction, coherence, and interracial friendship, and by considering her theoretical representations of embodiment, self-commodification, and rage in relation to blackness, I demonstrate the enduring productivity of nineteenth-century black women's contestation of the liberal problematic. Indeed, apprehending contemporary narratives of slavery as repositories of liberal ideology critique indebted to complex epistemologies regarding privilege and consent, rather than mere catalogues of the immense struggles faced by the enslaved, confounds longstanding perspectives of black defiance. Further, it establishes the ongoing necessity of interrogating the limits of American liberalism within the neoliberal present.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Here, my thinking is informed by that of Evie Shockley in her essay, "Colorblind(ed): Visuality, Discursivity, and Slavery in Rita Dove's and George Elliott Clarke's Verse Plays," presented at "Racial Representations: African American Literature Since 1975" at the University of Oregon on April 26, 2013. Specifically, Shockley speaks of the utility of contemporary narratives of slavery—especially poetry—as a response to the "post-racial"—that is, in the wake of the retraction of welfare; an altered, post 9/11, racial landscape; and the spectacular elections of Barack Obama.

II

In *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction*, Keith Byerman writes that “[t]o grant much influence, even of a negative sort, to the white writer is to put the black one in the position of reacting rather than creating,” ascertaining quite rightly that *Dessa Rose* amounts to far more than a rebuttal of Styron’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Confessions*, though it is at least that (55). *Dessa Rose*, the poetics of which also serve as epigraph to Keizer’s *Black Subjects*, chronicles the exploits of the novel’s namesake, a young bondswoman of the mid-1840s South. The brutal murder of Dessa’s husband, Kaine—“He chosed me. Masa ain’t had nothing to do wid it. It Kaine what pick me out and ask me for his woman,” she lovingly recalls on one occasion (Williams 19)—shatters the world as she knows it. As violence begets violence in the context of enslavement, Kaine’s attack on his master, Terrell Vaughan—for breaking a hand-crafted banjo symbolizing the former’s sense of home and identity—results in his death, while Kaine’s demise incites Dessa to assault her mistress, Mary. The latter confrontation consigns Dessa to the “sweatbox,” wallowing in her own excrement and grief, bearing deep lacerations and later such extensive keloid scarring across her genitals that “no hair would ever grow there again” (Williams 154). Eventually dispatched deeper South, a pregnant Dessa mourns the loss of her partner, mother, and siblings, only to join in on a violent uprising in east Alabama after a white man that ventures off into the woods to rape a mulatta slave girl, Linda, on the coffle neglects to properly re-secure the slaves’ chains. Severely wounding the slave trader, Wilson, and assisting in the killing of

five other white men, Dessa ultimately surrenders in the hopes that some of her accomplices, unencumbered by impending childbirth, might escape.

However, aside from an “Author’s Note” and brief prologue, all that readers first glean about Dessa and her story is filtered through the diaristic perspective of Adam Nehemiah, a character based on Boston clergyman, Nehemiah Adams (1806-1878). The fictional Nehemiah, a white aspirant to the wealthy planter class and author of *The Masters’ Complete Guide to Dealing with Slaves and Other Dependents*, meets regularly with an imprisoned Dessa in order to interrogate her about her experiences on the coffle.⁷⁷ In fact, Nehemiah’s ruminations about Dessa for his newest masterpiece, *The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Population and Some Means of Eradicating Them* (or suggestively, *Roots*, for short) structures the entire first section of the novel, titled “The Darky.” The remaining two-thirds of the work, designated “The Wench” and “The Negress,” respectively, detail a transformation of Dessa-as-epithet—as an object refused a legitimate name—to Dessa as a self-defined subject. Indeed, as her comrades surreptitiously return to liberate Dessa from confinement, and as she enters into motherhood and, ostensibly, to a life post-servitude at Sutton’s Glen, readers witness the painful process by which the protagonist attains interiority. A homestead controlled by a white woman named Miss Rufel, Sutton’s Glen operates as a liminal space wherein Dessa’s notions of labor, love, community, and power are all called into question. The narrative concludes with an epilogue wherein an aged Dessa reflects back on earlier turmoil and trauma, including the trickster scheme whereby the blacks at Sutton’s Glen

⁷⁷ Notably, Dessa’s execution is postponed until her child with Kaine can be birthed into slavery.

sell themselves back into slavery in order to extort enough money from local whites to run away for good. A novel preoccupied, with varying degrees of success, with laying bare dense networks of racial and gender domination in the antebellum period, *Dessa Rose* marks a pivotal text in the arc of contemporary narratives of slavery.⁷⁸

Early exchanges between Dessa and Nehemiah in the segment of the novel titled “The Darky” personify Williams’ sharpest indictment of Enlightenment-derived precepts valorizing reason and rationality, two key facets of the liberal problematic. Specifically, Williams denaturalizes the mind-body split endemic to the project of traditional liberal humanism as she starkly dramatizes the trope of antebellum white mediation. “Always above [Dessa], behind her if she turned her head,” observes the narrator, “she heard tapping, in the silence between [Nehemiah’s] questions, his finger flicking proudly against the gold chain he wore at his waistcoat” (Williams 56). Juxtaposing Dessa’s dark, chained, brutalized body—a figure positioned on the ground during the interviews, and thus, as always already below—with Nehemiah’s duly arrayed, authoritative, civil form, Williams accounts for the bias and privilege embedded within the amanuensis relation. Indeed, Nehemiah’s quest for “facts” and “research” about black treachery and insurrection remains fundamentally tethered to gestures of dehumanization, a move akin

⁷⁸ Usefully, Stephen Best posits 1988—just shortly after the publication of *Dessa Rose*—as the approximate year inaugurating slavery as “the constituent object and metaphor in African American studies” (456). In fact, Best writes, “The rise of *Beloved* moved the entire field of literary studies to a central place in African American studies, and this move redressed what Eric Slauter describes as literary criticism’s ‘trade deficit’ with the discipline of history. With Morrisonian poetics as a guide, the black Atlantic provided a way of making history for those who had lost it and as such secured the recent rehabilitation of melancholy in cultural criticism” (459). Though distinct from *Beloved* in important ways, *Dessa Rose*, too, emerges and participates in this particular moment. See: “On Failing to Make the Past Present,” *Modern Language Quarterly*, 17.3, September 2012.

to that of Morrison's Schoolteacher in *Beloved*. "He had been told they fell asleep much as a cow would in the midst of a satisfying chew," relates the narrator of Nehemiah's private musings (36). Further, "He wouldn't have thought the darky's face so expressive," Williams adds via narration, simulating broader cultural presumptions of an inherent dearth of black sentience (38).

Nevertheless, I argue that Dessa's eventual admission that "[s]he couldn't always follow the white man's questions; often he seemed to put a lot of unnecessary words between his 'why' and what he wanted to know" (56), signals not Dessa's ignorance, but rather possibilities of Nehemiah's identity as a performance, his knowledge as conjectural rather than purely "theoretical." In the words of Roderick Ferguson on canonical sociology, yet another racialized enterprise and outgrowth of the Enlightenment, Nehemiah "invests in rational reflection ostensibly to record, but actually to construct" ideas of blackness as excessive and deviant (98). Accordingly, as critic Emma Waters-Dawson contends, "Nehemiah records Dessa's description in words that *he* would use" (20; emphasis in original), and as the narrators later reveals, "it was soon apparent to [Dessa] that the white man did not expect her to answer" (Williams 56). Ultimately, Nehemiah veils prejudice under the cover of detached, conceptual jargon.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Nehemiah's performance in this regard likewise coincides with Saidiya Hartman's theorization of dominant modes of empathetic identification in *Scenes of Subjection*. As I argue in Chapter One, via Hartman, "empathy installs a dynamic predicated upon a 'phantasmic vehicle of identification,' a substitution contingent upon the disappearing, or invisibility of the racialized object. Put another way, interracial empathy 'requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible'" (Mann 16). Here, Nehemiah's feigned objectivity and concern install an unequal set of power relations along racial lines by displacing Dessa's interiority with his *production* of her identity.

Paul Gilroy corroborates precisely such a reading in his important volume, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. “The desire to return to slavery and to explore it in imaginative writing,” argues Gilroy, “has offered [...] contemporary black writers a means to restage confrontations between rational, scientific, and enlightened Euro-American thought and the supposedly primitive outlook of prehistorical, cultureless, and bestial African slaves” (220). Williams’ novel directly engages in such an undertaking, locating Dessa’s body—her wounds, her pregnancy, her voice—as a site which contradicts dominant standards of knowledge formation and comprehension. Similarly, in her groundbreaking manifesto “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers examines the ways in which the Middle Passage fortified institutionalized hierarchies of value and racial meaning by reducing captives from feeling, knowing beings to property and cargo. Without authorized kinship systems or a legitimate capacity to mother or father one’s offspring, Spillers maintains, captive bodies are relegated to a space of vestibularity before culture, the place of the flesh. “If we think of the ‘flesh’ as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard,” Spillers writes (67).

