Bricolage Propriety: The Queer Practice of Black Uplift, 1890–1905

Timothy M. Griffiths

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BRICOLAGE PROPRIETY: THE QUEER PRACTICE OF BLACK UPLIFT, 1890–1905

by

TIMOTHY M. GRIFFITHS

A Dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York 2017
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Timothy M. Griffiths

This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Bricolage Propriety: The Queer Practice of Black Uplift, 1890–1905

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Timothy M. Griffiths

Adviser: Robert Reid-Pharr

Bricolage Propriety: The Queer Practice of Black Uplift, 1890-1905 situates the queer-of-color cultural imaginary in a relatively small nodal point: the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. Through literary analysis and archival research on leading and marginal figures of Post-Reconstruction African American culture, this dissertation considers the progenitorial relationship of late-nineteenth century black uplift novels to modern-day queer theory. Bricolage Propriety builds on work about the sexual politics of early African American literature begun by women-of-color feminists of the late 1980s and early 1990s, including Hazel V. Carby, Ann duCille, and Claudia Tate. A new wave of interest has emerged in the “Post-Bellum/Pre-Harlem” era of African American literary production, but few in queer theory and African American literary study have yet made a connection between this renewed interest and turns in gender and sexuality studies since the late 1990s. Bricolage Propriety attempts to revisit this period of literary production and to update how we think about this period after the emergence of queer-of-color critique, particularly the work of José Esteban Muñoz, Roderick Ferguson, Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, Tavia Nyong’o, Darieck Scott, Robert Reid-Pharr, Siobahn Somerville, and Mason Stokes. Moreover this project attempts to use its analyses of the gender and sex politics of this literary archive to question queer theory’s novelty, to put antiracism at its center, and to deemphasize the white-gay-male archive’s centrality. The argument offered in Bricolage Propriety narrativizes a usable past of black and queer cultures toward a more efficacious queer and antiracist coalition politics. By implementing race as a form of sexual transgression more fully into queer theory, the critical flexibility and political salience of queer theory can only stand to grow. Published during the emergence of the African American literary genre, the novels of Charles W. Chesnutt, Pauline E. Hopkins, and Sutton E. Griggs provide a critical model for how to think about race as a form of transgressive sexuality; further, these texts show how integral racial representation at the end of the nineteenth century is to our ideas about sexual transgression. In the manner of bricolage — art produced with whatever is at hand — these novelists worked within and outside the dominant culture of their time to theorize black sexual propriety, while challenging that same propriety through key failures and subversions of early African American literary form.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From its inception, Bricolage Propriety: The Queer Practice of Black Uplift, 1890–1905 has been primarily about my belief in the necessity of queer antiracism — in my scholarship, in my activism, and in my life. Everyone who has participated in this project, believed in its premise, funded its research, scrutinized its flaws, discussed its merits, and held its author’s hand in times of need has acted as an ally to that cause.

In the past five years, while working on this project, I lost two people without whom this dissertation would not be possible. This dissertation is dedicated to their memories.

The first is my father, Gary H. Griffiths. When you grow up in a predominantly white rural part of Michigan, there’s hardly any guarantee you’ll have access to antiracist culture and thought. But by some fluke miracle, I had Gary Griffiths for a father. My father was not humble about his lifetime opposition to racism — and it was probably a little hyperbolic, truth be told — but as a kid, it helped me to have a father who taught me that antiracism is a form of thankless heroism. He played his jazz records loudly every Saturday morning; he talked about his opposition to segregation while a lecturer at Auburn University; and he took me to see the Charles Mingus Big Band, where I first heard the song “Fables of Faubus.” He didn’t learn I was queer until he was about seventy-seven; after a month of awkwardness, he was about as accepting of me as I could ask for. And to what did he credit his acceptance of my sexuality? His experiences with antiracism. Not bad for an old white guy from Akron, Ohio.

The other person to whom I dedicate this work is José Esteban Muñoz. I only knew José for maybe a total of three months, having taken his class “Wildness” at New York University, co-taught with Tavia Nyong’o. José passed away about two weeks before the end of the semester, devastating everyone who had known this kind, generous, hilarious wit. I learned from José to craft my research trajectory like a philosopher, thinking of my work as one holistic project rather than as discrete inquiries. I learned from him to think about queerness as more than just subversive radicalism, but also as a loving critique of the dominant culture we all grow up in. Most importantly, I learned from José how to critique what I don’t like not just through biting analysis, but through generous, intimate acquaintance with it. I find myself grateful for his work almost every day and I expect to be teaching it throughout my career.

Before I began my time at the Graduate Center, when I was deciding where to go to graduate school, a professor at another university — where I was on a prospective student visit — told me that if I did not go to CUNY and study with Robert Reid-Pharr that I would be making a huge mistake. Robert has been everything you could ask for in a graduate school and dissertation adviser. He compliments my outfits; he doesn’t accept mediocrity; he patiently but curtly stops me when my projects are getting extravagant and longwinded; he pushes me not to take my theoretical underpinnings for granted, to always interrogate the role of theory in my scholarship; he pushes me to finish; and he told me early on that I should not forsake my creative writing background because skillful, imaginative writing is what would set me apart in my scholarship. Indeed, the beauty and distinctiveness of Robert’s prose taught me that lesson even before then. From the bottom of my heart, thank you, Robert.

Eric Lott ran a tight ship as a dissertation workshop supervisor and as a dissertation committee member. His expertise on interracial desire and politics in the early Jim Crow era were essential; I was incredibly fortunate he arrived at the Graduate Center when he did and that he was willing, amidst his busy schedule, to read my stuff. Further, he has excellent taste in
music, a great sense of humor, and one of the more collegial dispositions you’re likely to find in a big-shot academic.

Duncan Faherty has not only been a fantastic committee member, but he is the motor of American Studies at the Graduate Center. Without his diligence, so many of the opportunities I have had as a graduate student — intensive summer institutes, workshops, archival funding, and much more — would simply not exist. He has lobbied for me and my work on countless occasions; he has made me shake hands with academics at events when I was content to look at my shoes and drink free wine; and he was even nice enough to come to my wedding last year. He is one of the foremost advocates for student success at the Graduate Center, and he undoubtedly deserves more recognition for it than I can offer here.

I would like to thank Professors Kandice Chuh and Hildegard Hoeller, who made an indelible impact on my early scholarship as orals committee members. Kandice has always urged me to read promiscuously, to write without regard to period and genre, and to displace the term “queer” in my work. Hildegard introduced me to countless excellent texts about sentimentality, domesticity, and women’s writing in the nineteenth century. Although I had almost no expertise on these subjects prior to meeting her, she accepted me where I was and patiently held my hand throughout the process of my learning. She is a marvelous teacher.

Nothing would get done in the English department at the Graduate Center without the hard work, knowledge, and experience of Nancy Silverman. She patiently guides students through every bureaucratic hoop they face, helping us to avoid being “CUNY’d” whenever she can.

Thank you to Mario DiGangi, our executive officer, for signing countless pieces of paper for me and for letting all of us unclean grad students hang out in his suite at MLA year after year. Thank you as well to Carrie Hintz, our former deputy executive officer, who invited me into her office to talk pedagogy, scholarship, and academic life without an appointment several times.

To my Americanist colleagues (and former advisers) at Brooklyn College — James Davis, Joseph Entin, Geoffrey Minter, and Martha Nadell — working alongside you all has made me a better pedagogue. The role you play as antiracist, activist educators is inspiring.

Countless friends and colleagues have read my chapters, conference papers, and research proposals and provided feedback along the way. There are too many to name here, but I must thank in particular my GC English peers Joseph Bowling, Kristina Huang, and Danica Savonick. No one could ask for better writing buddies.

During the 2016–2017 year I had the immense privilege to be an NYPL/Schomburg Center Scholar in Residence, taking advantage of their archival holdings and taking part in their weekly seminar with the other residents. All of the residents lent wonderful feedback on the first chapter of this project, but I would like to extend special gratitude to Brent Hayes Edwards, Kim Hall, and Conor Tomás Reed, who always offer the right comment at the right time, not in the name of what I call “workshop performativity,” but out of a genuine, deeply felt interest in the work of their colleagues.

Portions of this dissertation have been shared at the 2015 Futures of American Studies Institute, the 2015 and 2016 Early Research Initiative conference at the Graduate Center, the 2016 CLAGS: After Marriage conference, and the 2017 Modern Language Association conference. To all the participants and organizers at these events who listened to and offered feedback on my work, I express my deep gratitude.

The research and writing of Bricolage Propriety was supported by a number of grants from the Graduate Center. Thanks to the Advanced Research Collaborative, the Early Research
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I was extraordinarily fortunate and honored in the final year of writing this dissertation to be a Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellow. I would like to thank Johnny Brennan, Matthew Goldfeder, and Cindy Mueller at ACLS for all their assistance. The support lent by ACLS easily shaved a year off the time it would’ve taken to complete this dissertation.

I could not ask for a more loving, funny, and interesting family than the one I’ve been gifted. To my mother, thank you for continuing to take an interest in my work even when it is really jargony, pretentious, and inaccessible. To my brother Chris, thank you for letting me stay with you in Nashville when I was doing my research at Fisk and for showing me a good time in the city. To my sister Brett — well, you blazed the trail for me in this family and showed me at every turn how to be an academic that stays true to their working class roots. It’s not easy to be the first kids in the family to get a college degree, and we took on extra difficulty and debt by trying to get PhDs. I don’t know how many times we’ve commiserated about and regretted those choices, but look at us now.

There are inadequate words to express the love and support I owe my partner, Garen. You have allowed me to toil in obscurity for almost nine years now as a struggling musician, writer, and academic and you never once pressured me to do anything but follow my heart, hold myself in high esteem, and keep writing. There is no substitute for what you have given me and I hope, now and in the future, to reward your good faith in me as a scholar, activist, and partner.

And finally, to all the queer-of-color activists, the women-of-color feminists, the students I’ve advised, and my struggling artist friends, thank you for sustaining me with your tireless, incredible work. I can only dream that my scholarship, teaching, and activism lives up to your high standards.
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Introduction: Bricolage Propriety

This was a world informed, above all, by ideas of gentility .... Thus, just as literary gentility remained a mainstay in much of American popular writing, no subversive elements appeared in the works of black writers of this period. For them, the ideals of gentility remained wholly positive; and their literature remained wholly faithful to its tenets. (19–20)

—Dickson D. Bruce Jr., Black American Writing from the Nadir (1989)

Examining queer blackness provides opportunities to consider how the history that produces blackness is a sexual history, that is, a history of state-sanctioned, population-level manipulation of sex’s reproductive and pleasure-producing capacities .... though sexuality is used against us, and sexual(ized) domination is in part what makes us black, though sexuality is a mode of conquest and often cannot avoid being deployed in a field of representation without functioning as an introjection of historical defeat, it is in and through that very domination and defeat also a mapping of political potential, an access to freedom. (9)

—Darieck Scott, Extravagant Abjection (2010)

Some say queer is the new black. Wrong. Black has always been the permanent queer.

—Marlon B. Ross, spoken at the 2016 American Studies Association Conference

The Teleology of Black Sexuality

What constitutes our idea of a libertine, cosmopolitan black sexual ethics, where did that idea come from, and how has it changed over time? Certain images are sticky ones: Langston Hughes and his ambiguous bedsharing with the Russian ballet dancer Sonya in his memoir The Big Sea (1940); Ray and Banjo’s anti-woman homosocial fugitivity at the end of Claude McKay’s Banjo (1929); Richard Bruce Nugent’s queer hipster ruffians and their erotic triumvirate in “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade” (1926); the bold, unapologetic stride of the eponymous sex worker escaping the moralistic confines of Wallace Thurman’s “Cordelia the Crude” (1926); and, in Nella Larsen’s Passing (1929), the charged erotic antagonism between Clare Kendry and
Irene Redfield that would later inspire Judith Butler’s work on race and sexual performativity in *Bodies that Matter* (1993). And then there are those hallmark texts of the Cold War period, with their ambivalent attitudes toward free love ideology in the sphere of black politics and culture: Ralph Ellison’s sexual grotesqueries and dysfunction in *Invisible Man* (1952); James Baldwin’s critique of the doctrine of sexual innocence — couched in effeminophobia and rugged, masculine idealizations of queer desire — in *Giovanni’s Room* (1956); Richard Wright and Eldridge Cleaver’s playful and sometimes gravely serious trolling with the specter of the black male rapist as the poisoned fruit of white supremacism in *Native Son* (1940) and *Soul on Ice* (1968); and, in the published and unpublished work of Lorraine Hansberry, an appeal for sexual freedom of choice for women amidst intense triangulation by the ideological forces of racial politics. Finally there is the consecration of the black queer studies canon in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century: the black feminist catalyzation of intersectional feminism in the work of Audre Lorde and Barbara Christian; the surprisingly sentimental but impolitic and dark erotic sizzle of Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill’s *Brother to Brother* (1991); the search for a black queer usable past in Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* (1989) and Dwight D. McBride’s *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch* (2005); and the unapologetically kinky black queer community building in ethnographic histories, personal narratives, and performances by scholars and artists like E. Patrick Johnson, Samuel R. Delany, and Robert Reid-Pharr.

In the loose genealogy of African-American sexual culture above we can tease out a few observations. First of all, black queer genealogy building seems to resist triumphalism and linear progression; unlike in queer studies, which has largely been about the journey out of the closet and into the streets, it is difficult to anoint specific epochs, authors, and texts in African American culture as breakthrough points for an idealized and consecrated black queer desire.
ethos. This is not to say that there is no arms race to develop an “authentic” and ethically oriented black queer politics, but in that endeavor, the past is not merely the past; not only are we concerned with symbols of queer blackness that are ideologically oriented toward our present concerns, but the intertwined history of racism, sexism, and homophobia make all of the history of African American culture the history of sexual repression, subversion, and liberation. In some sense there is nothing wrong with a historicism marking the continually changing characterization of the black queer body, and it has been ever so crucial to look for our Langstons; yet by dipping into certain wells of inspiration again and again, we have also risked consecrating a black queer body that oversamples from the experiences of black gay men in twentieth-century America. Additionally we have narrativized African American culture in a way that streamlines and cleans its progression from the antebellum period to the present, which does not account for all the ambiguities, regressions, radical imaginings, and failures that make up so much of African American literature throughout the development of its traditions.

It is worth noting as well that we typically mark the Harlem Renaissance as a massive self-conscious development of black aesthetics that involved an urbane shift toward the truth of human experience, including a new maturity about issues of human sexuality and gender. According to this idealization of the Harlem Renaissance, artists in this period were no longer forced to contend with an overbearing domestic propriety that held back the artistic impulses of writers in previous eras, but instead felt free to experiment with content in the same ways as they did with form. But that elides the fact that writers of the Harlem Renaissance did not all think of themselves as being part of one coherent revolutionary movement; many of them did not see World War I, the Great Migration, and the Red Summer as borders between their work and the work of the previous generation, even when they claimed, as in the Wallace Thurman edited
Fire!! (1926), to be staking new territory for a disenfranchised, bohemian subset of African Americans. Marking the Harlem Renaissance as the preeminent movement in black culture involves, intentionally or not, relegating the preceding period — what Rayford Logan called “the nadir of American race relations” — as a dark ages in which black culture could not make imaginative and creative strides in self-actualization and artistic development because it was so far back on its heels in the fight against early Jim Crow oppressions. Recent scholars of Post-Reconstruction African American literature — literature written primarily between 1877 and 1914 — have come to question why Harlem Renaissance literature has been so thoroughly cordoned off and why it maintains a privileged position in the narrative of the development of the tradition.

As I began writing what has become *Bricolage Propriety: The Queer Practice of Black Uplift, 1890–1905*, I too wondered why scholars of black queer studies so often look for Langston — or in many cases, Baldwin\(^1\) — as the progenitor par excellence of a black queer cultural history and whether or not that disallowed or flattened other nodal points in the genealogy of black queer culture. Turning to the Post-Reconstruction period — a period so often marked as an interregnum in black literary studies between the remarkable aesthetic achievements of slave narratives and jazz — I looked for something I could not name, a black queer desire ethos for which I didn’t have a word. I sought this, in part, because queer politics, in its post-marriage inflexibility of imagination, may be encountering a crisis of exigency — queer bodies seem not only to be “born this way,” but queer politics has insisted on midwifing a certain (anti)normative LGBTQ identity into being. The queer political movement suffers from the same teleological tendencies as many other political movements; particularly in its focus on bourgeois

\(^1\) See, for instance, Dwight A. McBride’s “Straight Black Studies” in *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch*. 
same-gender loving couples seeking the right to marry, it has grown predictable and inflexible as a site for the production of knowledge, as has queer theory in its tendency to perceive anything that could be normative as anathema to its ideology.²

By shifting the study of black queer sexuality to the Nadir, I model a widening of queer politics and queer method that displaces homosexuality and whiteness from the center of the discourse; in their place I offer a study of intensified black sexual transgression and the negotiation of black gender and sexual identity in fin de siècle America as archives that could fundamentally change queer method for the better. In particular this method involves thinking of blackness as a form of sexual transgression in U.S. culture, where the political contestation of reproductive ethics and domestic valor comprise the battleground on which blackness was adjudicated and used. This project is intended to widen the scope of the black queer usable past without watering down the precision and power of queer-of-color critique; in the same way, it

² Scholars have begun to register a degree of discontent with antinormativity as the central hermeneutic of queer theory, such as in a recent special issue of differences edited by Robyn Wiegman entitled “Queer Theory without Antinormativity” (2015). Especially of interest to me is Erica R. Edwards’ essay in this issue, “Sex after the Black Normal,” in which she calls into question the efficacy of the concept of antinormativity in describing the lives, experiences, and politics of black women. Noting discontents in the respectability politics of black feminism in the neoliberal era, Edwards argues that “black women’s sex and sexuality be understood as both at the center of a ‘changed’ America and on the edge of collective preservation” (156). Some of what Edwards argues may call into question the central theoretical tenets of scholars like Daricek Scott and myself when we say that blackness is queer. However, Edwards’ critique here operates primarily in a post-1945 timeframe, after which the relationship of black women to the concept of sexual normativity becomes different than that of the early Jim Crow era as they take a larger role in the public and political spheres. I agree, however, with Edwards, and more generally with the contributors to the issue, that antinormativity cannot be synonymous with queerness or with any political identity because of the complex power relations of LGBTQ political movements; but if we attempt to change the definition of queer to operate with other hermeneutics besides antinormativity, it allows us a much broader look into the spectrum of sexual, gender, and racial performances that comprise, surround, and define black queerness. Thus, when I say that blackness is queer, I am not saying that blackness is antinormative; I am saying it inhabits a special relationship to sexual biopolitics and power, particularly the sexual biopolitics of whiteness and white supremacy.
seeks out common queer theoretical tendencies in African American literature to suggest its progenitorial quality to queer theory without laying claim to an equivalence between black and queer cultural history in America. To follow Darieck Scott in saying that “blackness is queer” is not to say that blackness and queerness are historically or socially the same, but that blackness as we know it is so suffused with the assumption of sexual impropriety as to make it sexually transgressive (10).

**Black Queer Method: Its History, Limits, and Potentialities**

In the midst of great momentum for gender and sexuality studies — a time at which thinkers like Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler were about to publish their most vital contributions to the burgeoning field of queer theory — John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman wrote the highly influential primer *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (1988). This thoroughly researched book performed an important task as postmodern critique kicked into full swing: it attempted to overturn the common-sense narrative that modernity had freed us from puritanical sexual mores in America, letting us know that sexual cultures and cultures of sexual transgression had a long history in the United States. D’Emilio and Freedman understood, too, that since the seventeenth century, sexuality has worked as a form of racialized social control in America (86). What eventually counts as sexual progressivism or free-love ideology in U.S. history and who and what gets to emblematize the journey toward sexual modernity is a matter of debate. To their credit, D’Emilio and Freedman argue that the African-American family system in America, prior to the twentieth century, was in fact largely different than that of the colonialists, in some ways that could be seen as sexually cosmopolitan or free-love-centric. This is a risk given that there remains a question of how to receive what enslaved Africans did under the social control of whites (97). However, when D’Emilio and Freedman begin to discuss the
Free Love Movement proper, which kicked into full swing in the late nineteenth century, African Americans are largely left out of the conversation because of the perception that African American culture was sexually assimilative after abolition. Within the culture of slavery, D’Emilio and Freedman hold regard for the ingenuity and flexibility with which African Americans approached domestic organization and the institution of marriage. After the pressures of Jim Crow emerge, African American sexuality and gender is depicted as normative (216).

D’Emilio and Freedman’s understanding of black culture in the early Jim Crow period as sexually assimilative is not totally inaccurate, but it did court an important critique from Ann duCille, who argued that Intimate Matters was unabashedly written from the perspective of “objective” and dispassionate white voices and did little to try to shake up the Eurocentrism of historiography (“Othered” 103). In her review of the book, duCille issued a clarion call for better methods in gender and sexuality studies, which she saw as lacking “An analytical framework that considers black sexuality in the context of a culture of resistance developed initially by a diasporized people in order to survive in an alien and exploitive environment” and “a methodological strategy that actively authorizes and centers … black Americans as subjects of discourse” (“Othered” 110). In her powerful conclusion she states,

[While] black and other scholars of color, in the process of being educated, are forced by the system to study the political, social, and cultural history of Euro-American society, traditionally such requisites have seldom been placed on the study of marginalized cultures. Perhaps this is what needs to happen. Perhaps when African, Asian, Mexican, and Native American histories become truly integral parts of American history, when multicultural women’s history becomes an integral part of women’s studies, when all Americanists attain their degrees knowing as much about the history of American “subcultures” as black and Third World scholars are required to know about the so-called dominant culture, these “racially different” Americans will no longer be approached as anomalous, marginal, outside, other …. As long as we accept the “limits of the field” and use them to excuse ourselves and each other, as long as we believe that concentrating on “white, middle-class, heterosexual attitudes and activities” is “inevitable,” as long as we are content to quote sources rather than interrogate subjects, we will
continue to marginalize, phenomenalize, and misread those othered Americans whom history has traditionally sought to annihilate, enslave, colonize, and exclude. Perhaps this is the terror of history repeating itself. (“Othered” 127)

Where a cultural history of black sexuality was concerned, Ann duCille was among those who most fervently claimed the feminist critical edge of Post-Reconstruction literature by emphasizing its many proto-postmodern tendencies, including its themes of intersectionality. She was especially concerned with a kind of tyranny of the present in analysis of this period, namely that postmodern feminist criticism chides “early African American writers for not being 100 to 150 years ahead of their times” (Coupling 18). One senses that duCille was rightfully frustrated with the lack of credit African American cultures were given with influencing progressive changes in sex and gender politics in the U.S. Her work is especially pertinent still because of her belief that gender and sexuality studies scholarship persistently diminishes black culture’s importance in the history of U.S. sexual cultures.

In the rapid advancement of gender and sexuality studies in the academy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, slight attention was paid by its scholars to African American cultural studies. The greatest scholarly attention paid to the intense gender and sex politics of the Nadir itself came between 1987–1993 in scholarship by women-of-color feminists like Hazel V. Carby, Ann duCille, Hortense Spillers, and Claudia Tate, their work firmly rooted in African American literary and cultural studies. This period also saw the republication of several important nineteenth-century novels by women of color by the Schomburg Center’s Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers series. Late-nineteenth-century novels by or about women of color were one of the most important archives for the study of black sexuality at this time. Scholars were careful, however, in projecting the prerogatives and interests of black feminism onto this work, favoring a traditional interpretation of African American literature in that period as assimilative
and genteel. Claudia Tate argued that black women’s domestic novels of the nineteenth century “all reflect excessive moralizing …. an ambience of gentility, hyperbolic representation of emotion, tightly circumscribed household settings, and the development of an exemplary heroine” (12). Hazel V. Carby, on the other hand, celebrated the way women-of-color authors of the period challenged the Cult of True Womanhood and its white-feminist ideological constraints, but noted that much of the work cannot be characterized as “free love” ideology or “unrestrained utopian vision” (“Threshold” 276). duCille appeared to be the only scholar claiming a culture of resistance or subversion in these texts that did not simply comport to widely held norms about gender and sex. To put it another way, duCille may have been the first scholar to think of these texts as not simply counteridentificatory, but disidentificatory. Indeed, this is what attracted me to these novels in the first place as an object of study — not that they issued sexually libertine thought and explicit feminist and queer notions that could be woven together seamlessly with postmodern queer thought, but that they offered, in their own subtle way, critiques of gender and sex politicking, methods of cultural representation, and conduits of resistance that were not totalizable as “subversion” or “assimilation”; further, they did this to not only voice and disseminate political opinion, but to extract pleasure from and survive in a hostile dominant culture that sought the death of racial and sexually nonnormative others.

Despite the fact women-of-color feminist scholars were so interested in the sexual politics of the Nadir, queer theory — which came to dominate gender and sexuality studies in the 1990s — was not, favoring white canonical culture and homoeroticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as their primary points of interest. Even in African American studies, major projects on the fin de siècle emergence of African American literature — let alone its complex gender and sex politics — have been few and far between. Productive debates about the central
theoretical tenets and subject matter of queer theory, however, have erupted, necessitating the development of a breakaway field known as “black queer studies” and a breakaway methodology known as “queer-of-color critique.” But before discussing black queer studies and queer-of-color critique and how Bricolage Propriety is conversant with those fields, I would like to discuss the queer disciplinary conflicts surrounding the development of black and queer scholarship.

In Cruising Utopia (2009), José Esteban Muñoz characterized queer theory as having two strains of thought: antirelational negativity and intersectional utopianism. Antirelationality is, essentially, the idea that at the heart of the experiences and culture of homosexuals lies an indispensable critique of normative values like reproductive futurity, marriage, and compulsory heterosexuality. Emerging out of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s, this work was intended to give value to the perspectives, lives, and critical methods of queer people, who were increasingly seen as living sad lives in a culture of death. Rather than rejecting that premise, most antirelational critique absorbs, with a degree of playfulness, the notion that there is something inherently antinormative about gay people, something almost mystical and inborn. Theorists of antirelational negativity claimed presentism and shunned futurity — emblematized by reproduction — as part of the mindless bourgeois consumptive habits of heterosexuals.³

³ Reproductive futurity is a concept most commonly associated with the work of Lee Edelman in No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (2004). In that text, Edelman claims that queer people are depicted in popular culture as belonging to a culture of death because of their ostensible inability to biologically reproduce. Edelman especially critiques the causticsentimentalism of a “children first” culture. Edelman does not disavow this cultural stereotype, but rather embraces the role of the queer as a presentist unconcerned with bourgeois notions of productivity. Many, though not all, queer studies scholars critique the institution of marriage and believe the marriage equality movement is an assimilative, “homonormative” movement. See Lisa Duggan’s “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism” in Materializing Democracy (2002), Katherine Franke’s Wedlocked (2015), and Michael Warner’s The Trouble with Normal (1999); for more conflicted, adaptive, or positive perspectives on the value of queer marriage equality, see George Chauncey’s Why Marriage? The History Shaping Today’s Debate over Marriage Equality (2004), Nancy Cott’s Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation (2000), and Elizabeth Freeman’s The Wedding Complex: Forms of
I agree with Muñoz that there is much to like about antirelationality, but that it has some off-putting aspects. I believe, for one, that white gay male thinkers have become remarkably unself-conscious about their waning minority status in America and their ability to shore up in white male privilege what they lose by being queer. Most of the queer thinkers who espouse the rather bitchy doctrine that queers are punkish wits are gay white men working at elite urban universities. A colleague of mine recently claimed that his being a gay man engendered in him a natural proclivity to contrarianism and that, as such, academia’s queer radical ideological homogeneity turned him on to aspects of conservatism. The recent trend of queer conservatism being rationalized by some inborn gay allergy to consensus has been unnerving, particularly coming as it has from white gay men who have little to lose by shunning fealty to left queer politics in favor of white-male dominated conservatism. On the extreme end of this trend we have the white supremacist and conservative shock blogger Milo Yiannopolous, who often proclaims himself a “dangerous faggot,” tapping into a notion as old (and dead) as Oscar Wilde — that gay men are antinormative wits and are persecuted for their impolitic natures. Indeed,

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*Belonging in American Culture* (2002). For perspectives on compulsory heterosexuality, see Adrienne Rich’s landmark essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980) and Michael Warner’s *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1991). Traditional queer theoretical perspectives like those listed above — written almost exclusively by white academics — are not the primary point of departure for my methodology and intervention into black queer studies; I am not looking to further, develop, or augment these basic concepts. But concepts from these works are highly influential in all of gender and sexuality studies. My goal, in part, is to show these concepts’ rootedness in early Jim Crow culture and its racial biopolitics as part of a larger effort to advance queer antiracist historical discourse.

4 Examples of such punkish polemic include Edelman’s famous tirade in *No Future* — “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital Ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (29) — and Franke’s declaration in *Wedlocked* that she is “the turd in the punchbowl” of marriage equality consensus (197).
these are extreme examples, but are they so different from what is on offer in much queer theoretical criticism published by gay white men about exceptional homoeroticism?\(^5\)

As a white queer man, I am happy to dispel the myth that gay white men are natural contrarian wits, only because I’ve had the misfortune to meet so many boring, racist, basic, and unclever folks among my people. Which really means they are like any other demographic. Yet I understand that this sneaky, backdoor male exceptionalism emerges out of a dire need in the pre-Stonewall era for representation and rights. But the gay white male claim to culture has become rather unimaginative. Dissertation shelves and academic journals have been filled to the brim with studies of homoerotic themes in Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman. What this signifies is not that we have a continually renewing well of queer thought or interest in these texts, but more that gay white men have purchased influence in the study of mainstream American culture, that homoeroticism now qualifies as a form of commendable, idealized American male exceptionalism.\(^6\) As such, in my own queer methodology, I do not jettison many of the vital

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\(^5\) Ironically some of the most famous recent examples of queer contrarianism that flirts with conservative thought (however well-meaning) have come from J. Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) and “You Are Triggering Me! The Neoliberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger, and Trauma” (2014). In the latter essay, Halberstam offers an intergenerational critique of young queer activist valuations of “safe spaces” and “trigger warnings.” Their prime example is the battle over ownership and appropriation of the sometimes slur “tranny” as a term for transgender, transsexual, transvestite, or genderqueer people, an admittedly fussy and pedantic battle in which young activists interest in the use of correct language seemed to unfairly supersede the life experiences and values of a broader trans community. Halberstam sees this as oversensitivity derived from dissensus-fearing neoliberal identity politics in which the highest goal is to have an acknowledged identity and to go unmolested and unchallenged within it. In the process, however, Halberstam polemically derides an entire stream of queer youth activism as oversensitive and insufficiently radical in a way that can’t help but resonate with the work of someone like Milo Yiannopolous, who refers to young left activists as “snowflakes” and who treats the term “political correctness” as synonymous with sentimental pedantry. Obviously there are enormous differences between Halberstam and Yiannopolous’ politics, but their shared perception of oversensitivity in left youth activism is overzealous and flat.

\(^6\) The tradition of gay male critique I speak of derives from twentieth-century scholarship on homoerotic themes in American romanticism like F.O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941) and Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death*
aspects of queer antinormative critique — anti-reprocentrism, anti-heteronormativity, and anti-marriage ideology among them — but merely suggest that these conceptual tenets rely too closely on white gay male essentialism, risking white male exceptionalism. But *Bricolage Propriety* is not — or at least not primarily — a celebration of queer counteridentification with a repressive dominant culture. I am drawn instead to two of Muñoz’s most vital contributions to queer theory, both of which are rooted in queer-of-color critique and its archives: disidentification and utopianism. In turn, these ideas drew me to the Nadir as a vital area of study.

“Disidentification,” influenced by Althusser’s concept of “interpellation” and Stuart Hall’s essay “Encoding/Decoding,” is the process by which damaging stereotypes of minority subjects are recycled into desirable modes of being. Minority subjects, like any subjects, desire, and in many cases they desire the same things that are coded by dominant culture; “disidentification” is a way of desiring those things “with a difference,” meaning that the desire must be aesthetically altered or refigured to signify in favor of minoritarian knowledge. This is not merely textual play, but a form of compulsory work or labor, one that makes a way for queers of color in the world, but is also a queer-of-color worldmaking activity. Muñoz sites this worldmaking in artistic forms that engage with dominant codes, such as drag shows, pop art, and

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7 These theories about critical engagement by minority cultures with dominant culture all come from different intellectual traditions; I do not have the space here to trace out key differences and chains of influence between Althusser, Butler, Hall, Muñoz, and Sedgwick on this subject, but it is important to note that these traditions of thought exist and are related to one another.
mainstream reality TV. As such, queer method centering on modes of disidentification is in fact a theory of queer antinormative critique focused on dominant culture; but what makes it especially effective is that it concedes our desires for much of what is deemed normative and embraces the notion that there is no outside to capitalist heteropatriarchy nor an ethical relation to it. This method is not incommensurate with antirelational negativity, but it does not implicitly claim a kind of unique intellectual territory or intellectual superiority for homosexual culture. Disidentificatory critique is therefore highly adaptable to a wide variety of archives while maintaining a certain intellectual rootedness in queer-of-color critique. Just because it is rooted in queer-of-color critique, of course, does not mean it only pertains to the study of queer-of-color bodies.

The other method I borrow from Muñoz is thinking of queerness as a form of utopianism. Muñoz argued in *Cruising Utopia* that utopianism does not have to be an abstract, sentimental vision of a homogenous and peaceful future without history; rather he theorized that queer presentism itself — the will to live and desire amidst intense violence persecution — constituted a form of utopianism. As I have already mentioned, one of the primary points of agreement among early scholars of Nadir-era black literature was that it did not offer, to put it in Carby’s words, an “unrestrained utopian vision.” While in my study of this literature I did not find rampant free-love ideology, I did find prescient visions or hopes for free African American desire in their lamentations on the extreme overdetermination of black desire in early Jim Crow society. Through their critique of the present and their disidentification with white supremacist genteel culture, authors of this period did dare to dream of what free desire between black Americans could or should be. Whether through Charles W. Chesnutt’s pathologization of white normative sexuality, Pauline E. Hopkins’ dream of Pan-African post-patriarchal worlds, or
Sutton E. Griggs’ speculative fiction on African-American statehood and desire in the post-racial era, these authors did not simply try to usher into existence an exemplary black citizen with normative desires. Their work was inventive and posed a critique of the present that implicitly offered a vision of black futurity. Darieck Scott puts this another way: “… though sexuality is a mode of conquest and often cannot avoid being deployed in a field of representation without functioning as an introjection of historical defeat, it is in and through that very domination and defeat also a mapping of political potential, an access to freedom” (9). So, in that regard, Bricolage Propriety thinks of Nadir-era African American literature as expressing something — albeit something indeterminate — about sex and desiring practices as access to racial freedom. Even in its failures of sexually liberative thought or concessions to normative ideas of sex and race, it practices imperfect, disidentificatory worldmaking.

Even if queer-of-color utopianism and disidentification are mobile epistemologies that work irrespective of bodies of interest, I do risk something by relocating black queer studies to black uplift in the Nadir. The three primary subjects of this study — Chesnutt, Griggs, and Hopkins — were ostensibly heterosexual authors who wrote primarily about heterosexual subjects, and as tenuously canonical authors, they have flirted with absorption into the patriarchal mainstream of traditional African American cultural studies. Much of the reasoning for the emergence of black queer studies was to register discontent with African American studies and its sometimes heteronormative, patriarchal, and gender essentialist traditions and methods. Though not a black queer studies project per se, Robert Reid-Pharr’s Conjugal Union (1999) — published in the same year as Muñoz’s Disidentifications — argued that early African American literature endeavored to consecrate a homogenous, valorous, and sexually normative black citizenry, and that ultimately it failed at this project. In this regard, Reid-Pharr was one of
the first to claim that African American literature was a queer literature from its outset via its proclivity for grand desire and its aversion to ideological conformity. Even though some of these early texts tend toward trying to produce a consistent image of domestic propriety, many of them fail, thus disidentifying with black propriety through an “infidelity of the desiring black body to the project of black community formation,” what Reid-Pharr calls “runaway values” (21–24).

Conjugal Union and projects like it rejected a triumphalist vision of the African American tradition by highlighting both the ways in which it was self-consciously manipulated and in which it endeavored toward propriety while never actually making it there.

Black queer studies arguably hit its stride in the early 2000s with the publication of three seminal texts: E. Patrick Johnson’s Appropriating Blackness (2003), Roderick Ferguson’s Aberrations in Black (2004), and the edited collection Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology (2005). All these texts offer similarly expansive approaches to the notion of what black queer studies methodology is and what kind of archives it addresses. Roderick Ferguson, for instance, wrote Aberrations in Black to juxtapose classic texts of African-American-focused sociology with various African-American literary texts. This is done toward what Ferguson calls “a queer of color critique,” a way to establish “queer-of-color” as an epistemology distinct from other strains of Marxism or Foucauldianism. Often Ferguson exposes how within those texts an ostensibly materialist and empiricist practice (sociology) is used to reduce African-Americans to a pathological essence. Part and parcel of this pathological essence is the notion that African-American families and subjects are disordered in terms of gender roles and sexuality. The literary texts examined beside them (Baldwin, Ellison, etc.) suggest the untenability of Marxism as a primary hermeneutic of blackness because of Marxism’s reliance on normative idealizations of the family as “natural.” In other words, given the social sciences’ immense influence on black
cultural thought since the late-nineteenth century, Ferguson theorized certain African American literature as an outlet for thought that questioned the social sciences’ eminence in this regard, especially in its adherence to heteropatriarchal norms.

In this regard Ferguson’s idea of queer-of-color critique was not necessarily about gay bodies, but about sexually transgressive bodies and their repression at the hands of diverse ideological forces. For the editors of Black Queer Studies, E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, this expansive definition of “queer-of-color” is also evidenced in the coalition building Johnson and Henderson do in their introduction. By noting that women-of-color feminists were the first critics of African American studies as a heteropatriarchal formation, Black Queer Studies effectively welcomes women-of-color feminism into the fold of black queer studies. In fact, Johnson goes so far as to frame his oral history project on his grandmother’s history as a domestic worker as part of a black-queer-studies paradigm. The collection admirably juggles two impulses: the need to create a historically and culturally precise subfield catering to the needs of black queer politics and the need to theorize expansive definitions of non-normative gender and sexual identity that cannot be captured by the old identity politics. They had to overcome the repression of gender and sexuality as a site of study in black studies while also making race a part of queer studies; in doing so, they were careful to keep this theory salient and agile by remembering that markers of difference such as gender and race were still very real and totalized vectors of subjectivity in the political sphere (4–5).