Ungendered flesh, then, becomes an archive of memory, a manuscript in itself which is passed down across generational lines. Following Spillers, while Dessa’s flesh testifies to encounters with love and loss, to a sense of righteous anger and of boldness, rationality operates as a state-sanctioned apparatus whereby black pain and subjection are disavowed and instead codified as evidence of unassimilable difference and pathology.

“Williams is primarily concerned with the differences between the marks inscribed on paper by Nehemiah’s pen and the marks inscribed on or rather incorporated into Dessa’s body [...],” confirms Gilroy. “Each supports a distinct system of meaning with its own characteristic forms of memory, rules, and racialised codes. They cross each other in Dessa herself” (220). By framing Dessa and Nehemiah’s discourse in this way, Williams undermines abstract reason and objectivity as singular fonts of wisdom and understanding, crystallizing how each contributes to the dissimulation of power.

Importantly, Williams’ incisive departure from a romanticization of the interracial “as-told-to” dynamic, her parody of such a framework even as she exposes its sexual undercurrents, denotes a refusal of the cultural capital and rewards typically associated with pastoral illogic.⁸⁰ The success of the 2011 blockbuster film, *The Help*, an adaptation of Kathryn Stockett’s 2009 novel by the same name, to take just one example, demonstrates the tenacity and allure of such problematic popular cultural renderings. Grossing more than twenty million dollars in its opening weekend alone as well as ample Academy Award recognition, *The Help* recounts a young white woman, Skeeter Phelan’s (Emma Stone), journey to publish a narrative exposing the conditions faced by black domestic workers Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis), Minny Jackson (Octavia Spencer), and others, in Jackson, Mississippi in the 1960s. Yet, as collectives such as the Association of Black Women Historians and scholars such as Melissa Harris Perry have argued, this “lovely little coming-of-age-story” fixes whiteness as the sole origin of viable

⁸⁰ On Williams’ use of parody and her exploration of the sexual implications of the “as-told-to” dynamic, see Byerman (pg. 55) and Henderson (pg. 299).

sociopolitical action—despite the film’s setting in a veritable hotbed of formal and informal black civil rights organizing and resistance—and elides lived realities of lynching and sexual abuse, finally scapegoating black masculinity, rather than white privilege, as villainous.⁸¹ Unlike Williams’ rendition, *The Help* installs a sanitized plot of (white) upward mobility, one which pivots upon a larger liberal mythos of writing as essentially liberatory as well as illusions of consensuality and collaboration which inexplicably transcend rigorously policed racial and class distinctions. Read with and against a film in which the image of a white hand on a white page tellingly occupies the entirety of the opening frame, “The Darky” section of *Dessa Rose* instead sets up the novel as an intervention into the ways in which gendered and raced discourses of reason circulate as alibi, challenging the notion of white intermediacy as a precondition for legitimate knowledge production. Indeed, Williams foregrounds disembodied or purportedly disinterested, if liberal ways of being and knowing as simultaneously violent and reductionist in scope.

However, as much as Williams’ deconstruction of hegemonic modes of thought contests contemporary valorization of the mind-body split and of (white) amanuenses as agents of democratic promise and possibility, a more capacious reading and interpretive practice can also account for the ways in which it speaks to similar efforts by nineteenth-century black activists, including Anna Julia Cooper, to disrupt the liberal problematic. As I argued in Chapter Three, Cooper’s *A Voice from the South* deploys aural framing,

⁸¹ Melissa Harris Perry characterizes the film as a “lovely little coming-of-age story” in an interview on Lawrence O’Donnell’s television program, *The Last Word*, airing on MSNBC on August 10, 2011.

musical metaphor, and theory to undercut Western reliance on predominantly visual terms of order and to recognize neglected intersections between embodiment and rationality. In fact, Cooper's fin-de-siècle blues attests to the failure of Reason to transcend material presence, contributing to a subversive reconceptualization of U.S. civil subjectivity and of reigning valuations of black womanhood. Of consequence for this chapter, in advocating an understanding of black music in excess of purely sociological imperatives, Cooper's representation of harmony and of voice resonates with modern-day black feminist engagement with and through sound. The organizational structure of *Still Brave: The Evolution of Black Women's Studies* (2009), for instance—a continuation of the classic anthology *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave* (1982)—constitutes but one, among them. Editors of the former—Stanlie M. James, Frances Smith Foster, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall—"named each section, each neighborhood, each family of thought [in the volume], with a line from a song [they] believe represents, reaffirms, and reconstructs the pieces into a whole. In doing so, [they] acknowledge and honor the presence and prescience of music in Black Women's Studies and other cultural contexts as well as in the history of African peoples" (xxi). Williams' novel, too, dialogically encounters Cooper's archive, as the melodies of black spirituals and other rhythms infuse the pages of *Dessa Rose*.

Indeed, the lyrics of a love song from Kaine to Dessa open the Prologue. Further, as a means of concealing slaves Nathan, Cully, and Harker as they return to spirit Dessa away from Nehemiah's grasp, contralto, tenor, and baritone blend in a call-and-response refrain culminating in the hymn, "Good News, Lawd, Lawd, Good News" (Williams 64-

7). Not insignificantly, though Nehemiah attempts to write off ballads performed by Dessa as “only a quaint piece of doggerel which the darkies cunningly adapt from the scraps of Scripture they are taught” (Williams 52); to reduce her compositions to mere “annoying melody” (52); or to conclude alongside the slave owners in his midst that, simply put, “a loud darky is a happy one” (29), Nehemiah obviously struggles to register and to repress the intricacy of Dessa’s voice. On one occasion, Nehemiah recalls that “[h]e and Hughes had heard upon approaching the cellar [where Dessa resides awaiting execution] a humming or moaning. *It was impossible to define it as one or the other*” (29; emphasis added). When Nehemiah tries to clarify that “[t]he *noise* had sounded like some kind of dirge,” Hughes rebuffs the notion and attributes the racket to Dessa’s indiscriminate happiness, perceiving no need to distinguish between moaning and singing when “[t]he niggers don’t” (29; emphasis added). Yet, Nehemiah remains continually perturbed by Dessa’s “absurd monotonous little tune[s] in a minor key, the melody of which she repeated over and over as she stared vacantly into space” (Williams 35). What’s more, “each morning Nehemiah was awakened by the singing of the darkies and they often startled him by breaking into song at odd times of the day,” the narrator observes (35).

In fact, Dessa’s inflection and cadence flout Nehemiah’s impetus toward normative lucidity and coherence. According to the narrator, due to the “quiet rasp of her voice,” he “hadn’t caught every word; often he had puzzled overlong at some unfamiliar idiom or phrase” (18). Plus, “she answers questions in a *random* manner, a loquacious, *roundabout* fashion—if, indeed, she can be brought to answer them at all,” writes

Nehemiah in his journal (23; emphasis added). As Jacquelyn A. Fox-Good apprehends in an important essay, “Singing the Unsayable: Theorizing Music in *Dessa Rose*,” Dessa’s modulation, her manipulation of timbre and tone, inhibits prevailing codes of listening: her voice/song “clearly prevents, disrupts, and resists [Nehemiah’s] ‘comprehension’ of her” (15). Though, as Fox-Good notes, Nehemiah eventually begins to collapse Dessa’s cries and chants into the natural soundscape—as akin to “the clucking of the hens or the lowing of the cattle” (Williams 51)—the knowledge encoded in her song produces a distinct terrain of reason and articulacy.

In other words, “[...] music must be heard ideologically,” as Fox-Good makes plain (10). She contends, as have others including Gilroy and Lindon Barrett, that “One must work against [...] conventional assumptions about music: that it is nonrepresentational and cannot carry ideological, political, or other kinds of content; that it is formally and aesthetically replete, well-made sound and fury, signifying nothing” (9). Williams exploits the “heterophony” or “musical texture”—that is, the “density, simultaneity, and sense of movement into and away from the tonal center” of song (25)—Fox-Good surmises, to influence governing structures of language, emotion, and signification. Not unlike Cooper, then, Williams (via Dessa) mobilizes a framework which resists narrow bounds of intelligibility. While Cooper’s and Williams’ musical poetics may not, in fact, facilitate a complete transcendence of alterity—leaving them effectively *unsung*—each indexes a commitment to survival, marking meaningful attempts to maneuver within and beyond the constraints of the existing social order.