At the heart of black queer studies is the effort to make space for intersectional, interdisciplinary critique in these otherwise homogenously figured disciplines. It undoubtedly remains important to recover and disseminate the culture of sexually transgressive figures —

8 See Johnson’s chapter “‘Nevah Had uh Cross Word’: Mammy and the Trope of Black Womanhood” in Appropriating Blackness.
especially homosexual and trans people of color — now and in the future. But since the advent of black queer studies and queer-of-color critique, scholars working in these fields have not been content with static definitions of the terms “black” and “queer,” nor have they conceived of black queer studies as a subdiscipline consisting of writing that merely issues from black queer authorities. Black queer studies and queer-of-color critique are multilateral and multidisciplinary, so they work as much for better representational and citational ethics as they do for a better theory and practice of race and sexuality. As such, black queer studies has not been rooted in classic liberal identity politics and thus has not invented a statically figured “black queer” at its center; instead, over the course of its development, black queer studies has become much more about the third word in its title: “study.” Black queer studies is about changing our ways of knowing and our methods, about not delimiting who we are or what we are able to say under the banner of a certain kind of identitarian formation. The objective of this interdisciplinary formation is not to arrive at a properly figured black queer, but to shift study — and, as I argue in this dissertation, not just African American studies or queer studies, but American Studies, nineteenth-century studies, science studies, posthumanist thought, Marxism, feminism, and literary studies.

A great deal of black queer studies work produced since the mid 2000s attests to its malleability and risk-taking qualities as an intellectual movement. The most interesting development, to my mind, is the growing theoretical tenet, explicitly stated by Darieck Scott but shared and practiced by other scholars and activists, that blackness is queer (10). When first encountered with this tenet, one might recoil for a number of reasons. First of all it is a theoretical tenet that risks false equivalence. Many take exception, for instance, with comparisons made by LGBTQ activists between the struggle for marriage equality and the battle
for interracial marriage rights, not to mention the larger comparison that is made between the Civil Rights movement (capital “C”, capital “R”) and the LGBTQ Rights movement. People could have any number of motivations for shrinking from this false equivalence; perhaps some members of antiracist movements are homophobic, but the much more understandable position is that historical conditions and historical specificity matter. When white LGBTQ activists utilize Civil Rights history in service to their activism, they show a kind of shallow relationship to it, wherein black lives and history only matter insofar as they are convenient to LGBTQ politics. But for all the Dan Savages of this world and for all the productive dissensus that should occur between coalition movements, there is scholarship that, in risking this false equivalence, not only makes startling and effective claims, but produces better, less hermetic scholarship as a result.

Where the history of marriage is concerned, I think of Katherine Franke’s recent book *Wedlocked*, which, though not labeled as such, could qualify as a black queer studies project since it attempts, again, intersectional and interdisciplinary study of race, gender, and sexuality that attempts to make room for race in gender and sexuality studies and gender and sexuality in critical race studies. Franke’s approach is to compare the LGBTQ marriage equality movement to similar African Americans’ experiences with marriage after emancipation; she uses the latter as “cautionary tales” in order to critique the notion that LGBTQ marriage equality is a noble end (3). A central point of her argument is that these movements are pointedly not the same. For instance, LGBTQ marriage has largely won gains on the back of a sentimental philosophy of the alternative family, one that argues that nuclear and consanguine families are not the only viable forms of family. That this notion has made gains is wonderful, but African Americans practicing similar forms of alternative familial organization have not been afforded the same respect — in fact, alternatively organized black families have, since at least the late nineteenth century, been
regarded as “broken,” symbols of poverty and degradation (89). Franke’s work on marriage points to a larger problem in our current political landscape — that as LGBTQ people have made rapid gains in rights and public opinion, people of color have lost ground. There is no better evidence of this than the fact that, within the last five years, the Supreme Court voted to enshrine same-sex marriage as a constitutional right while stripping the Voting Rights Act on the premise that we no longer need racial protections. Indeed, people would be right to ask if antiracist and antihomophobic coalition politics can still take place on the same plane because of the forms of privilege many gay people — especially white men — now experience.

My work, like Franke’s, points to a need to better understand the history of marriage and other institutionalized coupling as racialized social control. By employing a queer methodology toward fin de siècle African American culture, I am not attempting to enshrine LGBTQ politics in a long American human rights struggle; rather, I am trying to improve queer theory by making it amenable to a wider range of bodies, subjects, and historical periods. In particular I am claiming that in moving queer studies and black queer studies to an earlier period, we might learn something about the long genealogy of sex and race as linked concepts and, thus, gain a better understanding of how sex and race politics as formalized thought have overlapped and diverged from one another in the twentieth century.

C19 Black Queer Studies?

While few scholars have attempted to adapt queer-of-color critique to subjects other than twentieth- and twenty-first-century LGBTQ culture, there is, as I have shown, a long pedigree of work on the gender and sex politics of nineteenth-century African American culture and the Nadir. Most of it has come from women of color feminists. There are, however, a few queer theory scholars who I would count as fellow travelers in the endeavor to form a C19 queer black
Two of these scholars loosely base their queer-of-color work in a “whiteness studies” paradigm or in a study of the concept of the “normal.” Mason Stokes in his whiteness studies text *The Color of Sex* (2001) argues that there is something profoundly homosocial and even homosexual about the erotics of white separatism in the late nineteenth century because heterosexuality and all reproduction presents a liability for the reproduction of whiteness (18–19). Through readings of white supremacist texts and early African-American literature Stokes shows a battle being fought to associate sexual normativity or transgression according to race. This did not only take place, as most of us know, with regard to the demonization of black men as animalistic rapists and black women as promiscuous; charges of perversion were also targeted toward white people. Stokes compellingly argues that in the work of Charles W. Chesnutt, white sexuality and reproductive anxiety is represented as a kind of sexual pathology resulting from white supremacy. Julian B. Carter similarly argues in *The Heart of Whiteness* (2007) that neurasthenia and other nervous conditions affecting whites at the end of the nineteenth century were the result of a white supremacist mythology wherein white citizens were responsible for stewardship over civilization and the reproduction of white, pure bodies. According to Carter the mirror image of the black sexually transgressive body as an animalistic sex demon was a weak, effete whiteness which lacked an aggressive prowess for racial reproduction. Some African American literature played into and propagated these myths about white sexual disorder, though obviously with different intentions that those of white supremacists. A common thread in this dissertation is that for all three of the primary authors being studied here — Chesnutt, Hopkins, and Griggs — white sexuality is often depicted as either backwards or weak-willed. By comparison, African Americans’ civilized command over desire ranges from tragically heroic,
such as in the work of Chesnutt, to utopian in Hopkins and Griggs.

*Bricolage Propriety* is in part about the historical emergence of whiteness as a sexually normative racial attribute, but unlike the work of Carter and Stokes, *Bricolage Propriety* takes a deeper look at the period between 1890–1905 in which events like the growth of black education systems, the increased circulation of black periodicals, the Plessy v. Ferguson case, and the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars all played a large part in the development of African American literature as a self-conscious movement with fundamental ideas about the representation of gender and sexuality at its center. While I admire the longer historical spaces in which Carter and Stokes’ work takes place, my work demonstrates a fealty to a theory of African American literature in particular in which I am attempting to understand how events of the 1890s led to an explosion of black uplift novels in the years between 1900–1905, most of which have odd and intense sexual politics. In the original spirit of black queer studies scholarship, my work is about putting sexual transgression — or queerness — into the conversation about African American traditions and their developments.

The other scholars whose work most boldly takes queer-of-color critique into the nineteenth century are Siobhan Somerville and Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman. Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line* (2000) is probably the project most similar to my own. Like Carter and Stokes, Somerville tracks the relationship between the emergence of the homo/hetero and black/white binaries at the end of the nineteenth century. Somerville argues that “the simultaneous efforts to shore up and bifurcate categories of race and sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were deeply intertwined” (3). In the Victorian era, non-white and non-heterosexual people became the pathological others on which norms were buoyed. Following in the footsteps of Carby, Somerville carves out a special role for black women’s literature in antinormative and
antiracist efforts:

African American women writers of the late nineteenth century embarked on efforts to reconfigure cultural constructions of black womanhood. Excluded from expert discourses such as law and medicine and erased as agents in popular-culture industries such as the emerging cinema, they looked instead to fiction and journalism to carve out some space, however marginalized, to begin to reshape cultural constructions of race, gender, and sexuality. (77)

One of the best aspects of Somerville’s work is her focus on lesbian subtext in Pauline E. Hopkins Contending Forces (1900). I agree with Somerville’s analysis of Hopkins as someone especially interested in black literature as a project in which black people could “claim and represent their own desires.” Hopkins associated “amalgamation” and “mixed bloods” with progress, claiming that sexually non-normative people had a place in antiracist politics (79). My own approach to Hopkins differs from Somerville’s in key ways. First of all, I do not place as much emphasis on lesbian subtext in Hopkins as Somerville does; my approach is not so much about staking out a role for homosexual thematics in black literature, but rather to address racial performance and race politics as sexual politics in this literature. Thus, I turn my attention to a less talked about but much more sensationalistic serial novel of Hopkins’, Of One Blood (1902–1903). In it, I consider the ways in which Hopkins looks at mixed-race identity as a sexually transgressive identity that has an important, utopianist role to play in Pan-African antiracist politics.

If an author can be said to occupy the center of a growing C19 black queer studies, it might be Pauline Hopkins, whose Contending Forces also makes an important appearance in Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman’s Against the Closet: Identity, Political Longing, and the Erotics of Race (2012). Abdur-Rahman’s book is one I greatly admire for its transhistorical sweep, productively messy archival practices, and provocative claims about the relationship between sexual transgression and race. Transhistoricism, of course, is also pertinent in Bricolage
Propriety, as I am attempting to destabilize the strict, triumphalist boundary between Nadir-era African American literature, which is perceived as sexually conservative, and Harlem Renaissance-era literature, which is perceived as more sexually libertine. Moving from Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs all the way to Sapphire’s Push (1996), Abdur-Rahman tells a story about the ways in which African American culture has developed a relationship to the concept of sexual transgression. This has taken many forms — for instance, Abdur-Rahman argues, similarly to Stokes and Carter, that in texts like Harriet Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), whites are depicted as sexually hedonistic and rapacious; black desire is, thus, favorably compared to that sexual disorder. She also shows the way in which, in their texts, experiences with sexual violence become moments of galvanizing racial consciousness for Douglass and Jacobs. Yet, in other texts, like Sapphire’s Push, black people marked by sexually violent and regressive practices are given a chance to incorporate their experiences into a forward-thinking desire. In other words, for Abdur-Rahman — and echoing Hortense Spillers — African Americans have been marked by sexual transgression, violence, and victimization since the nineteenth century, but they have not been defined or delimited by it.9

I do however have a degree of ambivalence about what I see as Abdur-Rahman’s instrumentalization of the term “queer.” Most of the exigency of Bricolage Propriety rests on the notion that queer theory is often blind to race and, when it does engage with it, it instrumentalizes it through false equivalence in the service of queer political ends. I find that Against the Closet does not ultimately engage with the question of how African American studies and African American literature can change our sense of queer theory as well as the definition of the term “queer” itself. In fact, it relies on a flattened definition of the term “queer”

as “sexual transgression,” which as shorthand is fairly typical, but in terms of reflexive theoretical critique does not offer much back to the theory. Throughout the book, it often feels like an African American literary studies text that uses queer theory as a lens or tool. So while Abdur-Rahman’s book, in some senses, embodies the provocative spirit of the black queer theoretical tenet that blackness is queer, in practice it often figures African American culture in relation to queerness rather than as queerness.

Furthermore, queer theory has been engaging for a while with the definition of the word “queer” beyond sexual transgression; in my own critical work on queer theory, I sometimes regard “queer” as an absorptive word signifying an arms race toward ostensibly radical critique. I find that when people use the word “queer” to describe their scholarship, what they are really saying is “radical,” and as self-described radicals, they are very often taking part in what Michel Foucault called, in The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1 (1976), the “speaker’s privilege,” extricating themselves from complicity in the flows of dominant culture through a performance of consciousness. This is especially true, as I have said above, with regard to some gay white male critique. There are other working and fluid definitions of “queer” as well. It is often used as a verb, signifying a paranoid reading of a text with a methodological eye toward sexual antinormativity,10 queerness, with regard to LGBTQ politics, signifies a (sometimes undeserved) distancing from bourgeois consumptive ideology and static sexual definitions.11 While very often the working definition of “queerness” in Bricolage Propriety privileges ideas of racial identity as

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10 A famous critique of “paranoid reading” and Jamesonian political critique as an extrication of oneself from political complicity comes from Eve Sedgwick in “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You” in Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity (2003). This work and Sedgwick’s methods with regard to critique have been highly influential in queer literary theory in its engagement with dominant culture, especially in the work of Muñoz.

11 See, again, work by Lee Edelman and Michael Warner.
sexual transgression amidst white supremacist biopower, I attempt to keep in mind and in tension the contentious nature of the term, particularly because it is so widely appropriated and sometimes used to dress up scholarship in the clothes of the ostensibly radical. *Bricolage Propriety* is thus skeptical of queer theory and what it can lend to African American studies while attempting to use and change it simultaneously.

As I have mentioned above, there are discontents and risks in trying to move black queer studies into earlier periods. Most of the scholarship I have described above — and mine as well — attempts to depict African American culture with regard to changing conceptions of sexual normativity; in the process, it often paints a pathological picture of African American subjects suffering from the violent effects of white sexual ideology. This is different from the aims of Ferguson, Henderson, and Johnson, whose black queer studies work hews much more toward recovery and celebration of black queer voices. Using a disidentificatory queer approach, *Bricolage Propriety* attempts to show black queer thought’s long and problematic emergence in both negative and positive aspects, as a resistance to the violent pressures of dominant culture, but also as revolutionary self-actualization and radical epistemological intervention. Indeed, given the pre-discursive status of LGBTQ identity in nineteenth-century U.S. society, there is not much room to talk about queer identity in African American literature outside of subtext and pathology; but there is room, I argue, to talk about African American thinkers as the progenitors of queer thought, queer thought as an antiracist thought that is politically directed, in most cases, toward sexual and gender emancipation for African Americans.

**Bricolage Propriety and the Nadir**

To put it plainly, *Bricolage Propriety* is attempting to continue work on the gender and sex politics of *fin de siècle* African American literature that was begun by women-of-color
feminists in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but which has been curiously abandoned after the advent of queer theory. I argue that there has been no major study on the gender and sex politics of African American novels in this period after the rise of queer theory and black queer studies; thus, it is time for updated readings and new conversations about these novels, ones that, for the most part, are fairly generous toward the aims and achievements of these texts. Because scholarship on the Nadir has waned and only reemerged in recent years, we have been left with an incomplete narrative about gender and sex politics in African American literature in the Post-Reconstruction era. Since the work of scholars like Dickson D. Bruce Jr., Hazel V. Carby, and Claudia Tate tended to suggest — following in Rayford Logan’s footsteps — that Post-Reconstruction literature was primarily assimilative and lacking in subversive elements, it allowed a backdoor narrative of sexual politics triumphalism in which the Harlem Renaissance would become sexually transgressive by comparison. Bricolage Propriety suggests a loosening of the division between Post-Reconstruction and Harlem Renaissance literature where gender and sex politics is concerned; I argue in particular, via my work on Chesnutt, that Nadir-era literature laid the groundwork for many African American texts that have occupied an influential place in queer studies.

The secondary status of Nadir-era literature in African American literary studies has been an emerging topic over the last ten years, particularly since the 2006 MLA Conference panel “Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: New Approaches to African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919.” This panel preceded the similarly titled collection Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919 (2006) by Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard. Most of the purpose of this collection was to note that Post-Reconstruction African American literature was not merely the “dark ages” out of which the Harlem Renaissance
emerged.\textsuperscript{12} Within the collection are varying approaches to literature in the period: Frances Smith Foster tries to distinguish the era from the Harlem Renaissance and other periods by noting its distinct emphasis on creative collaboration; Carla L. Peterson writes about how African-American culture at the turn of the century was interested in imaginative responses to slavery, time, history, and memory; many of the scholars in the collection are women and the collection regards its period — the “Woman’s Era” — as an important one for feminism. However, none of the approaches reference changes in the study of gender and sexuality since the 1990s or black queer studies, so for the most part they model traditional historicist and formalist approaches to issues of sex and gender in the period. Though the collection does offer a variety of new approaches to an underserved period, the approaches themselves are not especially interdisciplinary or inventive, nor do they veer far from traditional African American studies scholarly practices.

This is true of a good deal of scholarship on the Nadir, which, despite trying to make space for alternative interpretations and narratives about the period’s literature, still seems to take for granted Bruce’s notion that this was an assimilative, genteel period where gender and sex politics were concerned and, thus, that there is not much new to talk about. And while I am not blaming any scholars at the forefront of new scholarship on the Nadir for this, none seem to be conversant with or interested in queer-of-color critique or black queer studies and the potential impact those interdisciplinary movements could have on the study of the Nadir. Perhaps, of course, one could make the case that the work of women-of-color feminists and black feminism itself are adequate to the task of Nadir scholarship and that black queer studies and queer-of-color criticism are not necessarily adding anything new, but rather hanging off the coattails of

\textsuperscript{12} See also James Smethurst’s \textit{The African American Roots of Modernism: from Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance} (2011).
earlier criticism. It is my hope that in the above methodological discussion on black queer studies and its relatively few approaches to earlier periods that I have made the case for a C19-oriented black queer studies and, in particular, for a new study on major novels of the Nadir from the perspective of queer-of-color critique. But I understand, too, that queer theory has an historical indebtedness to women-of-color feminism that it is sometimes too quick to forget, and for that reason, much of the cultural analysis in Bricolage Propriety puts women-of-color feminist scholarship into a genealogy with queer-of-color critique and black queer studies scholarship to consider the ways in which black queer studies productively elaborates on those earlier perspectives and in what ways it merely traces or paraphrases earlier perspectives on gender, sex, and race in the Nadir.

There are a few important recent approaches to what is variously called “Early-Jim Crow,” “Early-African American,” “Nadir,” “Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem,” “fin de siècle,” or “Post-Reconstruction” literature that have been helpful to me in writing Bricolage Propriety. Important to this project is the notion, often associated with Kenneth Warren and his book What Was African American Literature? (2011), that African American literature is a historically specific genre that emerged self-consciously out of the conditions of the early-Jim Crow period. I not only agree with Warren, but I also make the case here that concepts and problems of gender and sexual propriety were absolutely essential to the development of African American literature as a self-conscious formation or genre in this period. Bricolage Propriety particularly argues that a wave of novels, perhaps the first to self-consciously embody African American generic conventions, emerged between 1900–1905 as a result of rapid social changes in racial and sexual
thought between 1890–1900.\textsuperscript{13}

When considering queer politics and African American history side by side, marriage is obviously an important point of comparison. Three books in particular — Nancy Cott’s \textit{Public Vows}, George Chauncey’s \textit{Why Marriage?}, and Katherine Franke’s \textit{Wedlocked} — have offered some of the most thorough work on the history of marriage politics in the nineteenth century as it relates to race in America. The arc of shifting opinion on marriage equality they draw from 2000–2015 also tells us an interesting story. In Chauncey’s book, and perhaps less so in Cott’s, the history of African American marriage serves as a context for why the right of marriage was being sought by LGBTQ people in the 2000s as well as why that right should have been ensured by the fourteenth amendment. Though argued rigorously and comprehensively, it is never called into question in Cott and Chauncey’s book whether or not gaining the right of marriage had any negative effects on African Americans. Key differences, too, in LGBTQ and African American relationships to the concept of alternative family have also gone underexplored. Franke’s book, which I have discussed above, has the advantage of having been written during and published after the climactic events of LGBTQ marriage equality. She argues that both African Americans and LGBTQ people both suffered encroachments of the state into their personal lives and that marriage in its traditional form is unsuited to LGBTQ partnerships.

I am sympathetic to Franke’s argument, but I find that offering this history of African American experience with marriage as a “cautionary tale” invokes again a dynamic where black history is important to LGBTQ politics only insofar as it suits the argumentative ends of the scholar or activist. Whether that scholar is for or against the institution of marriage, African

\textsuperscript{13} A similar argument about the centrality of gender and sexuality to the development of African American literature can be found in M. Giulia Fabi’s \textit{Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel} (2001).
American history acts as a fungible discourse. I take care in Bricolage Propriety to consider African American experience with marriage in the early Jim Crow period not just as it is convenient to forwarding a pro-LGBTQ rights agenda, but on its own terms. What particularly interests me about marriage in the early Jim Crow period, especially in the artistic and literary approach to it, are the restrictions under which African American marriage operates and its relative novelty. By the time a “Negro Literature” began to be called into being by figures like W.E.B. Du Bois and Pauline E. Hopkins, African Americans had already been able to legally marry for about thirty years and had cultivated a variety of experiences with and opinions on the institution. In the novels of Chesnutt, Hopkins, and Griggs, marriage, engagements, and other forms of partnership are common events, but this is not only a generic consistency — it is a political problem. The heroine of Chesnutt’s The House Behind the Cedars (1900) has her life circumscribed by the chaotic possibilities of intra- or intermarriage; Hopkins’s Of One Blood and Contending Forces both depict marital practice and traditions as deeply important aspects of gender normativity and racial propriety, while attempting to imagine revisionary and utopian partnership ethics; and in Griggs’ Unfettered (1903), the primary characters have to decide whether or not marriage under the law implies their fidelity to an imperialistic and racist United States government. In short, I add to a growing segment of comparative scholarship on race, queerness, and marriage by arguing that many figures of early Jim Crow literature had a degree of ambivalence about the institution. Rather than simply arguing for a historical continuity for marriage equality rights between African Americans and LGBTQ people, I instead argue that marriage has caused a great deal of difficulty and ambivalence for both groups. If a critique of marriage is to be a part of queer political history, African American archives must be included in the conversation. But we also must develop a way of talking about the history of marriage
wherein race, sex, and gender are not so discretely figured.

Passing, mixed-race identity, and interracial sex and partnership, too, are oft-referenced points of comparison between queer culture and African American culture, especially since Judith Butler’s influential “Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen’s Psychoanalytic Challenge” in *Bodies that Matter*. Butler used Larsen and women-of-color’s experiences with desire to critique the notion that there is such thing as pure sexual difference and desire without regard to racial difference and desire. Ever since, Larsen’s *Passing* has served as a commonly referred to example of an African American novel wherein lesbian erotics overlap with questions of racial propriety; but it is not the first African American novel to explore this, as Siobhan Somerville showed in her work on Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* in *Queering the Color Line*. It tends to be the case, however, that modernist and Harlem Renaissance literature gets more attention as a lesbian archive.¹⁴

José Esteban Muñoz, writing on the ethics and political efficacy of passing, called it a disidentificatory act which he likened to queer acts of resistance like drag performance (108). Indeed, when an LGBTQ drag performer of color performs an act of drag, they are critiquing the act of passing, not purely by shunning it from an objective distance, but by inhabiting passing performativity; through a queer medium wherein gender appears to be the primary concept at stake, queer artists of color can explore the history and ethics of racial performativity, too. Like Muñoz, I see the ethics of passing, where liberatory gender and race politics are concerned, as deeply complicated, especially where ethics of pleasure, desire, and survival are concerned.

Of course it is easy to make analogies between racial passing and the closet, mixed-race identity and queer sexual identity, and interracial desire and queer desire. As I mentioned above,

¹⁴ For more on the subject of modernist literature as a lesbian archive, see Suzanne Raitt’s review essay, “Lesbian Modernism?” (2003).
these comparisons are typically made to advance LGBTQ political causes in the marriage equality era, to normalize queerness by citing past examples where free desire was repressed along the lines of race. I find, however, that doing so in the post-marriage equality era we can experiment with these analogies to engage with a different set of questions: how did early Jim Crow novels regard the ethics of passing as a potentially radical and transformative political act? How did passing have a sexual or gendered dimension to it and how does that influence historical thought on sexual transgression? Does mixed-race identity raise the same set of problems and questions as queer identity? And can “mixed-race” be similarly regarded as methodological or epistemological in the way that “queer” is — indeed, do these terms address the same phenomena of race, gender, and desire in America? By asking these questions, I am trying to normalize the discussion of race and sexuality in U.S. history as a shared discourse while regarding all the very real ways in which race and sexuality have operated in the real as concrete and separate markers of difference. I however jettison the imperative to simply make racial history amenable to LGBTQ politics; instead, I ask how knowing more about racial history and desire and its central questions can change queer method for the better. This is all to say that the best intersectional politics — especially in black queer studies — risks false equivalence to invent new ways of knowing our history; intersectional politics do this to more accurately represent the histories and experiences of its constituents. I come at this project from the perspective that gay white subjects’ experiences take up too much room at the center of LGBTQ cultural study, and that deliberately experimenting with the notion that antiracism is a central part of LGBTQ politics — since black life is, historically, a form of sexual transgression — will improve it.

This project is, at heart, about methodology, a methodology that could seem gimmicky in
its approach to intersectional ethics as a matching of ostensibly unlike archives to reveal their similarities. But “revealing similarities” is not my goal with this project. Rather I have tried to make the methodology of this project draw upon what I see as the experimental political and aesthetic tactics of the primary authors being studied here. I think of Chesnutt, Hopkins, and Griggs as *bricoleurs*, artists who used whatever materials, discursive markers, thematics, phenomena, media, aesthetics, and ideas were at hand to make their art. Among all their labors, there is a consistency of approach with regard to their interest in the development of what we call African American literature; there is, however, no uniformity to the style, objectives, audience, and ethics of their writing. Their novels adopt everything from forceful agreement with dominant ideas about racial and sexual propriety to clandestine proponency for free desire, and often inconsistently from work to work. In effect, these artists — and I make it a point here to say that they are *artists* — made something of a *bricolage of propriety*. There are no easy answers about the liberatory ethics of desire, nor about the relationship between race and sex in these works. Their deep uncertainty and inability to be absorbed into political projects in reliable ways reflects the rapidly changing thought on gender, sex, and race at the time, as well as the anxiety and terror produced by the threat of racial and sexual violence. I therefore offer this project as an intervention into queer method where, by example, and without a direct political end other than my stalwart commitment to queer antiracism, I try to consider the lasting, complex, uneasy lessons offered by African American literature of the Nadir; while dodging full-fledged adulation or wistfully generous recovery, I hope, at the same time, to increase attention to these authors as master painters of identititarian rhizomes and knotty questions about race and sex.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, “The Queer Nadir: Sex Politics in 1890s America,” I survey dominant thought from 1890-1900 on the sexual propriety of black
Americans. This chapter, following in the footsteps of work by Siobhan Somerville and Roderick Ferguson, provides a survey account of how legal, sociological, biological, and literary culture of the period became fascinated with and came to imagine a sexual transgression inherent in and specific to the black body. Work in this chapter includes new primary source research on Thomas Nelson Page and the university periodicals of Atlanta University and Spelman College. “The Queer Nadir” newly narrativizes the development of blackness and whiteness as sexual identities in fin de siècle U.S. culture, reframing the study of both queer nineteenth-century culture and early African American literature in light of the emergence of queer-of-color critique. This chapter also provides scholars new to this period of study — particularly those in gender and sexuality studies without a background in African American culture or pre-twentieth-century history — with an opportunity to better understand how central gender and sex politics are to early African American cultural development and how historical pressures led to an explosion of novels between 1900–1905 that engage with the question of sexual propriety and racial citizenship.

In the second chapter, “Namelessness and Consecration: Charles W. Chesnutt and the Queer Pathology Novel,” I analyze how the novels and unpublished writings of Charles W. Chesnutt perform disidentifications and reconciliations with the strictures of literary realism and with W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Thomas Nelson Page’s figurations of black sexuality proper. Chesnutt, particularly in his novel The House Behind the Cedars, attempted to understand the condition of black womanhood as a sort of pathology of passion. I argue here that Chesnutt’s depiction of Rena’s constant interpellation and the political capital of her body as an object of sexual power anticipate quintessential novels of the queer tradition such as Nella Larsen’s Passing and James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room. More than the trope of the tragic
mullatta, the character of Rena Walden serves as a critique of the intense scrutinization of black women’s bodies in nineteenth-century race politics. Though Chesnutt misses the opportunity to imagine Rena’s power as a sexually transgressive figure, he does accurately illustrate the ways in which passion has a political dimension.

In the third chapter, “Cruising Ethiopia: Worldmaking, Antinormativity, and Other Aesthetic Strategies in the Work of Pauline E. Hopkins,” I argue that nascent women-of-color feminism from late-nineteenth century America, especially in archives that were avowedly part of an emergent African-American literary tradition, sentimental novels, and domestic novels, seeded the recent and very influential concept of queer worldmaking and queer utopianism. As such, I argue that queer theory could productively center on this era’s work and that the novels and magazine writings of Hopkins in particular are a font of inspiration and information on the historical emergence of queer worldmaking. This is because her work is largely based on the notion that patriarchal and white supremacist dominance were purchased through the sexual oppression of women and the disciplining of their bodies, and that sexually non-normative others held an epistemological and political key to antiracist progress. Her work abounds with themes of antinormative worldmaking and, even from within a genteel, middle-class, heteronormative genre, a little free love ideology. In addition, it provides a much-needed complement to the grim sexual and gender determinism of authors like Charles W. Chesnutt, whose approach to human sexuality could not as readily lay the groundwork for an upheaval in sex politics.

In the fourth and final chapter, “Fettered Bed: Fidelity, Sex, Imperialism, and the Black Citizen in the Novels of Sutton E. Griggs,” I attend to the mostly unremembered work of novelist and Baptist minister Sutton E. Griggs. Often mischaracterized as a militant black separatist similar to Marcus Garvey, Griggs, whose work is almost never discussed in detail and is mostly
out of print, is most famous for his novel *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), a speculative, pseudo-utopian work about a subversive black republic operating secretly from within the boundaries of the United States. Through new readings of *Imperium in Imperio* and *Unfettered*, I argue that Griggs’ unique contribution to a genealogy of queer-of-color critique lies in the way his novels link U.S. expansionism, party politics, fidelity, and sexuality to the politics of the personal. As LGBTQ rights become incorporated into the banner of American Exceptionalism, Griggs’ work serves to remind us that questions about marriage and fidelity to apparatuses of the state have a long history. Yet because Griggs finds a way for his central characters to get married by solving the race problem, Griggs also suggests that marriage in and of itself is not a bankrupt institution, merely that we need to think carefully about how to change its contextualizing culture.

I conclude by offering some thoughts on how this queer antiracist project relates to turns in academic leftist activism and the new resistance to Trumpism. In particular I argue that this study can serve as a model of how to perform intersectional critique in relation to the history of dominant culture as a direct refusal of recent conciliatory arguments by liberalist thinkers. Given that Trump’s America draws so many comparisons to the so-called “Southern Redemption,” a comprehensive historical memory about resistance movements of the late-nineteenth century could serve us well as we attempt to use our scholarship in the pursuit of a better, more effective coalition politics activism.
Owner’s Consent: Lucy Carr Cary and the Post-Plantation Domestic Narrative

Around December of 1912, Thomas Nelson Page — a popular writer of Southern pastoral novels, an essayist on lynching and race, a white supremacist, and the U.S. ambassador to Italy — received a letter from a woman named Lucy Carr Cary, written in the form of a narrative manuscript. The title page was adorned with a Christmas card pasted to it. Titled “Recollections of a Nelson-Page Family Servant,” this narrative was “Suggested by the death of ‘Miss Bettie,’” Cary’s own mother, and addressed to “Young master ‘Tommy Nelson Page.’” In this narrative, Cary describes her life growing up on the Nelson family’s Virginia plantation, taking care of Fannie Page, and acting as the servant-friend of young Thomas Nelson Page. Carr, as she tells it, was one of eleven children — two of whose names she could not remember — born to Bettie Hope and John Anderson, enslaved people who lived on different plantations. Carr was “selected to play” with Thomas Nelson Page when he was about two or three and she was only a little older: “...it was my duty to look after all his wants and do whatever he wanted to do at any time. I spread out his toys for him, picked them up when he said so, played in the mud when he wanted to, went out with him when he said go and came when he said come.” She describes the Nelsons and Pages as “kind but positive masters” who read prayers to the enslaved every day. “They had their rules,” Carr writes, “which had to be followed or punishment followed. They never allowed their servants to be cruelly treated.”

Regardless of Cary’s assurances that the Nelsons and Pages were good, Christian souls, her descriptive account of domestic life on the plantation belies these polite statements to Page. Carr could only see her father every other weekend, when he was allowed to visit from the neighboring Anderson plantation. She counts it as among their generous courtesies that the
slaves were allowed “shoes in winter” and that they were given a Christian burial, “in a burying
ground set apart for them,” when they died, as if these observations were enough to rebuke the
so-called “mythology” about plantation life that abolitionists like Harriet Beecher Stowe and
William Lloyd Garrison had widely circulated. The young men were “allowed” to learn a
multitude of farm trades; the height of a woman’s ambition was to work and save hard enough to
buy a feather bed for their small, dirt-floored log cabins. The children, mimicking a post-racial
ethics of relations between blacks and whites, were “taught to treat every body, white and black,
with manners” or they would face a “whipping.” And when the Civil War came, the older
“colored boys” of the plantation followed their masters into service in the Confederate Army
while the women took care of the plantation. Nevertheless, Cary tells Page, “My slave days were
happy days and I did not know I was a slave from the way Old Miss treated me at Edgewood.
She did not allow my own mother to touch me, but took me in her special charge.”

Cary describes her “white people” as “very particular, and we were not allowed to
associate with any servants unless their owners were of the same standing as ours,” suggesting
that Cary’s relationship to her partner, father, and family were heavily determined by the Pages
and Nelsons. As Cary describes it, the Nelsons and Pages were strict arbiters of morality in
relationships on the plantation. While legal marriage between enslaved black people did not exist
during the antebellum period, religious marriage was in fact encouraged on this plantation, albeit
in a highly determined fashion: “Marriage was encouraged but no men and women on our places
were allowed to live together unless that had properly married with the consent of their owners.
The white people took great pride in fixing for the marriage of faithful servants and they would
have them sometimes in the great house.” Despite having the “right” of plantation marriage,
however, family life for Cary as a slave was tragic: Cary eventually gave birth to seven children,
all of whom died except for one. While she casually relates this in her letter without explicitly dwelling on the implications, one understands that there is barely any chance that six of seven white children in a family would die, presumably because they had better access to food, shelter, and medical care, and because they were not forced into hard labor at an early age.

What we can take from Cary’s account is not surprising — that in addition to the horrendous accounts of enslaved people being forced into submission through violence, hard labor, anti-literacy, religion, and imprisonment, they were also incorporated into compliance through soft forms of oppression. Cary and her fellow captives’ moral universe was centered on Fannie Page’s beliefs, engendered through religion, and ensured through the granting of certain privileges — the ability of Cary to see her father, or to be afforded shoes in winter, or a featherbed, or to get married on the plantation and have several children. Cary’s account is highly similar to what Southern pastoralists and white supremacists like Page had been arguing in their work: that the plantation had constituted the domestic life of African Americans and held their worlds in order, shaping their desires and giving them purpose where none previously existed. This was not true in the sense that all enslaved people believed in and valued this domestic order, but it is true in the sense that life on a plantation constituted much of their routine, lived experience. It was a part of the strategy of enslavement to make enslaved people believe in the naturalness of the white-dominated domestic order. When this domestic order was abolished, African Americans, for the remainder of the nineteenth century, found themselves negotiating what it was they themselves wanted out of a domestic life, creating their own idea of what proper desire and affiliation was. Some of this would mimic the dynamics of the system they left and some of it would be new. Throughout these decades, and especially in the 1890s, black domestic life would remain a popular and contentious subject. The idea of free black
people desiring would provoke fear among whites resulting in lynchings and other forms of violence against black people in an effort to curb this desire and re-subordinate them under Jim Crow logic; it became the catalyst, too, for a massive amount of social science work, scientific racism, educational thought, and, of course, literature.

To this latter point, Cary’s narrative is a curious document. Why was it sent? How did Cary really feel about her life as an enslaved person and the lives of those around her? What did she hope to accomplish by sending this to Page? Did Page respond? Was there a dialogue? Is there evidence that Cary questioned the goodness and rightness of the domestic values of her master and mistress? Why did she not mention the end of slavery and her transition into life as a free woman? Is Cary’s narrative African American literature? Mimetic narrative, a method common to realist novels, memoirs, and historical accounts, is typically deployed in order for the writer to reflect or depict a truth about the way life is lived and about social relations. Cary’s letter, on one hand, seems to support Page’s nostalgia for a white supremacist past and a plantation culture in which relations among blacks and whites were highly determined by white people. On the other hand, Cary’s narrative is difficult to read as a document that romanticizes the “good” conditions on plantations because of the overdetermination of desire and life that Cary depicts. In a less ambitious claim, but one that I think makes sense, Cary’s narrative is an attempt to remember and understand the experience of life in the plantation’s domestic order on polite terms, with Page as her audience, without funneling it into a strict political purpose. In this regard, Cary’s narrative is akin to much of the social science and literary writing of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, which attempted, often problematically, to speak “objectively” about the state of black and white sexual desire and gender. In literary studies, we
would refer to a document like Cary’s as a “problem text,” meaning that it defies categorization, totalized meaning, generic conventions, and political alignment.

African American literature at its emergence was full of these problem texts, in which a wide range of ideologies about black sexual and gender propriety had come into play. Much like queer theory of the early 90s, which emerged out of the intense repression of the HIV/AIDS crisis in order to blow up, fundamentally question, and expand our knowledge of gender and sexuality, African American literature of the Post-Reconstruction era was largely dedicated to representing and understanding black desire beyond social science and political discourses that had intended to determine it for the purposes of racial domination. This chapter surveys and accounts for the wide range of messages conditioning black sexual desire, gender, and domesticity in the 1890s, which influenced the writing of a flurry of novels between 1900–1905 by African Americans. For all intents and purposes, I am considering these novels a kind of queer literature — literature in which sexual propriety was concretized, negotiated, and challenged in ways that anticipate not only the sexually libertine attitudes of the modernist era, but the negotiation of sexual ideology and politics today. Many of these novels are political romances representing the most common ways in which black bodies came under attack in their domestic and desiring lives. Some proffer proper and normative ways of desiring as antitheses to dominant culture’s prohibitive ideas about black culture; others protest against even this normative black desire in favor of highly imaginative idealizations of black radical desire. But to know and read these novels as the documents of a nascent fin-de-siècle culture of black desire, it is necessary to understand a number of phenomena and movements of 1890s U.S. historical discourse that catalyzed this work. These include Manifest-Destiny-inspired U.S. imperialism, rapid industrial and technological change, the Plessy v. Ferguson trial and the full emergence of
Jim Crow segregationism, the rise of Social Darwinist ideology, the biological debate between proponents of monogenesis and polygenesis, the race in the social sciences to pathologize or idealize black gender attributes, the competition between the black church and black social sciences for influence over black politics, black disenfranchisement, miscegenation laws and amalgamation ideology, the continued emergence of black colleges, the popularity of southern pastoralist fiction as white supremacist nostalgia for plantation days, and, of course, high-stakes debates over rape and lynch law. Since I anticipate my audience comes from a multitude of disciplinary backgrounds in which these subjects do not always serve as fundamental knowledge, I offer here a rudimentary overview of 1890s race and sex politics to accommodate them while setting the stage for the critical analysis of the novels that follow.