Such a reading, I would add, might also be extended to Williams' representation of the act of braiding in the Epilogue to *Dessa Rose*. No doubt an Africanism, as Amy K. Levin posits (145), the process of black hair styling/dressing also disrupts individual, ocularcentric modes of knowing sustaining the liberal problematic, in a manner similar to song. In a fractured, halting recital, Dessa recalls,

I missed this when I was sold away from home.—“Turn your head, honey; I only got two more left to do”.—The way the womens in the Quarters used to would braid hair. Mothers would braid children heads—girl and boy—until they went into the field or for as long as they had them. This was one way we told who they people was, by how they hair was combed [...] Child learn a lot of things setting between some grown person's legs, listening at grown peoples speak over they heads. This is where I learned to listen, right there between mammy's thighs, where I first learned to speak, from listening at grown peoples talk... (234; emphasis in original)

From Dessa's perspective, corn-rowing and plaiting become expressions of place, belonging, and as she will go on to elaborate, decorum, and even pleasure (Williams 235). Yet, she simultaneously locates the quotidian, embodied practice as a means to transmit memory and experience. In fact, citing braiding as a textured mode of discourse, Carol Boyce Davies identifies this specifically “nonscribal way of storytelling and maintaining history” as a profound strategy by which Dessa transforms from “the-mother-as-she-is-written to being the-mother-as-she-writes” (56). Indeed, her son, Mony, as will her grandchildren, acquires a deep sense and awareness of Dessa's pain and pride on her path from bondage through this special performance of reclamation and connectedness. Additionally, throughout the Epilogue, Dessa's articulation of wrapping and weaving hair is always already filtered through reminiscences of her mother, her sister Carrie Mae, fellow Sutton's Glen runaways Ada, Annabelle, Debra, Flora, and

Janet, and their involvement in the braiding process, underscoring the communal character of this approach to meaning-making. Through both music and hair care, then, Williams counters dominant systems of rationality and literacy, in tune with epistemological ground activated by black women writers and activists over a century ago.

III

Though less secondary critical focus attends Williams' aforementioned renarration of liberal abstraction and associated discourses of reason, much has been made (and aptly so) of her problematization of the "mammy" figure. Drawn to the representation of Rufel caring for Dessa's newborn at Sutton's Glen in the wake of the latter's recovery from her latest, harrowing flight from captivity, scholars have situated this particular scene within diverse interpretive milieu. "The image of the white nursemaid and the black infant dismantles a long tradition in American sentimentality naturalizing the ur-image of the black mammy and the white child," theorizes Mae G. Henderson (297). "Such a reversal has the subtle effect of transcoding a traditionally sacred iconographic representation of Madonna and child into an obscene image by reinscribing it into the context of a suggestively pornographic scenario" (ibid). According to Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, in a study of the neo-slave narrative's prioritizing of motherhood as a central drive for black resistance and survival, Dessa's hostility toward the white mistress to whom she must forfeit the capacity to nourish her child constitutes an "ironic" show of "reverse prejudice" (39), while consent to interracial breastfeeding, on the other hand, "signals [Rufel's] growing courage to be true to her

feelings” (38). Though Beaulieu’s fixing of bigotry and magnanimity along stark racial lines is troubling, I also question a broader analytical trajectory which understands Williams’ subversion of the sedimented Mammy trope as attributable exclusively or even primarily to an “inversion” of wet nursing roles. This strikes me, finally, as too simplistic. Further, it circumscribes the epistemological import of Williams’ intervention and obscures its relation to feminist leanings in early African American women’s literature.

The heart of Williams’ premise, in fact, surrounds a charged conversation between Rufel and Dessa in the master bedchambers of Sutton’s Glen. In an altercation prompted by Rufel’s rapt reverie about her recently deceased “Mammy,” a bondswoman named Dorcas that had labored for Rufel’s family for years, Dessa rouses her nearly broken frame in bitter objection to the white woman’s meandering recollections. “Mammy’ ain’t nobody name, not they real one,” spits Dessa, enraged. “You don’t even know ‘mammy’s’ name. Mammy have a name, have children,” she declares (Williams 119). Though Dessa “knew even as she said it what the white woman meant” (118)—that she was not referring to Rose, Dessa’s mammy—she proceeds angrily to quash Rufel’s cherished icon. Indeed, she speaks her own mother’s name and testifies to the lives (and deaths) of nearly all of her ten children, “lest her poor, lost children die to living memory as they had in [Rose’s] world” (119). While critic Gunilla Theander Kester notes in her comparative work on the fiction of Williams and Charles Johnson that this incident produces “‘Mammy’ as a semiotic sign,” as a “sign [that] is in a sense meaningless” with “no transcendent or immanent truth value” (132), I read this moment

as a vehicle for the *urgent* imperative that “Mammy” be at once materialized and historicized. Contrary to Kester’s notion that “Mammy” “escapes both the white and the black woman’s need for a symbolic or a metaphoric history, and it consequently frees the women from their constructed genealogies” (ibid), I discern Williams’ strident negation of “Mammy” as a disembodied reserve of surrogacy as a repossession of the value and the truth(s) of her life as someone’s daughter, as someone’s mother. Through her theoretico-narrative enterprise, Williams illuminates Rufel’s liberal claim to reciprocal fidelity between she and her “Mammy” as little more than a consolidation of white privilege.⁸²

Put differently, Kester’s determination presumes even contexts of subjection; it takes for granted an analogous relation between the constructed-ness of each woman’s respective genealogy. By contrast, I shift Kester’s critical lens by juxtaposing Williams’ *Dessa Rose* and Elizabeth Keckly’s *Behind the Scenes* within a larger framework of resistance to liberalism at the scene of black women’s writing. I argue that the two texts, though distinct in their own right, critique the liberal problematic in comparable ways, and thus, I interrogate their affiliation within a matrix of black feminist thought. Indeed, the memoir *Behind the Scenes*, as I explore in Chapter Two, contains performances of counter-memory by which the author upsets pastoral fantasies of Keckly-as-mammy. Keckly’s quiet resistance clarifies the violence perpetuated by mythologies of

⁸² As Byerman suggests of the confrontation between these two patently, if differentially marginalized subjects, Rufel’s position “legitimizes a version of history that puts whites at the center of black experience and defines black feeling in terms of relationships with whites” (61). More to the point, he observes, “The insight that Rufel struggles to, after all, should not be an insight at all; it should simply be part of human awareness. Her ignorance and the privilege that both supports and is supported by it, make her unreliable from the black woman’s point of view” (62).

superhuman black female strength, particularly their simulation of black volition, power, and consent, without tangible variation in existing political and affective regimes.

Ultimately, Keckly and Williams each carefully undo liberal fictions of dehumanized, consumable black motherhood, exposing Mary Lincoln and Rufel Sutton, respectively, as self-interested rather than charitably inclined. Williams' Signification on Keckly's text in this way, moreover, speaks to the institutional hold of racial privilege, without reifying it as absolute, pinpointing an ongoing site of black feminist inquiry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Similarly, Keckly's life and writings undermine prevailing models of interracial friendship and intimacy. As outlined in the second chapter, the intrinsic ambivalence of intimacy—itsself an ideologically and materially violent institution—is often minimized, if not covered over entirely in liberal renderings of familiarity, companionship, and rapport. Productively, *Behind the Scenes'* restaging of the uninhabitability of normative political reason (for black women, in particular) intervenes in a widespread misnaming of complex social and emotional ties which traverse, though rarely transcend, racial and class boundaries in the context of the nineteenth century. As modern historical scholarship and commercial publications alike consistently reiterate myths of interracial amity and acquaintance when addressing Keckly's legacy, comparable claims are often staked in the (literary) relationship between Dessa and Rufel.

“[M]otherhood and sexual vulnerability,” writes Angelyn Mitchell, “become the two sites of commonality for Dessa and Ruth in their bond of sisterhood” (78). Likewise, deeming Dessa and Rufel “true witnesses to each other as survivors,” in her recent study

Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance, Jennifer L. Griffiths holds that several carefully crafted scenes by Williams “allow the women to know the other’s struggle on multiple levels: emotionally, intellectually, and bodily as mothers, daughters, lovers, and finally, as friends” (23). “The categories of difference that construct black and white womanhood in opposition to each other and prevent witnessing are broken down through empathy,” she adds later (ibid). What’s more, in a stance perhaps most symptomatic of the limitations of this popular framework, Beaulieu insists that at Sutton’s Glen, “[...] a place where no race hierarchy is recognized” (33), the “disenfranchised blacks and the white woman deserted by her financially irresponsible husband form a group that in some ways resembles an extended family” (35). For Beaulieu, by the novel’s end, “each [woman] has chosen friendship over race” (50), for “[w]hen the enslaved persons and Ruth cooperate to implement the moneymaking scheme, they realize that trust is an essential element of the scam and that trust can develop only among friends” (36). Beaulieu and others’ commentary in this vein, then, place a premium on liberal notions of freedom, autonomy, and self-determination.

Much of Dessa’s own language throughout the novel, on the other hand, bespeaks precisely who can and cannot *opt out* of racial difference. “White woman was everything I feared and hated,” declares Dessa just prior to the plot getting underway (Williams 169). Indeed, “we didn’t talk too much that was personal,” she recalls afterward. “I mean, I know I mentioned mammy-nem, and she talked about Dorcas—or ‘Mammy,’ as she called her. But this was a white woman and I don’t think I forgot it that whole, entire

journey” (216-7). In another incisive display of discernment and recognition, Dessa counters Miz Lady’s suggestion that most whites were just like her and simply did not know any better when it came to the depths of violence and despair subtending enslavement. “As far as white folks not knowing how bad slavery was—they was the ones made it, was the ones kept it” (212), Dessa clarifies, dismissing oblivion as a pretext for brutality and locating unexamined privilege as a considerable barrier to integration. Dessa remains equally perceptive when Rufel flagrantly inverts the configuration of their trickster scheme, as the latter proclaims, “I don’t want to live round slavery no more [...] What do you think about that, Odessa? About you-all coming [out West] with me?” (218) “It was like her to take for granted I’d want to be her friend, *that we-all would want her to come West with us,*” Dessa corrects, “that she could have what she want for the asking” (219; emphasis added). As Byerman corroborates, “Although Dessa saves Rufel from rape and later Rufel does everything she can to save Dessa from reenslavement through Adam Nehemiah, racial boundaries are ultimately left in place” (63). Thus, he concludes, “While Williams clearly refuses any simple white claims of knowledge or understanding of black experience, she also appears to be unwilling to grant the possibility of cross-racial community” (63).⁸³ Though I stop short of Byerman’s final contention that Williams’ positioning of Ruth as an outsider, rather than as a friend, signals a means to skirt the possibility of the post-racial (64), it remains that

⁸³ Similarly, in citing potential resemblances between Dessa and Rufel, Fox-Good aptly characterizes their “approximation to identity” as fundamentally disconcerting and dangerous for Dessa (26). Even Mitchell grants that theirs is a relation “rooted in difference” (83).

an unqualified recuperation of Dessa and Rufel as allies elides the nuances and deep problematics of even the most seemingly progressive relationships.⁸⁴

As had Keckly before her, Williams also juxtaposes the aforementioned intimacy informed by dominant ideological impulses with that catalyzed by purportedly nonrational forces. From the very beginning of her time on the coffle, Dessa remembers that “the negro driver the white men called Nate was paying attention to her,” that “the young mulatto boy who often walked the chain in front of her was being kind” (Williams 59). Though their collective efforts to ensure that she never faltered on the journey, and to minimize her hunger by providing extra home-fries or molasses, initially leads to her to expect that “one or both of them would come fumbling at her in the dark,” Dessa soon “knew herself to be *enveloped in caring*” (ibid; emphasis added). Williams, via Nathan’s characterization, later names such intimacy as “sweetness”: “You been through with someone what we been through together and you be ‘sweet’ on em, too,” Nathan reveals to a mystified Rufel (149). Of slavery, Nathan continues, it turns blacks into “poor excuses even for they own selfs [...] I feels bad for all them that didn’t make it, worse for all them that didn’t die, that even now living in slavery after we been free. But us three—we did it and we made it. It’s got to be some special feeling after that” (ibid). For

⁸⁴ This is not to discount the obvious ambiguity in which Dessa and Rufel’s relationship is at times embedded. This is evidenced by such passages as the following, each from Dessa’s perspective: “Who wanted to be her friend anyway? [...] I wanted to believe it. I don’t think I wronged her at first, but the white woman I’d opened my eyes to at the start of the summer wasn’t the one I partnered with on that journey; I admitted this to myself that afternoon” (Williams 219); “My thoughts had changed some since that night at Mr. Oscar’s. You can’t do something like this with someone and not develop some closeness, some trust” (Williams 206); “This was the way she was, you see, subject to make you mad just when you was feeling some good towards her. And she was good” (Williams 232).

Williams, this “sweetness” or “special feeling” represents less a sensation-driven, bounded, private mode of expression, than an erotic, innately political one.

In this sense, Nathan, Cully, and Dessa’s connection might well be mediated by what Imani Perry theorizes, in a slightly different context, as a praxis of care. Though she focuses most immediately on the “context of human creativity and productivity” in her essay “Of Degraded Talk, Digital Tongues, and a Commitment to Care,” her call for an understanding of care as an ethic and a value, as a standard in our most basic terms of engagement with one another, parallels Williams’ imaginative formulation in many respects. Significantly, Perry borrows from feminist philosophy to revive a species of care reflective of an “inherent communal interest,” one which possesses a “requirement of integrity,” and that functions as at once a “pedagogical, aesthetic, and creative endeavor” (20). Williams’ insurgent care in developing the characterization of a story of a black female slave renegade, and in turn the manner of concern and affirmation with which those in bondage generally address one another in the narrative, challenges a broader impetus to manage, order, and define the intimacy of the narrative in normative ways. Indeed, as one critic observes, “Dessa shares with the men on the coffle a bond of family fostered in their common adversity,” a measure of feeling which exceeds the register of jealousy commonly attributed to Dessa in the wake of Nathan’s affair with Rufel (Waters-Dawson 25).⁸⁵ Further, writes another, “[t]hese depictions of tenderness between Black women and men, absent from traditional historiography of slavery and

⁸⁵ This is not to say that there is no conflict or disagreement within the group, as Waters-Dawson’s invocation of “family” suggests. Yet, I maintain that the ethic of care/sweetness supersedes such conflict.

historical fiction, are yet another example of how Williams attempts to correct the historical betrayal of Blacks by Whites in fiction and in ‘non-fictional’ writing” (Mitchell 82). In contrast to a default invocation of liberal tropes of interracial friendship and intimacy, Williams posits black sweetness as a resistant site of collective fulfillment and critical consciousness.

In her memoir, Keckly also advances a conceptualization of American liberalism as a ritualized, embodied performance, rather than as a political or economic formation alone. Usefully, *Behind the Scenes* contests the public, if tacit power dynamics and diverse modes of violence through which such hierarchized relations are produced. As I argue in Chapter Two, and the scholarship of Lori Merish and Trudier Harris likewise confirms, Keckly’s project reworks scripted custom and convention governing interracial affect, domesticity, and consent.⁸⁶ Particularly striking is Keckly’s manipulation of the masks of silence, docility, and deference as she articulates the tenuous intersection between liberal ideology and blackness. Williams, too, I maintain, makes visible the effects of such routinized scenarios in *Dessa Rose*. An analysis of Williams’ intertextual harnessing of Keckly’s insight within her contemporary literary rendering of slave culture productively illuminates precisely how liberalism as a performative mode regulates and controls (black) movement, gesture, being, and mood.

In chapter four of the section of the novel titled “The Wench,” Rufel begins to come in increasingly closer contact with the blacks in hiding at Sutton’s Glen,

⁸⁶ See Merish, Lori: *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* and Harris, Trudier: *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature*.

particularly Nathan, to whom she will later become “romantically” attached. Notably, during the course of her initial interactions with him, the mistress of the liminal, would-be plantation remains vexed, for “[Nathan] did not say he would answer [a question she had posed to him], she noticed, just as he had made no excuse or move to go when she surprised him loafing yesterday” (Williams 132). For Ruth, Nathan appears out of sync with established patterns of etiquette and decorum. She, self-proclaimed as tolerant in comparison to other local whites, is confused by Nathan’s reluctance to immediately disabuse her of her impression of idleness—a common charge leveled against blacks which she herself has fabricated in this instance. According to the narrator, “It was if they didn’t know how they should act in front of a white person, she thought, amazed and uneasy. She had never met darkies who seemed so unversed in what was due her place as these” (132). Moreover, “Harker, Ada, Annabelle, none of them offered her anything that she had not specifically requested; they volunteered no act that she had not specifically directed; they never sought to oblige her,” the narrator reveals (132-3). An aspiration for timely, mundane enactments of black subordination permeates Rufel’s interior monologue here; their absence produces palpable uncertainty and disarray.