There are dozens of excellent historical and cultural studies texts about all these phenomena, and, in books like Susan Harris Smith and Melanie Dawson’s *The American 1890s reader* (2000), Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America* (1982), Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard’s *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem* collection, Peter Bardaglio’s *Reconstructing the Household* (1995), James Smethurst’s *The African American Roots of Modernism*, Alys Eve Weinbaum’s *Wayward Reproductions* (2004), and Rayford Logan’s classic *The Negro in American Life and Thought* (1954), a handful of sweeping and ambitious attempts to account for the massive significance of race and sex politics in late-nineteenth-century America and its influence on contemporary politics and culture. This chapter attempts nothing like a focused examination of any one of these deep and complex phenomena, nor does it attempt to unify these discourses into one coherent narrative about black life and sex politics in the United States. Rather this chapter is one narrative among many that sketches the historical context out of which emerged the genre and cultural movement known as African American literature, especially in its
prolific flourishing between 1900-1905. I argue, in particular, that ideas about transgressive sexuality, which we commonly think of as “queer,” were fundamental to the emergence of African-American literature as a self-conscious project in part because 1890s discourse, in ways both explicit and implicit, is about the ethics of racial reproduction and, thus, about sex and race as mutually informed concepts. While it has only been standard practice since the late-1980s to think about race and sex as mutually constitutive identitarian subjectivities in academic discourses like gender and sexuality studies and critical race theory, these discourses have been catching up to one another and we have begun to notice that many ideas about race as gender and sex or gender and sex as race have been implicit in U.S. cultural discourse for centuries. This work has largely arrived under the umbrella of queer-of-color critique or black queer studies discourses. Unravelling and understanding this and thus improving our interdisciplinary fields involves further historicization and analysis of periods that are more often than not shorthanded.

Many may take Rayford Logan’s famous proclamation that 1877–1901 represented “the nadir of American race relations” to mean that this period represented something like the antithesis of the romantic and liberative black movements of the 1920s, most commonly characterized as the Harlem Renaissance. But many like McCaskill and Gebhard have also noted that while Post-Reconstruction was a deeply oppressive time for black people in the United States, the seeds for the liberative discourses of the modern era were planted during this period of violence and the loss of rights and, moreover, some of these seeds blossomed during that period. Although the concept of the “New Negro” is commonly associated with Harlem Renaissance luminaries like Alain Locke, the term — along with the lesser known “New Anglo Saxon” — was actually a product of the 1890s, employed by a range of writers on race from the black intelligentsia to white supremacist politicians. The 1890s were not only a period of loss
and setback; scholars like McCaskill and Gebhard are attempting to get beyond subsequent eras’s reactions against this period by approaching fin-de-siècle black culture without only adjudicating the degree to which this literature is assimilative or genteel (5–8).\(^\text{15}\)

This is not to romanticize what was a violent, terrible epoch in the lives of African Americans; it is to suggest that it is discursively apiece with the liberative discourses of the modernist era, not a negated literary and cultural “dark ages” as it sometimes seems to be, the unfortunate precursor to the wellspring of black social thought in the first quarter of the twentieth century (and this characterization is probably most common in literary studies, which is highly modernism-centric). On the surface, this is not such a controversial opinion, as many scholars of the Post-Reconstruction era — whose work makes up the bulk of research in this chapter — write about the significant worldmaking and knowledge production of the black intelligentsia in the period. Yet, in more general discourse on race and sexuality in U.S. culture, the Post-Reconstruction era takes a backseat to modernism proper.\(^\text{16}\)

Here, with contemporary queer politics and Post-Bellum/Pre-Harlem literary study as my primary milieu, I offer a critical summary and analysis of three aspects of race and sex culture in the 1890s that I believe are particularly important to understanding Chesnutt, Griggs, and Hopkins’ approaches to sexual biopolitics and African American uplift: the quasi-scientific debate over race and reproductive ethics, polygenesis, monogenesis, and Social Darwinism.

\(^{15}\) One of the more representative arguments that fin de siècle black culture was irrevocably assimilative and genteel is Dickson D. Bruce Jr.’s Black American Writing from the Nadir. Although, to be fair to Bruce and scholars like him, many argue that the assimilative and genteel aims of these texts weren’t always met and that often authors deviated from this mission as it suited their work. To say that a novel of this period is “assimilative” accurately states the role African American literature was expected to play in African American politics, but it hardly tells the whole story, and scholars shouldn’t be discouraged from reading and studying this material because of its perceived lack of a stated radical agenda.

\(^{16}\) Again, see Smethurst (2011).
gender and sex ideology as it relates to vocation, labor, and knowledge at black colleges; and the
literary cultures of realism, naturalism, and Southern pastoralism, particularly through the
published and unpublished writings of Thomas Nelson Page. While much of this research is
drawn from secondary sources and relates a general history to accommodate a wide range of
scholars, some of it — such as my analyses of periodicals from Atlanta University and Spelman
College and my research on the letters of Thomas Nelson Page — is an original contribution to
historical and textual research on U.S. culture of the 1890s. This chapter should lend ample
context for the argument that follows: that out of the 1890s emerged an African-American
literature that was centered on issues of gender and sexuality as they related to racial politics, one
that presciently took blackness as a kind of sexual transgression, thus anticipating many of the
debates and concepts now common in contemporary queer and queer-of-color political discourse.

**Everybody’s Negro: Genetics, Law, Sexual Ethics, and the Social Sciences**

Perhaps the best way to describe the spirit of intellectualism in the 1890s is to say that
there was a crisis of authority and intense rivalry in scientific, social, and political thought
triggered by new consolidations of political and economic power among wealthy, white elites.
Coined “The Gilded Age” by Mark Twain in 1873, the late-nineteenth-century U.S. is commonly
characterized as a period in which intense social unrest and deep economic turmoil were covered
over by corporatization, cosmopolitan urbanity, and the ascendancy of nouveau riche
industrialists, giving the United States an empty air of prosperity amidst a double-dip recession.17
There is perhaps no better example of how racist ideology and economic power are mutually

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17 This double-dip recession took place between the years 1893–1896; as in all epochs, market
uncertainty tends to predict radical social change. But also in eras like this with massive
unemployment, the working classes — which tend to be non-white — are hit the hardest, and
therefore have the least access to institutions of social power.
determining than this period, in which American economic power — no longer able to rely on
free slave labor — grew on the back of xenophobia, eugenicism, and imperialism, especially
through the ideology of Manifest Destiny, the quasi-Christian belief that it was God’s ordained
will for the United States to spread Christian qua “democratic” values throughout the world. This
period saw the accelerated development of a homogenous American identity based in Anglo-
Saxon supremacy due to fear of immigrants and black enfranchisement; in some sense, this was a
augmentation of the earlier American origin myth propagated by founding figures like
Crèvecœur and Franklin, who depicted America as the practice ground for the implementation of
democratic ideology as it had been idealized by Enlightenment figures. Disingenuous as this was
in a period of chattel slavery, wherein an “American citizen” was always white, the American
origin myth tends to sell the nation as a place where immigrants from Europe could get out from
under a caste society, thus earning an array of new freedoms in labor, ownership, and the
practice of religion and culture. Once abolition was deemed to be in the spirit of the American
experiment and amidst economic turmoil, white ethno-nationalism and white supremacy gained
increasing influence as contradictory logics meant to continue disenfranchising, oppressing, and
exploiting non-white people on the basis that they were not in a full sense “human,” and thus not
full citizens deserving of rights.

The most obvious events associated with Gilded Age white nationalism include the
continued dispossession and relocation of American Indians, emblematized by the massacre of
Lakota Indians at Wounded Knee in 1890; the Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896, in which the
Supreme Court formally ushered in Jim Crow segregationism by deciding that a doctrine of
“separate but equal” was in fact constitutionally protected discrimination; and the Spanish-
American and Philippine-American Wars (1898–1902), which involved influence over and
possession of resource-rich Caribbean and Pacific territories and their citizenries. Though these decisions were arguably all economically determined for the purposes of mass exploitation and alienation of non-whites from their material wealth and cultures, the logic and popularity of these racist actions derived largely from intellectual discourses beyond economics, especially in the human, natural, and social sciences. Influenced by unrigorous deployments of Darwinist thought, which largely synthesized his work with the earlier and much more pernicious theories of Louis Agassiz, the school of Social Darwinism and its motto, “survival of the fittest,” became common rationalizations for U.S. colonialism and white supremacy, as well as their ensuing bodily violences. Intense debates over the philosophy of Social Darwinism were a central aspect of racial discourse in 1890s U.S. culture.

What we may forget if we are focused on imperialism and economic exploitation, though, is that Darwinist thought — especially that which is derived from *The Descent of Man* (1871) — is largely about the notion of biological success and, thus, reproductive ethics. Sexual relations and gender roles, therefore, undergird much of the discourse about racial domination and its rationalizations in both figurative and literal ways. To put this another way, not only were relations of power between races and national citizens discussed in the metaphorical language of sex and gender, but sex and gender themselves — especially ideas about racial amalgamation and its relationship to “biological success,” which in fact meant political and economic control over capital — were considered to be crucial determining factors in the hierarchy of races. In a Foucaldian way, one might say that such oppressive discourses were a preemergent sign that gender, sex, and race essentialisms were just beginning to fall apart, thus requiring power to make itself visible in an explosion of discourses.\(^\text{18}\) Hegemonic power that was previously

\(^{18}\) For an elaboration of this Foucauldian theory of power, arguably his best and clearest, see *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1.*
invisible now had to show itself in an effort to reinstitutionalize dissipating “White Western values” in an increasingly globalized world. White supremacists did this in part by co-opting the resurgence of materialist scientific thought in the nineteenth century, from biology to economics, most notably in their propagation of Social Darwinism.

One need look no further than Darwin’s work itself to understand how fundamentally bankrupt and opportunist the concept of Social Darwinism was and, thus, how instruments of power can bend any intellectual discourse into a weapon. Though Darwin was no stranger to a priori, normative logics that the family unit was a part of the natural order and that the purpose of human existence was to survive long enough to reproduce, Darwin was, in essence, not an idealist thinker, but a materialist in the Baconian sense. When he took up the notion that race somehow determined “biological success,” he did not take for granted assumptions of essentialist or environmentally determinist thinkers on race like Louis Agassiz or Jean-Louis Lamarck; the fact, though, that Darwin took the discourse of racial essentialism with a great deal of seriousness — devoting pages and pages to airing the viewpoints of racial essentialists — gives one the impression that Darwinian thought is racially essentialist. Yet Darwin’s anti-creationism in *The Descent of Man* attempts to show that all difference emerges from communal, perpetual, mutual creation rather than from distinct acts and, thus, that we all share common ancestors (37). Darwin thus determines that race is arbitrary to all chances of biological success in humans. Later racist eugenicist thought of the nineteenth century that lays claim to the notion that racist violence is justified by the principle of “survival of the fittest” largely misunderstands Darwin by interweaving his scientific philosophy with the polygenism of Louis Agassiz and the concept of “soft inheritance” made popular by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and repopularized by Neo-Lamarckism of the late-nineteenth century. This is all to say that in the nineteenth century
popular scientific imagination, Darwin both provided the chance to think beyond genetic essentialism, yet, mistranslated in the popular imagination, it functioned in a more pernicious way.

Regardless of the scientific baselessness of Social Darwinism, the concept made its biggest gains in social and political discourse where it was treated with regard among white social thinkers. Although less influential than it had been prior to slavery, polygenism — the idea that different races constituted different species because they supposedly shared no common ancestor — still also held sway among especially fervent white supremacists. Thus, African Americans had two pseudo-scientific bogeymen to contend with when it came to the scientific support of racist sex politics: either African Americans had inherently inferior biological traits passed down from generation to generation and their social oppression was evidence of their genetic inferiority, or African Americans were in fact a lower species. In either scenario, scrutiny and fear of the “dilution” of white blood caused mass hysteria among whites when it came to the question of reproduction and racial mixture. Increasingly, the question of what was “natural” became integral to determining sexual propriety, and largely this question revolved around the prohibition of or control over black sexual desire through legal and extralegal measures. Because African American social and political thinkers were also, if not convinced, beholden to popular logics of the “unnaturalness” of racial mixture, they also sometimes avoided challenging the notion that it was unnatural for races to mix in a biological sense. As the chapters that follow show, it was much more within the purview of literary figures to challenge the rightness of these sexual logics, even as they tended to portray black citizens as paragons of virtue when it came to respecting and upholding societal norms.
The notion that blacks were an animalistic and hypersexual species of a lower order and that it was not natural for races to mix was not exclusively popular in the Post-Reconstruction period. The racist scientific discourses that emerged in this period were intended to refigure and maintain a system of control over black reproductivity and domestic organization after abolition. As Lucy Carr Cary’s experiences show, previously it had been enough for whites to engage in forms of soft oppression over blacks in which marriage and other forms of social relation were privileges granted by paternalistic whites. Throughout Reconstruction, and primarily through their control over the law, whites continued to enforce domestic norms that concretized their sense of superiority and privilege while portraying black desire and domestic organization as dysfunctional. Despite slavery having been the primary agent of racial amalgamation in the South, due to the sexual assault of black women by white men, anti-miscegenation laws emerged in the 1860s and 1870s out of white supremacist fears that black men would take their newfound freedom as license to subordinate white women to their will, a fear ironically drawn from the general norms of white patriarchal society.

African Americans, coming out of the sexual abuses of slavery, did not necessarily relish the idea of interracial domestic organization either, and some “African American delegates to state constitutional conventions … agreed to support proposals to ban intermarriage if they included a section prohibiting white men from cohabiting with African American women outside of marriage” (Bardaglio 178). Those interested in the history of marriage equality might be interested to know that it was during this spate of state-level anti-miscegenation and anti-intermarriage laws that some of the earliest cases on whether or not marriage was a constitutional or human right emerged. The Texas Court of Appeals, for instance, ruled in an 1877 case that marriage was not a right, but a civil status left to state regulation, thus rationalizing “reasonable”
punishments for interracial relationships (Bardaglio 184). By the end of the nineteenth century, “household-centered patriarchy had yielded … to an emergent state paternalism,” one that, while abandoning plantation culture’s domestic organization, offered lesser protections for non-white subjects in both de jure and de facto ways (Bardaglio 227).

The unequal enforcement of rape laws became a hallmark of the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction eras meant to carry out pre-existing patriarchal and white supremacist hierarchies of antebellum America. Peter Bardaglio writes,

Rape challenged the power of the male household head to protect the women, children, and other dependents in his family, and damaged his standing in the community …. Now, with the transformation of the household that took place with emancipation and the subsequent redefinition of who qualified as a household head and citizen, the position of propertied white men in both the private and public spheres came under severe pressure. (189)

Naturally, then, white supremacists, who largely controlled the power of law, would need to make sure that rape laws were stringently enforced against black men for multiple reasons: to argue for their inferiority and the need to curtail their rights, to solidify the virtue and purity of white women over that of women of color, and to depict white men as stalwart defenders of the private sphere in their public dealings. In this effort, they were fairly successful. While many court documents of the time do not specify the race of the parties involved because of the idealistic red herring that all were equal under the law, some appeals proceedings did make note of it: “thirty-seven of the opinions involving prosecution for rape or attempted rape during the last third of the nineteenth century clearly identify the male as African American and the female as white. Of the thirty-seven appeals, the court upheld convictions in twenty.” In appeals where white men were accused of raping women of color, only a third of convictions were sustained (Bardaglio 190–91). Some Southern courts did allow race to be used, though, as evidence of intent or motive — if a black man was accused of raping a white woman, racial dynamics and
essentialisms were, in the eyes of the law, a valid establishment of motive. No white woman could be assumed to willingly desire sex with a black man, thus making her consent impossible; black men’s motive for raping white women would be seen as a natural extension of his desire for racial dominance (Bardaglio 193–94). Still this ignores that a great deal of the dynamics of enforcing sexual assault remain hidden under a veil of silence, as sexual assault has always gone widely unreported. Literature becomes all the more important in this matter for its depictions of the realities of life for black women, especially the realities of their sexual subordination and the racist and sexist attacks on their credibility.

Post-Reconstruction anti-amalgamation, however, is characterized more by extralegal violence than the official violence of the state, namely lynch law. While the official line of white supremacists was that lynchings were abhorrent and illegal affairs, they largely laid the blame for lynchings at the feet of black men and women. Though he perhaps understates many psychological and performative factors, Bardaglio argues that lynch law’s emergence came about in part because of confusion on the part of Southern whites as to whether the defense of the household was the primary responsibility of the state or “household patriarchy” (224). Pining for the consolidation of white male authority in antebellum times (a pining in part catalyzed by popular Southern pastoralist literature) and the certainty of their right to commit violence against African Americans when they saw fit, lynching’s circumvention of law emboldened white men to believe in their naturally ordained sovereignty over white women and black people. Even as legal culture continued to largely work on behalf of white supremacy as it changed, control of the arm of the law was not enough reassurance for white supremacists. Aside from lynching and rape, the New Anglo Saxon of Southern Redemption began to fight a culture war intent on depicting his own normality and non-whites’ deviance. This culture war, if carried out properly,
would ensure that the law would continue to work on their behalf. Lynching, itself a choreographed spectacle, is a performance of white cultural superiority, a kind of demonstrative entertainment.¹⁹

The natural and social sciences, too, circulated among wide audiences as a form of popular, demonstrative entertainment. The image of white domesticity as implicitly healthy, normal, and civilized emerged along with the advent of heteronormativity and Victorian sexual discourses; not lacking in a futurist vision beyond hatred of blacks, white supremacists tied the American love of romance and family to the mandated reproduction of white civilization. If one was not reproducing healthy white children, one was sacrificing a society that, due to rapid scientific progress and national growth, was seen to be at its pinnacle. According to Julian B. Carter, this necessitated the invention of, in the sciences, a “normal” American to act as the image of these successes, a bodily ideal. Important to Carter’s analysis of this phenomenon is the concept of neurasthenia or nervous exhaustion, a Victorian age affliction primarily affecting bourgeois whites.²⁰ Many whites considered themselves the torchbearers of modern civilization, and along with that supposedly came a tremendous burden and anxiety to defend this civilization through industrious labor and careful breeding. Not only did they believe that whiteness was the norm, but whiteness as a norm was under constant threat and needed to be defended. African Americans were perceived as animalistic and efficacious in their ability to reproduce, while

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¹⁹ For more on this subject, see Amy L. Wood’s *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (2009).
²⁰ Neurasthenia played an integral part in the extremely popular and influential socialist utopian novel *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* by Edward Bellamy. In that novel a well-to-do white man becomes increasingly burdened by guilt over societal inequality and feels pressure, because of his position of economic and racial privilege, to do something about it. In attempting to cure his malady with sedatives, he is accidentally placed into a deep sleep and wakes up in the socialist utopian Boston of 2000. It would not be surprising to learn that Griggs and Hopkins read Bellamy’s work and that it influenced their own speculative fictions.
whites were so encumbered by the neuroses of modern life that they were losing their ability to consistently partner and reproduce, thus ensuring their dominance.\textsuperscript{21} Normative white sexuality became key to the defense of what was perceived as an industrious, corporatized, and imperialistic American modernity.