Significantly, Rufel distinguishes departures from prescribed behavioral codes, in the form of black diffidence, as especially troublesome and disruptive. “She felt, too, in [Harker] a certain reserve; he would give this much and no more,” she reports on one occasion, seething (Williams 133). Indeed, each time Ruth is lulled into a sense of comfort, of home, with the runaways at Sutton’s Glen, the memory of her dispute with Dessa over “Mammy” arrests such feelings: “she knew the wench’s reticence and

timidity were feigned, and was angry and bewildered by the deception” (141). Rufel even berates a deceased Dorcas for her purposeful omission, under the guise of ignorance, of information about Rufel’s husband, Bertie’s, gambling debts—as much a means to spare Ruth’s feelings as, I would argue, to ensure a continuation of the relative stability of Dorcas’ own current living situation (153).⁸⁷ “‘Place,’ [Miz Lady] say, ‘place’ [...] ‘That’s how they answer everything,’ she say, ‘Ain’t my place, Missy,’ [...] ‘Morning, Mammy,’; ‘Ain’t my place.’ ‘Afternoon, Dessa’; ‘Ain’t my place.’ Well, I ain’t talking no ‘place,’” Dessa overhears Ruth yelling in exasperation (218).

The quiet counter-rituals staged by blacks throughout the novel resonate with experiences documented in Tera W. Hunter’s critical history of nineteenth-century black working women, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War*. Hunter identifies acts such as converting work sites into spaces of communal sustenance; outright quitting; as well as more subtle stratagem including pantoting, feigning illness, and other inspired means of stealing time, as signature tactics in the arsenal of black women as they struggled to articulate their relationship to their labor in the post-Emancipation period (28). As Hunter details, such acts were promptly codified into hegemonic transcripts of black indolence, while they as often served as a means both to draw attention to and to evade sexual exploitation at the hands of white supervisors.⁸⁸ As the fugitives at Rufel’s homestead navigate a dubious sovereignty, akin

⁸⁷ Given Dorcas’ general wisdom, sense of discernment, and measure of “control” over the goings-on in the house at Sutton’s Glen, I find it likely that she is manipulating this situation to her advantage as well, at least to some extent.

⁸⁸ See Chapter 2 of Hunter’s text, “Reconstruction and the Meanings of Freedom,” (pg. 21-43).

in many respects to postbellum conditions of black servitude and containment, they rely on familiar techniques of subversion, methods often tethered to a performance of hesitancy, modesty, and unassertiveness.

In this same vein, I maintain that Aunt Chloe's capitalization upon a keen awareness of racial scripts marks a crucial moment in the development of the novel, precisely due to its deepening of Williams' interrogation of liberalism as affective performance. The figure of Aunt Chloe in *Dessa Rose*, unlike Keckly's Aunt Charlotte, has elicited a reasonable secondary critical response. Yet, contrary to emphases on Aunt Chloe's strength and courage—to those readings which suggest that “[t]he fact that the sheriff trusts her is a measure of how powerful a woman she is” (Beaulieu 44)—I contend that her characterization permits Williams to literalize participatory and stylized, though frequently implicit, interracial traditions constitutive of the liberal problematic *without* presupposing or romanticizing black access or authority.

After Nehemiah recaptures Dessa, who had been walking the streets unaccompanied in a town where the group was implementing the latest version of their scheme, the sheriff sends for Aunt Chloe to verify Nemi's claims about Dessa's scarring.⁸⁹ An “old woman [who] smoked a nasty pipe and mumbled a lot” and by the “way she hobbled round might've been a granny and then some,” Chloe arrives and proceeds to examine Dessa behind the veil of a cloth she'd brought for the purpose (Williams 230). All the while, Chloe demonstrates expected gestures and signs of

⁸⁹ Nehemiah begins to be referred to by the narrator as “Nemi” by the novel's end, a sign of how his obsession with finding Dessa has consumed him and precipitated his deterioration.

servility, bowing her head and never once speaking out of turn to the whites in her midst. After Dessa surreptitiously passes a quarter to the old woman behind the curtain—who later bites it to ensure its authenticity before sliding it into the cover of her dress—Chloe surveys only the top portion of Dessa’s body before concluding: “Masa Joel, Masa Joel [...] I ain’t seed nothing on this gal’s butt. She ain’t got a scar on her back” (231). Via a complex manipulation of received notions of black obsequiousness and a veiling of the “truth” (that is, Dessa does not, in fact, have “a scar on her back”), Chloe profits while simultaneously enabling Dessa’s evasion of Nehemiah for a second time. Nevertheless, Chloe then *returns* to her long-standing role as the sheriff’s maid, evidenced by her prompt deletion from the narrative. In the end, Dessa advances toward a measure of independence Chloe may well never know.

As Waters-Dawson suggests, “Aunt Chloe’s role as a loyal, devoted servant enables her to dupe and deceive the Sheriff under a mask of docility and submissiveness in order to protect a part of the slave woman’s life from white *and* male invasion,” the immediate restoration of her own terms of captivity notwithstanding (29; emphasis in original). This scenario differs from Williams’ representation of Jemina, the black bondwoman on Hughes’ farm in Alabama who attended Dessa in her jail cell after the rebellion on the coffle. Jemina’s performance in the wake of Dessa’s initial escape, a plot in which she herself is complicit, invokes the theatrical and melodramatic. Marked by “the darky’s throwing her apron over her head and howling, ‘Oh, Masa, it terrible; they was terrible fierce’” (Williams 70), Jemina concocts an embellished account in which “except for one exclamation from Odessa, of surprise or dismay, [Jemina] could

not tell which, they fled in silence,” insisting that “she could not see well enough to describe any of the niggers, save to state that they were big and black and terrible” (71) and “pointing to her muddied gown to prove it” (70). Jemina’s tale, which simultaneously exonerates an alternately “surprised” or “dismayed” Dessa and appeases whites’ penchant for a mythic black bestiality, relies on a calculated spectacle of exaggerated emotion. Though Williams’ positioning of Aunt Chloe’s performance at the narrative’s close might, for some, signal a hierarchy between competing modalities of black slave women’s resistance, such an arrangement as readily invites an understanding of the multiplicity of black struggle, conflict, and surrender. Black appropriation of sedimented racial scripts of humility and meekness, then, denotes an at once pivotal and fraught avenue of defiance irreducible to—if ultimately inextricable from—ostensibly more forceful means of confrontation.

Further, Williams mobilizes Aunt Chloe’s act to lay bare the Sheriff’s liberal pretensions. That is, the officer of the law seemingly strives to occupy a station antithetical to that of Nemi. As a crazed Nehemiah commences to violently restrain Dessa’s weak frame following their arrival at the jail, the nameless sheriff pulls out a chair and allows her to sit (Williams 221). The sheriff likewise thwarts the efforts of Nehemiah and other white men congregated at the facility from stripping Dessa naked—a reconstitution of the infamous charge to Sojourner Truth to bare her breasts—to search for the scars which would confirm her identity as a runaway: “Damn it, Nemi, you had your last peep show in here [...] This is a jail, not no carnival” (222). The sheriff also dispatches a messenger to the local hotel to retrieve Rufel (then traveling under the alias

Miz Carlisle) to potentially verify Dessa's claims (222), and reprimands Nemi after he proceeds to terrorize Dessa as she waits behind bars (224). Contrary to Nemi's exceedingly disheveled appearance since Dessa first absconded—"plumb wild, way he was throwing his head back like a horse and brushing at that brank of hair," observes the narrator—the sheriff emerges as "steely-eyed," reasonable, and fair (224). "The law handle this," the sheriff reiterates in Southern twang to a frenzied Nemi time and again throughout the exchange (228).

Nevertheless, the sheriff's discourses of justice and integrity, in fact, ring hollow. He seems far more concerned with protecting his own reputation (and that of his precinct) from Nemi's lower-class antics and Miz Lady's accusations of chauvinist misconduct than with establishing Dessa's innocence. As it becomes clear that Nemi has abducted and detained scores of black women in his quest to recover Dessa, the sheriff's righteousness and legitimacy become even more suspect. Ultimately, the solicitation of his servant's aid indexes collusion in Nehemiah's plot and collaboration in Chloe's dehumanization, in spite of its aim to shore up the sheriff's status as progressive and understanding over and above Nemi. Chloe's deferential, trust-inspiring performance crystallizes circuits of violent exchange in which this apparent spokesperson for uprightness and impartiality actively participates, fixing the two white men as conspirators, rather than foils. Indeed, inquiry into the engagement between Williams' and Keckly's respective theorization of liberalism-as-ritual uncovers new, imaginative possibilities of subversion and critique.

Finally, Williams takes on one other critical theme in *Behind the Scenes*: selective self-commodification. As had, in many respects, Olaudah Equiano/Gustavas Vassa, Keckly acquires freedom through the creation of quality stock and the manipulation of a mercantile sensibility, productively making visible intersections between liberal notions of freedom, individual sovereignty, and property. That is, Keckly's partaking in the rational marketplace at once generates surplus demand for her product, problematizes her object status, and contravenes dominant modes of valuation. Moreover, her refusal of truancy, as previously theorized in this volume, extends a self-commodifying ethic reinforced by a sly, pecuniary fluency. By exploiting her acquaintance with prevailing standards of accumulation, Keckly exceeds accommodationist and conciliatory interests. Though frequently written off as submissive or elitist, Keckly, in fact, posits an analytic of self-commodification that destabilizes gendered processes of chattel slavery, foregrounds a liberal nexus of autonomy and possession, and renders (black) freedom as always already conditional. In *Dessa Rose*, Williams crafts a corresponding scenario, as Harker spearheads a plot wherein the blacks at Sutton's Glen will trade themselves back into slavery over and over again until they collect enough gold to flee West permanently. According to the scheme, originally developed by "Harker's old master [who] taught that the best lie is always the one closest to the truth" (206), Rufel will portray a distressed plantation mistress forced by unforeseen hardship to get rid of a few trusted hands. By wagon and by boat, the runaways plan to trek from Haley's Landing, on to towns across Tuscaloosa, Pickens, and Greene counties, and end up in Arcopolis, before returning to the Glen for final preparations.

Immediately, Williams demonstrates the troupe's acute knowledge of the inner workings of the "peculiar institution." "Back in them days about all you had to do was put a rope and a collar on a negro and seem like every white person in seeing distance want to make an offer on him," remembers Dessa, pinpointing the ubiquity and pervasiveness of the antebellum market (Williams 206). "Most any of our peoples would bring eight or nine hundred dollars easy at public auction," they collectively appraised, though Harker, Castor, and Ned would likely garner even better prices (193). Yet, as "[t]he woman was valued more because her childrens belong to the master," the company begrudgingly consents to add Flora to the inventory of those sold (ibid). When the band arrives at Haley's Landing, they proceed to print up handbills, reflecting additional savvy regarding the commercial lexicon of the day: terms such as "private sale," "through no fault," "likely negroes," and "warranted sound" occupy prominent positions on each advertisement in order to entice just the right buyers. As Griffiths corroborates, "The group's scheme to trick the white slave buyers involves a performance that denaturalizes the conditions and relationships buttressing the institution of slavery," likewise signaling their broader attunement to the limitations of liberal discourses of equity and rights (31). Ultimately, the development and distribution of notices of sale reveal the party's keen understanding of the relationship between ownership and citizenship, between authority and value, and their willingness to utilize such awareness to their advantage.

Notably, however, Williams extends Keckly's initial formulation, confronting tensions and costs associated with processes of selective self-commodification even more directly. Indeed, "[t]his was a scary thing to me," declares Dessa, "to flirt so close with

bondage again” (Williams 194). In particular, Williams characterizes the public auction—perhaps the pinnacle of their performance of self-commodification—as a painful “mock[ing] of our manhood” (204). As Williams relays via narration of an auctioneer’s proclamation to a full crowd of onlookers at Haley’s Landing, “‘The genuine article,’ pointing [then] at Castor’s privates. All the white men laughed; this was a big joke” (204). Dessa, never before witness to a slave auction, is stunned by the gratuitous exhibition of racist pleasure, by the depths of Castor’s humiliation and shame. In disregard of the cardinal rule of the scheme—that “We was slaves; wasn’t posed to know nothing nor do nothing without first being told (194)—Dessa shoves Rufel’s daughter into her arms and stalks away from the mob.

Nathan manages to catch up with Dessa before too long, however, dragging her into a nearby alleyway. Once out of sight, the two “[...] rocked and crooned to each others, till [they] cried [them]selves out, then leaned against the wall, laughing a little, kind of shamefaced” (Williams 204). This moment of tenderness, or of “sweetness” as Williams might have it, captures a shared sense of vulnerability and sorrow. As Keckly relays the complexities of at once circulating as flesh and as provider of specialized, embodied labor in the form of dressmaking, Williams theorizes the psychic toll on the group of becoming complicit in their own dehumanization, even if temporarily. Accordingly, Dessa and Nathan grieve over all of the losses they’ve endured, and express fear over gambling with the prospect of returning to slavery, before finally agreeing to help one another move forward together. As self-commodification enables proximity to freedom, Williams clarifies, it also entails great risk. By fashioning the scheme in this

way, Williams inventively distorts normative boundaries of entitlement, reshaping understandings of equality and personhood in context of the nineteenth century and beyond.

IV

As critical to the aforementioned scene as utterance—indeed, the unnamed hum or chant which passes between Dessa and Nathan is very much aligned with the theme of sound addressed earlier in this chapter—is touch. The act of rocking in one another’s arms becomes transformative in the context of their experience; it represents an expression of knowledge production, strength, and possibility. This coincides, I argue in the pages to follow, with much of Harriet Wilson’s theorizing in her 1859 biomythography, *Our Nig*. While scholar Carole Boyce Davis explicitly cites an intertextual correlation between Wilson’s *Our Nig* and Morrison’s *Beloved*, specifically in their respective invocations of “the white female without protection of the patriarchal power” (49), comparable interpretive frameworks have yet to be deployed to account for the relationship between *Our Nig* and *Dessa Rose*. This is especially troubling given the latter’s corresponding insights into questions of embodiment. As outlined in Chapter One, materiality and embodiment function as fundamental sources of socio-political awareness which contradict Western patterns of rationality. Frado’s ever battered face, ears, and other limbs attest to the provisional nature of the Protestant work ethic and the falsity of New England pastoralism in the antebellum period. Further, the testimony of her young body undercuts liberal discourses of progress and self-possession, as well as presumably neutral logics of nation and belonging predicated upon power and property.

In critiquing the ways in which racial and class ascendancy are secured at the expense of laboring bodies, Wilson problematizes conditions of enforced materiality by re-claiming the body toward subversive ends. In 1986, I contend, Williams demonstrates a familiar insistence upon understanding the black body in excess of the bounds of chattel.

Farrah Griffin's essay, "Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery," validates precisely such a claim when she writes of the importance that the "process of reimagining black women's bodies moves from focusing on a body that is constructed in history and that carries that history within and on it, to a body capable of being remade" (525). In an extension of Audre Lorde's theorization in *Sister Outsider* and elsewhere, and in a framework particularly attentive to hazards associated with the erotic as a mode of resistance for many women of color, Griffin distinguishes between sensual and sexual touch. The former, for Griffin, facilitates meaningful healing, spiritual affirmation, and a means of effecting change, or what she refers to in the piece as an "opening out to others" (524). A jailed Dessa's capacity to achieve orgasm as she remembers her slain husband occupies particular significance for Griffin as an agential act of self-pleasure upon which white hegemony cannot directly capitalize (528). However, this moment of intimacy, into which readers—in Griffin's estimation—are sutured as voyeurs, seemingly only paves the way for one of the novel's apparently more consequential turning points: Dessa's union with Harker.

While Griffin cites the ambiguity of Harker's post-coital claim that Dessa's scars "only increase her value" (Williams 191), questioning the fact that "[h]eterosexuality acts

as a plot catalyst to action and as a narrative resolution throughout Williams' novel [as it likewise does in *Beloved* and *Corrigedora*, she writes]" (531), Griffin also makes plain my sense of the ways in which embodiment mediates, without necessarily eradicating, domination, serving as grounds for liberal ideology critique:

Healing [as a product of sensual touch] does not pre-suppose notions of a coherent and whole subject [...] the healing is never permanent: it requires constant attention and effort. I am using the term healing to suggest the way in which the body, literally and discursively scarred, ripped, and mutilated, has to learn to love itself, to function in the world with other bodies and often in opposition to those persons and things that seek to destroy it. Of course, the body can never return to a pre-scarred state. It is not a matter of getting back to a "truer" self, but instead of claiming the body, scars and all—in a narrative of love and care. As such, healing does not deny the construction of bodies, but instead suggests that they can be constructed differently, for different ends. (524)

Here, Griffin's reading lends support to one critic's conclusion that "[w]ith one gentle touch, [Aunt Chloe] disrupts the primacy of the visual field. Her ability to feel and to know the meaning of Dessa's scars creates a new reading, one that bears witness to suffering without condemning the survivor to silence. Dessa's story finds its language in that encounter" (Griffiths 32). Hence, embodiment in Williams' narrative at once intervenes in Enlightenment-bound discourses of ocularcentrism and of contained selfhood bolstering the liberal problematic.