Carter’s study of sex and race in \textit{fin de siècle} U.S. culture emphasizes the construction of “the normal” and the white — methodologically it lies somewhere in the nexus of queer theory and whiteness studies. Carter, like Foucault before him, embraces the notion that white supremacist and heteronormative discourses barely conceal a deep anxiety about the loss of power. “Sexual purity and self control” were seen as primary markers of culture in white people, who were very self-conscious about the expression of their sexual desire (53–55). In fact segregation itself was one of the prime indicators that white people did not believe they could trust themselves to cohabitate public or private spaces with black people because of the precarious nature of their normative, intraracial desire (73). As Toni Morrison and Sharon Patricia Holland have argued, whites have always had a deep desire \textit{for} African Americans that expressed itself in racist, separatist action and othering.\textsuperscript{22}

In an unwieldy way, and without much regard to the distinction between the hard sciences and human sciences, social science discourses exploded in the popular imagination in the 1890s; much of the U.S. social science discourse about race was written by white anthropologists, sociologists, and biologists, many of whom are now disregarded because of the inherently racist assumptions of their views. When most of us think of social science and race in

\textsuperscript{21} It was partially for this reason, in addition to new psychological discourses, that the Victorian period is known for an explosion in erotic literature and sex manuals. See Carter (2007) and Foucault (1976).

\textsuperscript{22} See Morrison’s classic \textit{Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination} (1992) and Sharon Patricia Holland’s \textit{The Erotic Life of Racism} (2012).
the 1890s, we think of W.E.B. Du Bois and his reputation as being one of the first and greatest American sociologists. Du Bois was writing, however, into a milieu in which there was no real differentiation in the social sciences between work that had a priori racist assumptions and work that attempted to dismantle racial essentialisms toward an antiracist culture. The former work attempted to explain to nervous white Americans why there was racial discord in America, pinning any black poverty to the pathological social dysfunction of blackness. Black social scientists like Du Bois had to actively consider these interlocutors and address their talking points, even if their claims were motivated by sometimes bare antiblackness. Scholars like Hortense Spillers, Roderick Ferguson, and Marlon B. Ross have observed a mark of domestic and desiring dysfunction in blackness that was engendered by the system of slavery, diagnosed by the social sciences, and forevermore associated with the cultural iconicity of blackness. The trick for black social scientists was then and continues to be to observe truthfully the social conditions that did cause decades of black poverty and dysfunction in the United States as a product of institutional racism rather than something identified with a mythic and essentialized black culture. Cultural production would become an important tool in that fight, especially for Du Bois, who in works like *The Souls of Black Folk* would demonstrate an interdisciplinary approach to race that combined formal social science analysis and humanistic inquiry. This would become the model for early New Negro cultural inquiry — a science of black culture.

In cultural production and in labor, anxiety within the black community about how they were perceived by a white elite led to some strange and prohibitive conclusions about gender and sexual propriety, particularly where the division of labor was concerned. As Laura F. Edwards has observed, it was poor communities of both blacks and whites who most commonly broke convention by allowing women to work and, thus, enter the public sphere. Women of the
working class, in the industrial era, began to make “contributions to their families’ welfare” and this became a central idea for them in their roles as women. “Elite whites, however, blanched,” Edwards writes; “Looking into the households and communities of the poor through the lens of their own gender conventions, they saw evidence of personal depravity and social backwardness” (146). This is why the way labor is performed and who performs it must be considered in late-nineteenth-century African American culture as a marker of the degree of gender and sexual propriety. Characters like Erma Wysong in Sutton E. Griggs’ *Overshadowed* (1901), for instance, encounter great resistance from fellow characters for working because it is perceived as non-normative behavior that calls into question her claim to normative womanhood. Cohabitation of unmarried black people, too, courted suspicion in the minds of whites. Dicey Smith and Jennie Bass, two African American women who lived together in the 1890s, encountered trouble with the authorities when a guest at their boarding house fired a gun in the middle of the party. According to Edwards, “the authorities made the women’s living arrangements central to their investigation, certain that the explanation for the shooting could be found there. Doubtful that Smith and Bass were operating just a boarding house, they demanded to know if the women had sexual relations with their male renters” (152–53). Women of color who had any part in labor or the public sphere could not avoid the suspicion by whites, as well as elite blacks, that they were up to no good.\(^{23}\) One thinks of Pauline E. Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*, wherein two of the characters, Sappho and Dora, both African American, seclude

\(^{23}\) Despite this increased scrutiny, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore notes that “Unlike white women of the period, black women did not usually have to choose between higher education and marriage or between teaching and marrying. White women risked passing prime marriageable age in single-sex schools. One-half of the white women in the new state normal school’s 1896 graduating class never wed. African American women often taught after marriage, whereas most public school committeemen would not allow married white women to teach” (43). Black women of the period demonstrated and perhaps even saw the fruits of a fairly progressive feminism and, thus, are important to cataloging the history of feminism in America.
themselves in the room of a boarding house eating sweets and discussing their mutual disinterest in marriage. Put in context with the perception of Dicey and Jennie, Hopkins’ depiction of Sappho and Dora — especially in Sappho’s name and hidden past as a sex worker — would seem an adventurous choice given that Hopkins may also depict these women to be paragons of black heroism in the novel. As I argue further on, Hopkins may essentially be implying that sexually non-normative subjects or people who even court the appearance of impropriety by virtue of their labor and habitation can still be heroic defenders of black goodness and morality; after all, one of the only available photos of Hopkins is inscribed, “Yours For Humanity, Pauline Hopkins.” For Hopkins, ethical black performance meant being a human, not an angel. And after all, she too labored throughout her life until patriarchs took over her magazine and forced her into obscurity.

As Roderick Ferguson, Marlon B. Ross, and others have previously argued, the way “race men” doled out the rules of performance for black women so as to assuage potential white critics consecrated the authority of heteropatriarchal white supremacy. In “The Conservation of the Races” (1897), W.E.B. Du Bois argued that one of the primary problems facing black cultural development was a lack of unity and harmony, and thus that it must be refined through growth and development “along right lines” (3). Du Bois defends the conservation of race as the promotion of intellectual development toward political movement and recognition. While taking up intermarriage and racial amalgamation as complicating racial taxonomy (and causing it to fail often) in the long space, he also claims that races still serve a purpose as a political-existential family organization toward human progress (6). Part of why Du Bois calls for political unity is to “guard the purity of black women and to reduce the vast army of black prostitutes that is today marching to hell” (11). Du Bois’ sociological emphasis on the amelioration of deviance — as
monolithically and authoritatively determined by sociologists — is one of many ways in which Du Bois’ quest for cultural unity qua political power constrains pleasure, desire, and labor for others, particularly women and non-heterosexual black people. One should keep in mind that Du Bois wrote for over sixty years and for a diverse range of audiences, so by no means is “Conservation” the quintessential example of Du Bois’ gender politics. But this notion that black culture could not develop and unify because of immorality in sexuality was an opinion commonly held by white supremacists and some black elitists.

More egregious than this were Booker T. Washington’s conciliatory remarks in the early-going of *Up From Slavery* about interraciality during and after slavery. Of his white father, who presumably raped his enslaved mother, Washington writes “I do not find especial fault with him. He was simply another unfortunate victim of the institution” (8). Further he denigrates the domestic habits of African Americans and bemoans a lost sympathy and tenderness between blacks and whites that supposedly was common to plantation culture, even during and after the war. This is all due to Washington’s position that slavery, for people of the African diaspora, was a kind of felix culpa (12–14). Washington railed against what he believed to be a diminishment of industry and good nature in black people in the Gilded Age while excusing his mother’s rapist. Washington played well with white audiences because he indulged their double standards: white men who committed sexual assaults were victims of an unstoppable, fatalistic system, but black people had no option but a dogma of personal responsibility and bootstraps ideology (William Hannibal Thomas, called “Black Judas” by the historian John David Smith, is perhaps the most opportunistic denigrator of black moral character in this era, much worse than any “race men” of the period; I address his work and its reception in more detail below).
While race men and social scientists attempted to discipline the movements and desires of women of color, they also fought over the mythologization of an ideal masculinity either inhabited by or lacking in black men. Historicizing the sociological trend of the “young black male crisis,” Malinda Alaine Lindquist has recently called attention to the way black social scientists have “described black men as ‘supermen,’ who offered a progressive masculine ideal as a template of nation reform” by critiquing the supposed “unmanly nature of white social science” in favor of a social science of “virile social activism” (2). Again responding to “survival of the fittest” as one of the central laws of the humanistic sciences, sociologists rationalized pre-existing phenomena like the patriarchal organization of white society as evidence that white male supremacy was “analogous with survival and fitness” (Lindquist 14). This implied, for whites, that African American men were unsuccessful because they lacked a strong patriarchal component to their society. In shorthand, white sociologists propagated the idea that there was either a lack of masculinity or a perceived femininity in black culture which rationalized or at least explained their racial subordination. If it was logical for women to be subordinated to men, then it followed that it was logical for blacks to be subordinated to whites on the same principles. Casting race in terms of fixed ideas on gender and sexuality, Chicago School sociologist Robert Park would, in the twentieth century, call African Americans “the lady among the races.” This concept drew on white supremacist assumptions about race and biology and it remained a popular notion well into the mid-twentieth-century that African Americans were leisure-driven, happy-go-lucky folk incapable of social domination, ironic given that whites were also terrified of the specter of the black rapist. This is why exemplary, charismatic masculinity has remained
an important characteristic among black political leaders — to stand as a rebuke to these notions and, thus, to qualify African Americans for the rituals of power and domination.  

Not all black social scientists, however, caved to the anxiety of black masculinity, favoring instead an image of African American men as somehow *more* civilized because of their perceived vulnerability. Du Bois, for instance, using Jefferson Davis as his example, noted a certain incompleteness in the standard of the Anglo-Saxon strong man because it disregarded “every canon of human justice” (Lindquist 22). At the forefront of this effort to critique toxic forms of masculinity were women of color like Ida B. Wells, Frances E.W. Harper, and Anna Julia Cooper. For Cooper, civilization and evolved society were not characterized primarily by dominance, but by civility and cooperation. Seeing through the motivated reasoning of “survival of the fittest” ideology, Cooper re-coined it as “survival of the bullies,” arguing that the white use of violence like lynching to subordinate was evidence of white masculinity’s primitive nature. Though formulations like Cooper’s were still an attempt to gain purchase on the question of the “natural” or the “ordained,” they were also, in effect, antinormative gestures that attempted to ascribe positive characteristics to the way blacks performed their genders. This lends further credence to the possibility that critical race thinkers were the first to approach gender performance and race as malleable and mutually informed constructs, even if they still had essentialist views about their basic reality. Women like Cooper, too, wrote as part of a tradition of proto-feminist anticapitalist thinkers, the first of which were the abolitionist sentimental writers, who believed that the laws of capitalism alone did not ensure the naturalness of racist and sexist subordination. In the social sciences, as their conclusions were debated

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24 For a great transhistorical take on the subject of charismatic masculinity in black political culture, see Erica Edwards’ *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (2012). See also Hazel V. Carby’s *Race Men* (1998).
between blacks and whites, we see both the new visibility of power dynamics; the concatenations between gender, race, capitalism, and sovereignty; and direct challenges to the naturalness of these linkages as normal and rational in the everyday, particularly by women of color and literary writers. As Lindquist argues, the social sciences overall moved in this period from being just about the pathologization and amelioration of deviance to the positive identification of varying systems of culture and power (78–79). Queer theory’s emphases on antinormativity and gender performativity are directly descended from this discourse and owe it a citational debt.

In the tableau described above, hard sciences and social sciences of the 1890s were widely disseminated and extremely varied. Assumption of scientific fact influenced social sciences work, while even itself being politically motivated and co-optable. Even while social scientists and biologists began to rethink gender and racial essentialism, popular discourse on these subjects traveled faster than ever. Caught in this crucible of conflicting ideas were men and women of color, who began to experience what it was like to be so intensely scrutinized and weaponized by the media of new American knowledge at the turn of the century. African American literature — catalyzed and controlled in part by political figures — would attempt to intervene on this knowledge to show the transitivity of these ideas and how they impacted black citizens on an everyday basis. At the same time, a homogenous African American consensus on the facts with regard to social scientific and hard scientific thought could not be guaranteed. The literature under examination in this project, therefore, comprises its own intellectual venture, a kind of hyperrealism of the black experience in which black characters were shown navigating these new ideas as they circulated. African American literature acted as not only the propaganda arm of black politics, but as a conscience to scientific discourses and their own political ends.
literature, even though it was intended to act as uplift by so many of its authors and supporters, the literature itself resisted normative, formalized thought. This is why I tend to think of black uplift, in the literary arts, as a *queer practice*, one which resists the consecration of labels and fixed ideas which is the pursuit of materialist science. In a more basic sense, this meant that the kind of heroic black sexuality and gender performance these novels’ appear to seek out does not always come in the genteel and socially normative ways we’ve come to expect.

**Social Occupations: Education, Labor, and Gender at Atlanta University and Spelman**

Reliance on the Best Man ideal meant that African Americans constantly had to prove their manhood in order to maintain civil rights, even if they could never prove it to whites’ satisfaction. If a certain black man led an exemplary life, whites still held him accountable for the conduct of his entire race. His Best Man status was measured not just by his own behavior but also by that of any random stranger who happened to be African American. (63)


When I cast my eyes over the world and behold the present condition of our race, there comes in my mind a thought like this; Only a girl, only a girl, who is heeding to the instructions of a good mother and father, and cultivating her brains, heart, hands and eyes, is the future dependence of our race.

Beatrice Hubert, “Only a Girl,” *Spelman Messenger* 13.4 (1897)

Concurrent with the social sciences’ interlinked debates about racial uplift, white supremacy, amalgamation, segregation, the division of labor, femininity, masculinity, and sovereignty at the end of the nineteenth century was the emergence of multiple black colleges and universities, which became primary intraracial arbiters of black propriety and political futurity. Black education in the 1890s was the prime arm of community building and political organizing and was “characterized by utopian visions of cooperative learning, liberatory classrooms, transformative syllabi, and material empowerment” (Murdy 4). The relationship between literary culture and education during this period was strong as well. Charles Chesnutt’s
personal correspondence contain many requests for donations of his books to black colleges and secondary schools, including one from Du Bois requesting donations of Chesnutt’s work to the library at Atlanta University. While much African American literature of this period is artful, nuanced, and sometimes oblique about its politics, in circulation many domestic novels also took on a kind of didactic quality, acting almost as “textbooks.” As Anne-Elizabeth Murdy notes, “women writers expected women readers to learn something about domesticity, Christianity, patience, temperance, femininity, and so on” (7). Frances E.W. Harper, in fact, specifically wrote *Iola Leroy* (1892) as a “pedagogical tool” (Murdy 10). In *The House Behind the Cedars*, Charles W. Chesnutt’s choice to make Rena Walden a school teacher in the fallout of her broken romance with George Tryon is evidence of common attitudes in the period about the heroic nature of black educators; in Rena’s case, it is even pitched as a kind of atonement for her romantic indiscretions in passing, a recommitment of herself to the race. Her refusal, even, of romantic pursuits from all other courtiers in favor of racial uplift depicts black education as a profoundly celibate lifestyle modeling careful discipline over sexual and gender performance. On a different note, in Sutton E. Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio*, one mixed-race character’s suicide — the purpose of which is to prevent her from romantic congress with an “unmixed” black man — is the result of her inability to read an anti-amalgamation political text with any sense of critical scrutiny, a problem proper literary and social science education could ameliorate.

While the literary arts and critical reading were important, black liberal arts colleges tended to stress primary pursuits for women in education, missionary work, and domestic and agricultural vocations; students of all genders at these colleges, too, received especially stringent instruction in the social sciences. Sociology and anthropology were seen as the primary research initiatives of these colleges and essays analyzing social phenomena and conditions of the period
filled the pages of their student and faculty periodicals. All of this should not be surprising given
Du Bois’s famous proclamation in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that the problem of the
twentieth century is the problem of the color line. In an effort to understand in a more detailed
way the quotidian social issues and sentiments about curriculum that faced early black colleges
and universities, I performed archival research in the special collections at the Woodruff Library
at Atlanta University and the archives in the Women’s Research and Resource Center at Spelman
College. In what follows I describe the general content of course catalogs, student periodicals,
and faculty publications at these colleges with special attention to ideas of gender and sexual
propriety, curriculum, comportment, the division of labor, and political strategy. What I found in
these collections, generally speaking, is unsurprising evidence that while the writings in these
periodicals make mostly implicit and sometimes explicit arguments about the gender and sexual
roles of black men and women in society — especially with regard to labor and refinement —
they are mostly of a normative, disciplining, and Christian genteel nature, a trend contrary to
some of the content of the novels included in this project. It is clear, however, that in treating
domesticity and its vocations as part of the domain of higher education and part of the pursuit of
the social sciences, early black college significantly blurred the line between the public and
private spheres and called into question staid roles of women and men in society. This makes the
relationship of black uplift novels to black educational institutions somewhat complex. The
novels of Chesnutt, Hopkins, Griggs, and others might be understood as critiques of black
education and social leadership, even though sometimes their depictions of the remarkable,
heroic self-discipline of black people make them adaptable to early black cultural education.

Atlanta University had, like most universities in its time, strict rules of moral
comportment for membership in the university. According to an 1892 bulletin (the language in
bulletins throughout the 1890s was relatively consistent), the co-ed students were told to abstain from alcohol and tobacco. In addition, students facing disability or illness were discouraged from applying out of concern that it would ruin the school’s “good reputation for healthfulness” (30). The university was described as non-sectarian, but students were encouraged to have a relationship with Christianity. The language of membership in the college was one that emphasized good citizenship, morality, and health in addition to scholarly aptitude and work ethic. Many of these notes on ethics and propriety fell under the section “Miscellaneous Suggestions.” Students were told to bring their own bible for private reading and weekly bible lessons. Women were given extensive instruction on what clothes to wear and what clothes not to wear. “Expensive and showy dress” was not permitted, including “silks, velvets and jewelry,” which were deemed to be “indicative neither of good taste nor good sense.” Family and friends were discouraged from sending the students “large quantities of fruit or candy from home,” for fear that it would inspire “evil” in their students. Students were not allowed fire-arms either. Finally, students were prohibited from, “without permission, actively [participating] in any political or mass meeting.” All of this instruction was, according to the administrators, designed to make the college feel like “a home for those who attend. Not only their intellectual, but also their physical, social, moral and religious culture receive careful attention” (34).

To the extent that administrators modeled Atlanta University on conventional ideas of the separate spheres and this concept’s division of labor, it did seem to model the kind of domestic training one would receive “at home.” Industrial training was required for all men, including farming, gardening, and the use of tools. “Girls,” on the other hand, were taught “various branches of household science, such as plain sewing, dress-making, cooking, nursing, and laundry work” (32). Training in typesetting and other aspects of printing were available to men
and women and students and faculty worked on the college’s monthly paper, The Bulletin of Atlanta University.