Indeed, in the context of Aunt Chloe's feigned submissiveness at the prison, the *touched* body emerges as a site of articulacy and knowing, of recovery and resistance, particularly in relation to Nemi's pseudo-scientific musings. Sensuality between black women—"She ran her hand over my back, heavy, calloused hands; never forget how gentle they felt," recalls Dessa (Williams 231)—rather than white ministration, yields

opportunities to inhabit even the most seemingly intractable circumstances on altered terms. Though Nathan's and Dessa's fervent grasp in the discussion above crosses gendered lines, their laying of hands on one another remains imbued with the non-sexualized eroticism which Griffin identifies. At times strained and complicated, Nathan's and Dessa's "sweetness" perhaps finds its richest expression in this amicable embrace. While the caress does not prove to one or the other that they will forever elude capture, the contact reestablishes their willingness to proceed with the plan, and even more importantly, it restores their sense of their own humanity.

Just as readers can glean an appreciation of the body as a realm of knowledge production in the aforementioned scenes with Nathan and Aunt Chloe, as well as through Williams' initial juxtaposition of Dessa's chained blackness with Nehemiah's civil rationality, the same might be argued in relation to the author's depiction of Dessa's initial escape from prison. Herein, via stream-of-consciousness narration, Williams articulates embodiment as a locus of (black) memory and perception. For instance, just after her arrival at Sutton's Glen, pieces of imagery from Dessa's present, such as "the white light the rafted ceiling," are shot through with fragmented reminiscences from her covert exodus with Nathan, Cully, and Harker (Williams 86). "It had taken a while for her feet to remember the gliding shuffle that, slow as it appeared, ate up ground. The coffle had taught her that," recalls Dessa of the escape, as she attempts to get her bearings at the Glen (87). For Dessa, as with many slaves, her feet retain patterns of movement, as well as a sense of the power and exploitative capacity of slave drivers, all while evoking

her “bottom-line blackness.”⁹⁰ “Her feet were remembering,” Dessa continues in retrospect. “The muscles of her calves and thighs protested some and it took all of her concentration to keep their protests from drowning out the remembrance of her feet” (87). Moreover, the narrator observes, Dessa “didn’t speak [on the journey]. *She didn’t think either*. She was free; maybe not as free as she would ever be but she knew, *without needing to think about it*, that she’d never be less free than she was now, striding, sometimes stumbling toward a place she’d never seen and didn’t know one word about” (ibid; emphasis added). The runaways’ clandestine passage, then, at once represents pain and the possibility of liberation.

Nevertheless, the framing of the excerpt above appears somewhat contradictory, as it provokes an impression of both introspection *and* the sheer absence of thought. Consistent with the Western philosophical tradition, the caveats “She didn’t think either” and “without thinking about it,” relinquish cognition to a transcendent intellectual or psychic sphere. Conversely, the body becomes associated with an instinctual, natural mindlessness. On the contrary, in this instance, it is precisely through Dessa’s limbs that she begins to fathom her relationship to a violent past. It is precisely through her feet that she articulates her expectation for some semblance of freedom. In fact, in this scenario, it seems more likely that normative expertise cannot keep pace with the politics which Dessa’s body knows.

⁹⁰ This is likewise evidenced in texts like *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave* (1831). On Mary Prince and on Elizabeth Alexandar’s “bottom line blackness,” see pg. 10-12 of this volume.

Therefore, I contend that Dessa frequently references a gap between speech and literacy—two proper domains of liberal rationality—and that which she feels, throughout the novel.⁹¹ Hence, in addition to representations of her appendages, several other memories from her flight are broached in avowedly bodily terms. Refusing to fix reason and the visceral as antithetical, Dessa consistently cites the “tears sliding silently down her cheek” during the trek as she “lean[ed] back against [Harker’s] chest” (Williams 87). Further, she cannot forget the “dull throbbing in her back, some pounding in her head,” or rather “starting up out of some unremembered dreams to feel the sinewy arms around her, the beard-stubbed cheek against her face,” expressions of awareness and consciousness without which she would have otherwise “lost track of place, of time” (ibid). Within Williams’ narrative framework, then, materiality bears meaningful theoretical implications, granting the protagonist a space from which to interrogate a sense of being and of belonging. And, ultimately, it is through her body that she attempts to conceptualize motherhood and to develop a measure of community with the other fugitives in her midst.

Our Nig and *Dessa Rose* likewise intersect via their respective engagement with larger representations of black rage. In terms of a politics of wrath, Wilson mobilizes the characterization of Frado-as-picaninny in her narrative in order to counter prevailing liberal discourses of racialized anger as always already baseless or menacing. She renders fury as at once an epistemological formation and a mode of survival by engaging

⁹¹ For instance, Dessa declares on another occasion: “I couldn’t put into words all this that was going through my head. I didn’t have the words, the experience to say these things. All I could do was feel and it was like my own flesh had betrayed me” (Williams 174).

black anger on its own terms, and in conjunction with a “politics of joy,” rather than as a strictly illicit, pathological site. In positioning black rage in excess of liberal terms of order, Wilson interrogates insidious modes of discipline and social management in the antebellum North, while positing both experience and feeling as legitimate terrains of meaning-making, value, and worldview. As detailed in Chapter One, through her theorization of the critical import of black ire, Wilson dialogically encounters black feminist discourse articulated by the likes of Michele Wallace, Patricia Hill Collins, and Audre Lorde.

Williams, too, addresses the irruptive force of an incensed blackness. According to Waters-Dawson, “though the theme of the psychic rage of both the enslaved and the enslaver is present [in *Dessa Rose*] the novel itself [can be read] as a finished text or product of controlled rage by the novelist” (18). Waters-Dawson is especially drawn to the scene of Dessa and Rufel’s argument over “Mammy,” addressed earlier in this chapter: “In her angry response, Dessa represents multiple voices: for herself, for her mother, and for the nameless ‘mammies’ in the history of the slave woman [...] In other words, Dessa ‘has the last word,’ and Williams, as the creator of Dessa’s story, is the medium of this enraged voice,” Waters-Dawson observes (23). In a related scene in the novel, however, I argue that readers can glimpse even more precisely how liberal ideological imperatives attempt to sanitize and disavow expressions of black resentment and the critiques of white privilege embedded within them. Consumed on one occasion by thoughts of the increasing likelihood of her husband, Bertie’s, death as opposed to his lingering absence, Rufel quietly enters the room in which Dessa is recovering following

her escape. Catching Dessa unawares, who assumes it is simply another bondswoman, Ada, come to check on her, Rufel soon realizes Dessa is nude. However, “her bottom was so scarred that Rufel had thought she must be wearing some kind of garment,” the narrator reveals (Williams 154). Indeed, “The wench had a right to hide her scars, her pain, Rufel thought, almost in tears herself” (154). Characterized as alternately sympathetic, surprised, embarrassed, faint, and regretful, Rufel quickly closes the door as gently as she had entered it.

Nevertheless, rather than fully retreating—as a sign of respect for Dessa’s “right” to privacy—Rufel proceeds to open the door a second time. Immediately, Rufel “sensed the *smoldering hostility* beneath the girl’s obvious embarrassment,” as a previously oblivious Dessa “had [now] snatched up a dress and stood stiffly with it clutched in front of her bare chest” (154; emphasis added). In the face of Dessa’s indignation, Rufel responds anxiously: “That other day [...] that other day, we wasn’t talking about the same person. Your mammy birthed you, and mines, mines just helped to raise me. But she loved me [...] She loved me, just like yours loved you” (154). Subsequently, Williams depicts a problematic diffusion of black anger as Dessa apparently “watched her narrowly for a moment” before “slowly her tensely held shoulders relaxed”: “‘I know that, Miss’es,’ she sighed. ‘I know that,’ she said without anger or regret” (155).

Arguably, Dessa’s inexplicable lack of anger or regret in this moment signals an all too familiar evacuation of black intensity and suspicion; the development of Rufel’s liberal sense of self is secured at the expense of a slave woman’s interiority and of her longstanding objection to an uncritical white encroachment upon her life, her maternity,

and upon the story her body tells.⁹² Notably, Rufel outright dismissed other blacks' accounts of Dessa's barbaric treatment on the Vaughan plantation as propaganda, or else as completely warranted by the slave woman's own malevolence, prior to this exchange. In fact, her refusal to acknowledge Dessa's experience without seeing the "goods," so to speak, finally relies upon sedimented tropes of black female hypersexuality and excessiveness, points to which I will later return. In the end, Rufel's capacity to establish the veracity of black pain at will denotes a hallmark of racial and class privilege. Indeed, Rufel's acceptance, Williams' construal, or both, of Dessa's tone as suddenly "without anger or regret," rather than as a vehicle of sustained critique, indexes a fundamental unintelligibility of black rage within liberal matrices of domination and control.

Yet, Williams likewise portrays a misapprehension of black anger within intra-racial community dynamics. For instance, as the fugitives at Sutton's Glen congregate one evening to discuss the merits of Harker's plan to sell themselves back into slavery, Dessa and another runaway, Janet, cast doubt on the scheme in light of Nathan's sexual liaison with Rufel. "How long you think we going last amongst white folks with Nathan in her bed?" Dessa queries. "Yo' all just jealous cause he not diddling you [...] Don't nobody want no old mule like you," counters a slave named Ned, amidst stifled laughter (Williams 183). Though, as Byerman observes, Dessa's "response is carefully shown to be the product not of jealousy but rather of group betrayal" (62), Dessa explodes. The charge, reminiscent of Nanny's declaration to Janie in the opening pages of *Zora Neale*

⁹² Evidence of Dessa's longstanding objection is suggested by Williams' use of the term "smoldering."

Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), stirs deep-seated emotions.⁹³

Straightaway, Dessa "had to close [her] eyes"; she "was so choked [she] couldn't speak" (Williams 183). Her response is at once visceral and volatile.

Hence, Dessa's anger most readily manifests itself as "a fire-burst where Ned's head should've been" (Williams 183), a "flash" which makes time stand still, after which she "was still shaking from remembrance, from feeling" (184). Dessa recalls this sense of outrage—similarly personified as "a bloodhound in my throat, a monster that didn't seem to know enemy or friend, wouldn't know the difference once it got loose"—as the force motivating her previous attack on her mistress, Mary Vaughan, in the wake of Kaine's murder, and on Wilson, the slave trader, during the uprising on the coffle (*ibid.*). She eventually laments directing such umbrage at a fellow slave: "It scared me to see it almost loosed against one of us; and, pesky as he was, Ned was part of us," confesses Dessa (*ibid.*). Her reaction is consuming and fierce, formidable and destructive.

But while Ned mistakes Dessa's wariness for envy, I argue that her display of possessiveness, suspicion, and madness registers something else entirely. In this instance, Dessa produces a mode of contestation incumbent not on garnering black male favor, but on problematizing blanket devaluations of black womanhood. After lodging an initial complaint based on her discernment that Rufel's willingness to participate in the ruse marks, in effect, "her trusting in her whiteness and not our blackness" (Williams 189), Dessa heatedly rejects the demeaning, if commonplace appellation imposed by

⁹³ See pg. 14 of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: "De nigger woman is the mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!" (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006).

Ned. Just as with the terms “darky” and “wench” deployed by Nehemiah and Rufel, “mule” as intra-racial epithet misnames black women’s lives and labor at the same time that it minimizes their exploitation. “Oh, we was mules all right. What else would peoples use like they used us?” Dessa broods angrily, implicating black masculinity in the context of her oppression and that of countless other bondwomen (183).

Though Dessa does finally seek recognition and approval from her husband, Kaine— “Dessa’s inhibitions about her body contribute to the absence of the will to resistance,” while her deceased husband, and later Harker, function to assuage this self-consciousness, as Griffin reminds (530)—the rage which colors this exchange disputes a rampant misappropriation of black women’s bodies under enslavement, without eliding male privilege. Dessa’s invocation of the beauty of her own rough heels, Janet’s tough, hickory-inflected skin, and Flora’s big, hard hands, in the midst of her exasperation, then, refutes broader patterns of dehumanizing black women from which black men are not exempt. Moreover, Dessa’s bitter reflection upon the dispersal of seventeen of Milly’s children in eighteen years, of Ada’s rape at the hands of a master who later began to pursue Anabelle, the product of that initial union, in fact, demonstrates a singular passion. It is precisely through this intensity that Dessa wrenches possibilities of black worth from the depths of sorrow and anguish. Akin to Wilson before her, Williams restores meaning to black antagonism beyond the bounds of liberal ideology. Both writers channel enmity as an agent of knowledge production and redress.

V

In closing, however, it is useful to recognize a point of departure between contemporary narratives of slavery such as *Dessa Rose* and the literature and prose of nineteenth-century writers and activists Harriet Wilson, Elizabeth Keckly, and Anna Julia Cooper. As several black feminist and literary scholars have demonstrated, present-day fictional pursuits typically feature a concerted recuperation of sexuality in comparison to earlier writings. That is, novels by Williams, Morrison, Gayl Jones, and Edward P. Jones that engage the sphere of nineteenth-century slave culture and racial politics often confront the nuances and effects of black desire in a mode seemingly dissonant from that of Civil War, Emancipation, and post-Reconstruction era compositions. This dearth of explicit engagement with the erotic in some of black women's initial published discourse at once calls attention to acute vulnerabilities associated with the projection of a public image during the period and to the hold of governing ideologies of respectability. Indeed, with an emphasis on individual behavior modification as a means to access the privileges of citizenship, nineteenth and early twentieth-century proponents of a "politics of black respectability" organized against systemic violence and exploitation impacting black communities by advocating logics of temperance, morality, and self-help. Nevertheless, in failing to disrupt reigning gender, class, and sexual norms, such an agenda effectively contained outward expressions of black pleasure, discounting deep sensuality and embodiment as sources of restoration, understanding, and joy.

On the other hand, muteness around questions of the sexual in nineteenth-century black women's writing signifies neither aesthetic lack nor theoretical deficiency. In fact,

I conclude with the claim that much of the value of contemporary narratives of slavery concerns not its ameliorative, corrective function in relation to perceived absences within previous texts, but rather its ongoing commitment to interrogating the structural conditions necessitating such silences in the first place. Accordingly, throughout *Dessa Rose*, Williams crystallizes liberal humanist suppositions hinged upon notions of black female sexuality as fundamentally aberrant. Manipulating language and characterization, Williams undercuts pretensions toward abstract rationality and universalism, cultural mythologies for which black excessiveness implicitly marks the bounds. In these ways, Williams and others hinder the perpetuation of technologies of silencing, cultures of self-policing, and related processes of suppression in the present.

Nehemiah, for instance, vigorously defends cult of true womanhood ideology during his exchanges with an imprisoned Dessa. Reinscribing the by-now-worn attributes of a sanctified white femininity—purity, domesticity, spirituality—Nehemiah salutes exemplars of the wealthy planter class, such as Miss Janet of South Carolina, who epitomize purportedly objective standards of what it means to be a “woman.” He praises Miss Janet’s exquisite cuisine and taste in décor, for as “[t]he planters had wrought immense beauty in the wilderness that still dwarfed the nation [,] Nehemiah felt privileged to rub shoulders with its creators” (Williams 28). Yet, as he continues on in admiration of Miss Janet’s stirring opposition to “slave concubinage” as “an affront to white womanhood,” the following caveat accompanies his own view on the subject: “Nehemiah was not quite so vehement—a man must, after all, have some outlet for the baser passions” (42; emphasis added). Likewise, following an oft-cited dispute with

Dessa over the identity of “Mammy,” Rufel responds furiously. “Wench probably don’t know her own name and here she is trying to tell me something about Mammy [...] *Uppity, insolent slut!*” she bellows (121; emphasis added). In both cases, black womanhood circulates as illegitimate and available. The frequent deployment of the term “slut,” in particular, by various, progressive whites in the novel signals a collapsing of the hypersexual and the black feminine, whereby black women’s bodies always already constitute the wantonness and depravity against which the normativity of whiteness is secured.

Ultimately, Williams’ depiction of the unthinking ease—the cavaliness—with which black womanhood circulates as paragon of sexual difference, as a receptacle for white male lust, strengthens rather than diminishes our understanding of the place of emergent writers and thinkers including Wilson, Keckly, and Cooper. Williams acknowledges their (formal and informal) states of captivity by grounding her novel in a bold display of black intimacy and desire. Hence, the feeling emanating from Kaine’s smile, from his serenade, from lifting his wife, Dessa, into the air, permeates the Prologue. The memory of his warm breath on her neck and his laugh, his heart beat and the tip of his tongue, are enough for Dessa to realize, in the narrator’s words, that “[l]ove suffused her” (13). This vestibular act of dreamwork—the recovery of a sense of Kaine’s talk, his touch, the couple’s love-making—mirrors Williams’ broader, politicized reclamation of eroticism throughout her project as a whole. Without negating institutional or ideological barriers, Williams looks back to the tenderness and seduction that could have been so that each of us can imagine the pleasure that might yet be. By

harnessing an overt articulation of black women's sensuality as narrative frame—in conjunction with extended intertextual engagement with nineteenth-century black women's problematization of liberal notions of abstraction, rationality, interracial friendship, and rage—Williams broadens the scope and potential of black women's resistance.

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