According to a course catalog from 1899, the rest of the curriculum — the less vocationally oriented liberal arts training — was split between English, “Philosophy and Psychology,” and “Sociology and History” (13–14). In English, students primarily focused on rhetoric and composition with some training in the American and British canons. Particularly emphasized was the work of Shakespeare, including the plays *As You Like It* and *Macbeth*. Of special importance is the role social sciences education took at Atlanta University. Sociology is given the lengthiest and most detailed description in the catalog:

> It is intended to develop this department not only for the sake of the mental discipline but also in order to familiarize our students with the history of nations and with the great economic and social problems of the world. It is hoped that thus they may be able to apply broad and careful knowledge to the solving of the many intricate social questions affecting their own people. The department aims therefore at training in good intelligent citizenship; at a thorough comprehension of the chief problems of wealth, work and wages; and at a fair knowledge of the objects and methods of social reform. (14)

Classes in the social sciences included “Citizenship,” “Civil Government,” “Social Reforms,” “General and U.S. History,” “Ancient History,” “Ancient Languages and Bible Study,” and “Modern European History.” In the senior year, three terms were given to sociology, “the first term to a general study of principles, the second term to a general survey of social conditions, and a third term to a study of the social and economic condition of the American Negro, and to methods of reform.” Atlanta University was perceived by its administrators to be a rapidly emerging center for cutting-edge research, as indicated by the formation of “the Atlanta Conference, composed of graduates of Atlanta, Fisk, and other institutions. The aim is to make Atlanta University the center of an intelligent and thorough-going study of the Negro problems” (14).
As noted above, this strong emphasis on making Atlanta a premiere social science research center was coupled with a robust vocational curriculum. In the education debates of the day between figures like Washington and Du Bois, one might get the impression that vocational and liberal arts training were mutually exclusive goals in black politics, but it’s more accurate to say that the debate was about the balance of curriculum, as well as the relationship between humanistic enrichment, labor, and politics.

Much of women’s domestic training was undertaken, after 1899, in what was called “The Model Home.” The March 1899 volume of *The Scroll* describes it as such:

> It is designed to teach the domestic arts in the most thoroughly scientific as well as practical manner. Under competent instructors the young women will themselves carry on the work of the home. They will learn the 'why' as well as the 'how' of what they do. The chemical, physiological, and economic relations of the food question will be taught, as well as the principles of drainage, ventilation, and general household sanitation. Needle work and laundry work, so far as they pertain to a well-ordered home life, will receive due attention, and also the care of the sick. Thus trained, the young women will, in connection with their academic studies, be fitted to become efficient mistresses of the homes to which many of them will be called by marriage, and (what is especially sought) to become teachers of domestic science among the destitute masses. (10–12)

It may be most accurate to think of Atlanta as experimenting with social science and vocational training as mutually informed disciplines. In social science research, African Americans tried to best understand the pathologies, desires, and domestic practices of black life; in vocational training, this theory was put into practice. Labor among African Americans at Atlanta was gender normalized, but with an eye to the social construction of these norms and careful consideration of the political nature of vocational training. According to the 1899–1900 catalog, over 52% of graduates went on to become teachers. Vocations were not just trades people learned with rote instruction; they were observed, theorized, and disseminated by a growing black class of educators. People who learned vocations at Atlanta University probably also had a significant consciousness of the social underpinnings and political implications of their labors.
This is further evident upon examination of the Atlanta University student newspaper, *The Scroll*. Unlike the more well-known publications of Atlanta University, such as the sociology journal *Phylon*, *The Scroll* provides a unique look at the day-to-day life of students on campus, as well as evidence of how students at Atlanta engaged with popular political and domestic discourses.

With what issues were these students most concerned? For one, the cultivation of positive images. Writing in November of 1899, George F. Porter, then editor-in-chief of the paper, remarked upon the example that must be set by the black elite in the South. Porter was concerned that black educated people attending the opera or other theatre events in the South would condescend to attend segregated venues and sit in seats far worse than those afforded to whites. While allowing that the theatre is a form of enrichment African Americans should not deny themselves, Porter suggests black educated people do not attend the theatre “until conditions are entirely altered” as a way of setting an example for the lower classes not to accept oppressive conditions (5). Atlanta’s students, it seems, were self-conscious about the image of the educated class and admirably stubborn about matters of pride in social dynamics.

African American morality and the question of rape, too, were common subjects. Although among many thinkers the debate over black licentiousness and sexual assault was a racist red herring disseminated by whites, some approached it in earnest, sometimes in ways that might seem unpalatable to us. As I discuss in the next section of this chapter, black enfranchisement and the question of sexual assault of white women by black men were often discussed in the same breath, ostensibly because enfranchisement, among white supremacists, was a prerequisite of sovereignty and the ability to manage the hand of law in one’s favor. In the mind of white supremacists, the end for black voters in their enfranchisement was to create a
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world in which they could promote their sovereignty and dominance through the sexual assault of white women. Alumnus A.B. Cooper (class of 1896), writing for the January 1899 volume of *The Scroll*, in a piece called “The Duties of a Free People,” propagated this notion that black enfranchisement and moral citizenship were linked fates:

Let us, then, so use the ballot that we shall prove to the State and people that we are worthy recipients of this right. Listen further! Nothing is more destructive to the national life of a people than immorality and wickedness …. There are three great sins in this country, and especially in this southland, for which the Infinite One is frowning upon us, and from which we must cease if we would escape His wrath. They are murder, rape and lynching! They are all wrong. One cannot be offered as an excuse for the other. Two wrongs never make a right! These evils are harbingers of decadence. The usurpation of law and justice is anarchy; and if history teaches anything, it teaches that the flames of anarchy, once let loose, have no bounds; they know no class; they know no race. I believe that God wills all for the Negro race that He wills for any race but His will shall not be established along with vice and immorality. Therefore, to improve our moral standing, is a duty which we owe to the preservation of our race, a duty which we owe to the preservations of this southland of which we are a part; nay, it is a duty which we owe to the preservation of this great government. Our men must learn, not in part, as some of us have learned, but as a whole, to hold sacred the virtue of woman, be she white or black. We must learn to let liquor alone, because drunkenness is the cause of much of the crime that is committed. (11).

It seems taken for granted here in Cooper’s moral lecture that licentiousness and other manners of sin are indeed widespread among African Americans and that they stand as a barrier to widespread enfranchisement because African Americans are supposedly undeserving of the ballot. For Cooper, as well as for Thomas Nelson Page, the diminishment of women’s virtue and black sexual impropriety disqualified them from full-fledged citizenship. It does not matter that social science and legal research concurrently undertaken at Atlanta does not bear out the notion that African Americans are more sexually violent — Cooper’s essay is a demonstrative call to order, a performance of black self-discipline, one mirrored by self-censorious actions of characters like Rena Walden and Frank Fowler in Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the*
Cedars. It is an anticipation of political talking points and a disavowal of something projected onto black identity.

With regard to the virtue of women and women’s role in black uplift at Atlanta University, there are also signs that women’s vocational training was taken seriously as a kind of black national citizenship, that, for the faculty and students of Atlanta University, the way African American women managed their homes had a direct relationship to the success of the nation. In the November 1899 essay “Homes of A.U. Graduates,” Anna Wade Richardson (class of 1985) writes,

A well known, but none the less true, fact is that pure homes produce pure nations. No home can be pure where the women in it do not display the virtues of love, truth, and cleanliness …. One of our Normal graduates went to a town where there was but one house in it occupied by Negroes that had more than one room. The first thing she did was to marry and build a five-room cottage. This little cottage was an inspiration to others in the community. They began to feel that with some effort and economy on their part, they, too, might improve the condition of their own homes …. The hope of the race must be the formation of pure homes, built from the high ideals that so many of our graduates have shown in planting theirs. We are striving to make our homes our castles in the true sense of the word—not by fortifications against the mortal foe, nor by use of the implements of modern warfare, but by endeavoring to inculcate the principles of right living. (7)

The relationship between women’s role in constructing domestic propriety and the health of a nation would later be examined and challenged in the work of Sutton E. Griggs, particularly in his novels Imperium in Imperio, Overshadowed, and Unfettered. Griggs would criticize the notion that domestic propriety among blacks — largely disseminated by whites — could act as a vehicle for racial justice, as well as the notion that African Americans should endorse the United States’ imperialist prerogatives via their right to partnership.

The role of women at Atlanta is an interesting topic of discussion, especially given that Spelman College, one of the most well-known HBCUs for women, was literally just down the road. Though editor-in-chief E.L. Simon declared in the November 1899 volume of The Scroll
that Atlanta University had become “the Vassar of the South,” in reality only 11.7% of graduates at that time were women (AU Catalogue 1899–1900). In “The College Woman,” from the January 1900 volume of *The Scroll*, L.I. Mack (class of 1900) argues that Atlanta University was in fact pioneering in their redefinition of the “woman’s sphere.” Mack argues that domesticity was previously believed to be an autodidactic vocation learned by women or inherent to their subjectivity, but that Atlanta University was standardizing it as a science because of its social and political import: “The new fields of labor which are now open to women require the training of every faculty which they possess. The cultivation of her faculties must not be limited to a particular sphere, but they must be so broadened as to enable her to choose, in after life, a field for herself” (12–13). For Mack and others, all disciplines a woman engaged with at Atlanta University — literary studies, sociology, mathematics, or physical sciences — prepared them to be better, more well-rounded homemakers, if not actual members of the public sphere. Atlanta University’s students and faculty, then, had a complex understanding of the role of women in black uplift politics, and though a barrier still existed to the successes of women, aspects of Atlanta University’s training reflect an Addams-esque early feminism. It was not women’s only obligation to maintain the image of purity; they also had work to do. A primary thematic running through African American literature of the time would be women of color laboring between the public and private spheres while under the burden of their perceived sexual impurity.

If the student publication *The Spelman Messenger* is any indication, women-of-color’s issues were discussed much differently at nearby Spelman College, which operated primarily as a seminary and which was premised much more deeply on Christian values. Absent from their curricular and political focuses are pursuits in the social sciences, as well as a sense that the education being received carries with it a consciousness of the constructed nature of social
dynamics. The pages of the paper generally find the women of Spelman trying to balance three objectives in their lives: industrious labor, ideal homemaking, and pure living. For the most part, the women writing in the *Messenger* do often take up with directness the question of the role of women to the movement — including what her sexual responsibilities are — but, by and large, these arguments about women’s propriety are more explicitly conservative than those offered at Atlanta.

Chastity itself is a value liberally espoused throughout issues of the *Messenger*. In pieces like M.E. Johnson’s (class of 1892) “A Good Name” and Mary M. Gordon’s (class of 1892) “Vashti Has Lost Her Veil,” both found in the January 1892 volume, both women discuss the importance of a perception of purity in women. Especially pernicious are some of Gordon’s lines, which exhibit the victim blaming ideology of rape culture:

> I do not believe there is a man living so debased and so vile as not to honor and respect a pure, virtuous woman. We should also be careful of our actions. There have been many men led into sin because of the careless actions of some thoughtless woman. A woman should never try to attract attention because of her dress, but should always be neat and tidy. (7)

Like with Cooper’s essay, Gordon and others acknowledged — while preemptively denying — the sexual impropriety of women of color by demonstration of the black elite’s gender normative values.

One of the more striking essays I found in the *Spelman Messenger* was a June 1897 essay by Serena Sloane Butler entitled “Heredity.” Butler’s argument samples liberally from differing ideologies about families and inheritance and most closely resemble Lamarckism, the belief that behaviors could be genetically inherited. Most interesting in this essay is Butler’s tendency to describe social mores and good rearing in the language of genetics, essentially implying that propriety in one generation of African Americans would lead to reproduction of a subsequently
improved generation. Butler’s suggestion as to how to achieve this is racial pride and striving
toward racial “purity”:

As individuals, we are disloyal to each other and therefore disloyal to the race. We do not support race enterprises, prefer to build up those of another race …. If you are prepared in this and other institutions to be the best teachers … whom will you teach? What race will supply your classroom with pupils? Are not these facts sufficiently strong to compel you to use your every energy to establish race loyalty in the present generation that the succeeding one may possess it by hereditary right and continue to pass it on? (3)

She continues,

You may ask, What has this to do with heredity. It has all to do with heredity. As the quality of any body depends upon the quality of the atoms composing it, so the race must depend upon the quality of the individuals composing it. If they are strong physically, in morals, intellect, race-loyalty and race-pride, the race will be strong proportionately; and if these qualities be perpetuated with care, the race will continue to strengthen; if not, it will continue to weaken and degenerate. Let me entreat you to weave daily into your lives race-loyalty, race-pride and the motto which Paul gave to Timothy, “Keep thyself pure.” (3)

In a clever way, dominating social ideas about race pride are weaved here with arguments about purity, reproductive ethics, and women’s sexual and maternal propriety to argue that all the social endeavors valued by the black elite would be the cause for reproductive futurity of a better class of African Americans. Drawing liberally from language across the biological and social sciences, Butler imaginatively constructs a basis for “race-loyalty,” “race-pride,” and “purity” that derives not from white fear of amalgamation, but from the pursuit of black excellence.

Loyalty and pride are looked upon in Butler’s work as things that can be inherited and which could drive a black sexual ethics that begets the best genetic outcomes. Of course, Butler is not working in the realm of fact, but in a political imaginary. For one, racial purity does not exist; additionally, Butler’s worldview makes no room for mixed-race people to be contributors to African-American social and reproductive futurity. Nevertheless, Butler’s creativity in designing for women a scientific role of maternal power in race politics is evidence that women of color in
the 1890s began to see the focus on their sexuality as a kind of power, albeit a limited one. This kind of perspective, perhaps increasingly common among educated women of color, would be mirrored by Hopkins in *Of One Blood* only a few years later.

In African American higher education of the 1890s, as viewed through these archival materials, we can see the emergence of two major pursuits in black political and social life of the period: the pursuit of a scientific understanding of black life and the pursuit of purity, both aimed toward black futurity. The former, however, complicates the later. As students, especially women-of-color, became conscious of the socially constructed nature of race and gender, colleges like Atlanta and Spelman would eventually become colleges devoted not to upholding dominant views about the sexually transgressive and socially inferior nature of blacks, but rather places where African Americans, coming together in intellectual endeavor, would question whether there was anything wrong with them at all. What followed from that was an enriched social sciences that was, for lack of a better term, Afrocentric, a sociology that chose to see positive characteristics in black experience rather than just drudgery that must be ameliorated. This change is reflected in the literature of the period, especially in the work of the authors I examine in this project. Freeing themselves from the didactic aims of a black social elite, black literary figures began to approach their art not as only a dissemination of positive images, but as a means of questioning the rightness and goodness of dominant ideologies on race, gender, and sexuality, even those disseminated in the black intellectual community. Their paranoid and unfaithful reproduction of 1890s black political values act as the root of African American literature in its development throughout the twentieth century, as a literature of social inquiry unattached to an official arm of politics or even a mutual purpose. And though they juggled
much of the thought examined at black colleges and universities and in some cases strove to uphold positive images of black women’s valor, queer tendencies emerged throughout.

**True Fiction: Thomas Nelson Page and the Mythologies of Domesticity and Desire**

Although sometimes significantly breaking from it, literary culture, as I have by now made clear, did not transcend the wave of new scientific discourses emerging in the 1890s. Late-nineteenth-century U.S. literary culture is, in fact, most commonly identified with the full rise to dominance of two major movements: realism and naturalism. Not only was realism popular, it was understood to be the final evolution of literary form — the novel, too, was becoming a privileged genre. Henry James in “The Art of Fiction” (1888) provided the manifesto for this movement. According to James, the novels of literary realism offered a personal, perspectival impression of life as it occurred, one that had special insight on life as it is lived because of its special interest in the minutiae of quotidian life, small gestures, individual human psychology, local and intimate relationships, and believable narrative scenarios. Naturalism, though stylistically similar to realism, was more influenced by fatalistic tendencies in psychological, economic, and biological thought; it differed from realism in its primary interest in the way external forces determine the lives of individuals, who were essentially a higher order of animal. The stylistic tendencies of realism, however, were so popular that most serious authors — and their audiences — laid claim to the metric of how “realistic” a work was in determining its success. This allowed writers to be able to write highly ideological work with idealistic and romantic ideas about the United States — especially the South — in a realist style and attract acclaim for their work. Realism, too, connoted a certain artistic “seriousness” to a work, coupled with a kind of objectivity and detachment from the subject matter.
The work of Thomas Nelson Page perhaps best reflects the wide incongruities that emerged between how literary realism was defined and what its products were. Page was in fact able to use his reputation as a master of realist craft to advance noxious, romantic ideologies about the plantation past under the guise that they were objective, artistic commitments to the representation of truth and human experience. This earned him both a reputation as the premiere mind on Southern race relations among whites as well as a force to be contended with among African American thinkers. Perhaps what was most disarming about Page’s work was Page’s ostensibly reasonable and temperate rhetoric, which mildly promoted white supremacism while concurrently maintaining an anti-lynching and anti-slavery agenda.

Page, like most southern pastoralist authors of the period, has faded in the public consciousness and barring a few fly-by-night presses, his work is out of print. His novels and essays were heralded widely in their time and were tremendously popular among both mainstream audiences and the literary elite. Yet the era and ethos they spoke to quickly passed out of favor in the early part of the twentieth century; without even a drastic pushback against the work, any memory of or scholarly interest in Page’s work simply dissolved after the 1950s. It is not difficult in and of itself to understand Page’s work, either, and it does not court complex literary analysis, which probably also explains its failure to have lasting significance. To find a good summation of Page’s life and impact as an author, one must go back to Theodore L. Gross’s “Thomas Nelson Page: Creator of a Virginia Classic” (1966). Though the article’s title makes it sound laudatory, in Gross’s estimation, Page’s Virginia “classic” was essentially founded on a pernicious, racist lie about the sanguine conditions of the “Old South.”

Given that Page’s work is so invested in Southern antebellum mythos, one might wonder what Page’s work had to do with the high literary pursuits of the realists. As Gross illustrates,
Page received such acclaim and trust from his readership because of his masterful use of literary voice. In “Marse Chan” (1884), a story about a Civil War Southern romance, Page hands the narrative over to Sam, an African-American re-telling the story in 1972 amidst the supposed “ravages” of Reconstruction in the South. Page’s indulgence in stereotypical Negro dialect combined with his backward looking perspective puts the reader in the position of passive reception — ostensibly, someone with an authoritative, authentic voice is put in charge of depicting with seriousness, truth, and fairness what life was like before the war to a white readership. Page juxtaposes mythic white Southern heroism with an artistic depiction of contemporary racial discontents, “welding realistic and romantic elements” (Gross 342–44). The stories are skillfully propagandistic in their social realism — by putting mythic antebellum Southern white valor into a contemporary narrative frame, it made Page’s stories seem like first-hand historical accounts. Throughout, Page’s stories decry the ravages of the Civil War and Reconstruction as barriers to the reconciliation of the Union. In other words, Page does not position himself as a Confederate, but as a Southerner, a New Anglo Saxon; with that comes an entirely rebranded set of ideologies about racial relations that retain and draw on the social system of slavery without advocating for a literal return to it.

His novel Red Rock (1898) spoke most directly to the Southern resentment of Reconstruction and their anxieties about racial progressivism. Calling it something like a cross between the sentimental and gothic novel — though not received that way by Southern audiences — Christopher Bundrick describes Red Rock as Page’s attempt at depicting the Old South as an “anti-modern paradise” where “time and progress are the real villains” (71–73). It is also Page’s first attempt at the trope of the black rapist, emboldened by Northern progressivism, in the character of the black politician, Doctor Moses. It is no coincidence that Moses is a politician, as
the characterization is meant to imply that black desire for enfranchisement and political power is part and parcel with a desire to rape white women. Not only that, but as Sabine Sielke notes, Page attempts political irony by making the target of Moses’s sexual assault Ruth Welch, a northern abolitionist. When she is saved by Steve Allen, a heroic KKK member, Ruth suddenly becomes a Southern sympathizer (40–41). The scene of Moses’s attempted rape of Ruth — taking place at the dead end of a dirt road — would be echoed in the climax of Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars*, where Rena, triangulated on a dirt road by two overzealous courtiers, one white and one black, flees into the woods before being saved in true chivalric fashion by Frank Fowler. Though Chesnutt’s novel was drafted over the course of ten years, one might wonder if Chesnutt was attempting to write a kind of “anti-Red Rock” in the conclusion of *Cedars*. The letters of Chesnutt and others tend to show that they were highly conversant in and with the literature of writers like Page and Thomas Dixon Jr., and though they despised the subject matter and opinions expressed, they nevertheless felt forced to contend with them as literary figures. The widely circulated mythology in work like Page’s was so convincing among white audiences that African American authors could not simply ignore it, which explains some of the intense ambivalence in work like Chesnutt’s over how far to go in depicting and advocating for free black desire.

Page’s *Red Rock*, as romantic as it was, was undoubtedly received by his primary audience as social realism, a commitment to “the truth.” Upon reading the manuscript of *Red Rock*, Robert Bridges, an editor at Scribner’s, wrote to Page in September of 1897 that he found the novel “first rate” primarily because of how “real” the characters were. Realist author George Washington Cable — who also served as a literary mentor to Chesnutt — would echo these compliments in a letter to Page only two months later. Writing to Page in April of 1902, R.Q.
Mallard, editor of the magazine *Southern Presbyterian*, said of Page’s work, "Your characters, whether Master, Mistress, or Slave, Lover, Horse or Dog, were so vividly pictured and your reading so sympathetic and natural, that I altogether forgot that I was listening to fiction, and after a night's sleep, the impression of reality still lingers!" L.A. Magruder, an attorney, wrote to Page in February of 1898 to praise Page’s “Run to Seed,” writing "I can not think that the hero of 'Run to Seed' was an imaginary character, or that 'Polly' never existed.” Most strikingly, William H. Fleming, a congressman from Georgia, told Page that he thought of *Red Rock* as the “Anti-*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.” In 1901, Houghton, Mifflin & Co. would send Page a copy of Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) — based in part on the Wilmington Riots of 1898 — calling it the “new *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.” That they thought Page would be receptive to Chesnutt’s work — Page was friends with A.M. Wadell, the mayor of Wilmington at the time of the riots — shows that acceptable discourse on “Negro interests” at that time could range all the way from antiracist activism to outright racism while remaining in the same ballpark. In addition, there seemed to be a great deal of instability in notions of literary genre.

In looking at the encomiums to Page in the years around *Red Rock*, one notices an unsurprising parallel — most of the people who compliment Page on his realism also compliment him on his racial commentary. Bridges told Page that he had written the novel of the epoch of Reconstruction — the one which would most reflect historical record — in *Red Rock*. W.S. Fly, an associate justice from Texas, said of *Red Rock* that it was the first “true history” of the Old South, and that it would be particularly poignant amidst the beginnings of the Spanish-American War as a demonstration of gallant American heroism and Anglo-Saxon white supremacy. And in April of 1902, the poet James L. Ford wrote to Page suggesting that a play should be written in direct rivalry to the dramatic adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that would
“honestly” depict the relationship between master and slave after the Civil War. For all these admirers, the only criterion for a “realistic” work was that it conform to their perspective on history, one that affirmed the idea that the Old South was undervalued and that the Anglo Saxon was under threat.

Perhaps because of this response to Red Rock, Page began, in late 1903, to request penitentiary and land-ownership statistics in preparation to write The Negro: The Southerner’s Problem (1904). As he lectured drafts of the essay during its writing, Page began to receive diverse opinions on the matter of rape and lynching. Robert Stein, an employee with the Department of the Interior, argued to Page that in order to ensure the security of white women in the United States, all African-Americans would have to be deported, because their presence in the United States is “unnatural.” It is in Stein’s viewpoint, echoed in much separatist white supremacist rhetoric on interraciality, that we see continued reference to the question of national belonging as a question of nature and the natural.

One of the more surprising exchanges in Page’s correspondence is a series of letters written in February of 1904 between Page and Emmett J. Scott, the right-hand man to Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee and, later, an adviser in the Woodrow Wilson administration. Scott begins by assuring Page that African Americans do not live in an echo chamber, that they pay close attention to what is written about them by white authors, especially Page, who “challenge” their attention frequently. Scott argues to Page, in polite terms, that the perception among whites that African American leaders do not full-throatedly condemn rape is ill-founded: “I call your attention herewith to Dr. Washington’s statement at the Afro-American Council last July upon the subject of rape. No statement in his whole address was more warmly and sympathetically cheered than his condemnation and his expression of abhorrence of the fearful crime mentioned.”
Page responded by reiterating that he did not believe “that the few negroes who commit the crime which has brought about the spread of lynching are the terror of the South, but that the absence of a stern, repressive public opinion among the negroes against this crime makes the condition of affairs at the South what it is.” Equivocating, Page tells Scott that rape among African-Americans is both rare (“a few negroes”) and endemic (“absence of a stern, repressive public opinion among the negroes”). It is precisely through this kind of realist rhetoric — which trades in the air of reasonableness and logical white temperate performativity — that Page is able to comport himself to Scott as a good-faith interlocutor while saying such outlandish things.

Page goes on to tell Scott that he believes black leaders spend far too much time decrying the crime of lynching when the best way to stop lynching is to firmly condemn rape. Again, Page claims he is not saying blacks are inherently rapacious, but yet he lays the blame for lynching at their feet.

The seriousness with which Page’s views were taken is no less apparent when one observes that most of the people who write in praise of his work — A.M Wadell, William H. Fleming, Robert Stein, Henry C. King — are either politicians or people of influence. The influence of Page’s work went all the way to the top. On December 23rd, 1904, President Theordore Roosevelt, upon receipt of The Negro: The Southerner’s Problem, wrote to Page,

> These letters are extremely interesting, and I thank you for having let me see them. Most of your book I have already read. I shall read the remainder with great pleasure. Just one word. Don’t call me “Excellency” again. It makes me feel as if I was a fifth rate German potentate. I have no title excepting “The President.”

*The Negro: The Southerner’s Problem*’s apparent reasonableness and sympathetic angle about race relations stems primarily from its anti-lynching stance and Page’s willingness to read and address both W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, among other black writers. The book is otherwise host to a myriad of ugly and ridiculous assertions about “the nature” of the
Negro, all of which are conveyed with Page’s trademark cool detachment, the same prose style that accompanies his prized novels. He sweeps aside “the experiment of Negro suffrage” as “a failure” (10); characterizes the Negro domestic scene as irreparably broken (21); calls Negro politics “the securing of power and the down-treading of the Southern whites” (43); and essentially argues that the doctrine of racial equality, by way of emboldening the Negro, has led directly to his licentiousness and rude behavior and, thus, to his own lynching (54–55). All of this is done observationally and without any impassioned or melodramatic racism; the white supremacism is deployed matter-of-factly as a description of conditions recognizable to any resentful Southern white seeking confirmation of his biases. As the long-form essay progresses, Page deploys population and economic statistics to crassly argue that the material condition of Negroes was better under slavery (77). But on what, other than cherry-picked statistics, does he predicate this claim?

This proposition is borne out also by the testimony of the great majority of the Southern whites who live in constant touch with the blacks; who have known them in every relation of life in a way that no one who has not lived among them can know them. Universally, they will tell you that while the old-time Negroes were industrious, saving, and, when not misled, well-behaved, kindly, respectful, and self-respecting, and while the remnant of them who remain still retain generally these characteristics, the “new issue,” for the most part, are lazy, thriftless, intemperate, insolent, dishonest, and without the most rudimentary elements of morality.

They unite further in the opinion that education such as they receive in the public schools, so far from appearing to uplift them, appears to be without any appreciable beneficial effect upon their morals or their standing as citizens. But more than this; universally, they report a general depravity and retrogression of the Negroes at large in sections in which they are left to themselves, closely resembling a reversion to barbarism. (80)

There are a number of striking things about this passage. First of all, Page uses the phrase “new issue” to describe early Du Boisian Negro liberal arts education and existentialism. This bifurcation of “New Negro” from “Old Negro” suggests a language that would not become fully popularized until the 1925 publication of the Survey Graphic, edited by Alain Locke and entitled
“Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro.” Yet the distinction already existed in the minds of many Post-Reconstruction thinkers, perhaps first and foremost in the mind of white supremacists, who saw such novel experiments as Negro education, suffrage, politics, and marriage changing the general character of the Negro. Moreover, such words as “intemperate,” “morality,” “depravity,” and “barbarism” — in the same way that words like “degenerate” and “bachelor” acted as code words for homosexuality — imply Page’s belief that Negro education, part and parcel of the equal rights doctrine, begets sexual and domestic impropriety. And how do we know this to be true? Because the Southern white man, who Page claims to have maintained an intimate, integrated relationship with the Southern Negro, has observed it; their intimacy, regardless of its antagonistic nature, lends the Southern white authority over and insight into the Negro’s sexual impropriety — nevermind the Negro testimony that could be and was garnered from the very same antagonistic intimacy, a testimony exemplified in the writing of many African Americans of the period.

By now, the tricks and trades of Page’s The Negro shouldn’t look altogether unfamiliar to anyone who has lived through late-twentieth century Lee Atwater-esque “Southern Strategy” politics. Page’s strategic deference to unimpassioned reason — or, to put it in Atwater’s words, his resistance to saying “Nigger, nigger, nigger” — dissimulates his white supremacist ideology, although only just barely and with the thinnest of veneers. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière would refer to this dissimulation as a kind of “distribution of the sensible,” a “system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.” Page’s aesthetics, like most aesthetics, are a “system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience,” privileging visibility (12-13). The icing on the cake, perhaps the thing that
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reminds us over all else how similar dominant racial discourse of 1905 is to dominant racial
discourse of the present, is what some might describe as his “my-best-friend-is-black” defense of
his most specious claims:

That this immorality exists is the testimony not only of the whites, but also of
members of the race who have, with an open mind, made a study of the conditions
of their people. Perhaps the most remarkable study of the Negro which has
appeared is the book entitled, ‘The American Negro,’ by William Hannibal
Thomas of Massachusetts. No inconsiderable part of its value is owing to the fact
that the author, a free colored man, has had both the power to observe closely and
the courage to record boldly the results of his observations. In the chapter on
‘Moral Lapses,’ the authors says: ‘All who know the Negro recognize, however,
that the chief and overpowering element in his make-up is an imperious sexual
impulse which, aroused at the slightest incentive, sweeps aside all restraints in the
pursuit of physical gratification. We may say now that this element of Negro
character constitutes the main incitement to degeneracy of the race and is the
chief hindrance to its social uplifting’ …. His chapter on this subject will be, to
those unfamiliar with it, a terrible exposure of the depravity of the Negroes in
their social life, but it is only what those who have studied the subject know. (82-
83)

The book Page references, William Hannibal Thomas’ *The American Negro* (1901), was indeed
an exciting text in its time. It was also a widely discredited fabrication written by Thomas
explicitly to make money, a fact well-known among the black literati of the time, and further
explored and confirmed in John David Smith’s book *Black Judas* (2000). But, in keeping with
Page’s adherence to literary realism, the truth of the matter is immaterial; the impression of what
is widely held to be observed of the Negro is all that matters. It is not that Thomas’ book has
been revelatory to Page because it issues from a black author; rather, it is revelatory because it
confirms for Page what he already knows.

The chapter of Page’s *The Negro* entitled “The Lynching of Negroes — Its Cause and Its
Prevention,” is the pièce de résistance of the book’s circular logic. Arguing against the practice
of lynching, Page starts not with weighing the practice itself, but with the accountability of
Negroes: “In dealing with this question the writer wishes to be understood as speaking not of the
respectable and law-abiding element among the Negroes, who unfortunately are so often
confounded with the body of the race from which come most of the malefactors. To say that
Negroes furnish most of the ravishers is not to say that all Negroes are rapists.” This less-than-
comforting disclaimer out of the way, Page continues, “The crime of lynching in this country has
…. been caused by the boldness with which crime was committed and the inefficiency of the law
in dealing with lawbreakers through its regular forms” (86–87). As Page explains throughout the
chapter, one of his most deeply-held principles is that a society functions when its citizens show
respect for the process of law, but he believes that the new doctrine of racial equality has
initiated in Negroes a disrespect of basic morality, thus catalyzing a white vigilantism that is
equally disrespectful of due process under the law. In other words, lynchings are a violation of
our social contract, but no more so than when Negroes ravish white women. As Page would have
us believe, the antebellum era was a beautiful, rape-free, post-racial utopia. As for the widely
documented rape of black women by white men, Page is silent. With continuous reference to
Thomas’ book, Page continues to explain the root cause of a supposedly endemic black rape
culture:

In the first place, the Negro does not generally believe in the virtue of women. It
is beyond his experience. He does not generally believe in the existence of actual
assault. It is beyond his comprehension. In the next place, his passion, always his
controlling force, is now, since the new teaching, for the white women …. The
intelligent Negro may understand what social equality truly means, but to the
ignorant and brutal young Negro, it signifies but one thing: the opportunity to
enjoy, equally with white men, the privilege of cohabitating with white women.
This the whites of the South understand. (112–13)

Most of what appears above must again prove familiar to many of us as laying the onus on black
people to prevent the violence visited upon their own bodies. It has its cake and eats it too,
decrying the lawlessness of lynching and then rationalizing the fervent passions of those who
commit the grisly deed as the valorous defense of white women against black rapists. And, to
reiterate, Page frames this necessary critique as the antidote to “A somewhat inaccurate idea [of the] Southern plantation life, due, possibly, to the highly colored pictures that have been painted of it in books of a romantic order, in which the romance much outweighed the ha’penny-worth of verisimilitude” (168). The horrors of plantation culture? Nothing more than an affectation of sentimental and romantic literary traditions, and certainly no longer in vogue.

It may seem that this long exegesis of Page’s writing is less than necessary, as the views of white supremacists are plentiful and unremarkable. I have undertaken this deeper look into Page, however, for three reasons: his appeal to authority through observational intimacy; his aesthetic alignment with realism; and, most of all, his diverse influences and influences on contemporary race theorists, both black and white. As illustrated above, Page’s book was important and widely read and his suppositions about the essential character of the Negro, though wrong, did not appear to be ludicrous to most. Certainly, the black literati found his assumptions distasteful, yet they met William Hannibal Thomas’ book — largely the basis for the misinformation in *The Negro* — with a much greater outcry than they did Page’s. They did not seek to bury or discredit Page’s work because they could not — Page was white, and besides that, his work had all the appearances of eminent reasonableness, backed up by Page’s reputation as a master literateur; was it his fault that he was operating under misapprehensions gleaned from Thomas’ book? Instead of rejecting him outright, the black literati of the time — Charles W. Chesnutt, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Frances E.W. Harper, Pauline E. Hopkins, Sutton E. Griggs, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, among others — would be forced to contend with Page and his peers, counteridentifying and disidentifying with this work, absorbing its influence, transposing its affect, dealing with its ideas, and producing something that would defamiliarize
its theorization of black sexual deviance, all whilst occupying the role that Page would refer to as “the law-abiding Negro.”

In the decades before the inauguration of the Harlem Renaissance and its unabashed, aggressive, and sometimes libertine attitude toward black sexuality, there existed a well-documented discourse heavily invested in the power of black sexuality and especially black womanhood. Meeting the mainstream iterations of this discourse was a disidentificatory literary subculture in which acts of sexual transgression — miscegenation and amalgamation chief among them — were treated as social pathologies, but also as radical acts of spirited black autonomy, proof of the sophisticated and complex inner life of Negroes. Thus, I argue in what follows that the late-nineteenth century literature of black uplift, in the face of a dominant culture that overbearingly disseminated the logic that black people were animalistic sexual transgressors, enacted a pre-emergent queer-of-color critique that learned to value sexual transgression as an antiracist strategy. By accounting for mixed-race experience, miscegenation, antinormative gender performance, and other high-stakes forms of sexual transgression, I look to turn our attention toward a new nodal point in the genealogy of queer-of-color discourse, in turn suggesting that doing so will promote more expansive notions of human intimacy and a better understanding of how queerness developed as an emergent and antiracist science of being in nineteenth-century America.
Chapter 2: Namelessness and Consecration: Charles W. Chesnutt and the Queer Pathology Novel

Passing is often not about bold-faced opposition to a dominant paradigm or a wholesale selling out to that form. Like disidentification itself, passing can be a third modality where a dominant structure is co-opted, worked on and against. The subject who passes can be simultaneously identifying with and rejecting a dominant form. (108)

—José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications (1999)

From Amorphous Truth to Bitter Reality: Chesnutt and Realist Craft

On January 23rd, 1902, W. Pratt Annis, an English teacher at Cold High School in Louisville, Kentucky wrote the following to Charles W. Chesnutt:

In your gem, The House Behind the Cedars, I saw many scenes of my own life. I am an ‘outcast’ — the son of an anglo-saxon father and a mother who also boasts the same parentage. My grandmother (the dark one) was half Blackfoot Indian, anglo saxon and negro. You see, Sir, I am what might be termed ‘hash’ or ‘mixed meat’ as I told them at the Registration office one election day. Slavery, therefore, has left its ‘ban’ on me. I often feel so discouraged. ‘It is too hard to live without a name.’ (your words) But your books have inspired me. [I work] hard for my wife, children (four), mother, and race ….

Marrow of Tradition is of today. It is grand. The characters true — you see and feel each one. It is not romance — it is reality. We have so few “Josh Greens,” but so many “Jerry’s.” For every one negro, I sometimes think we have ten niggers …. I want every negro to read these books. The whites are doing so, and good is resulting. Uncle Tom’s Cabin did its work; Fred Douglass filled his mission. Booker T. is solving the so called ‘problem’ …. Chas H. [sic] Chesnutt must not be forgotten. My parting with you, sir, is that your work may be as ‘bread cast upon the water,’ to return ere long with much profit to you personally, and great benefit to all.

With best wishes for yourself and family,
I remain your obedient servant,
W. Pratt Annis
Teacher of Eng. Literature
Cold High School

25 Annis is referring to two characters in Chesnutt’s novel The Marrow of Tradition. Josh Green is a black revolutionary who leads a valorous though suicidal charge against rampaging white supremacists; Jerry is an archetypal conciliatory “house negro” who dies waving a white flag of surrender.
In my research of Charles W. Chesnutt’s correspondence, I have found that the above fan letter is not uncommon, and may be generally representative of a kind of structure of feeling surrounding Chesnutt’s work. Annis’ scattered observations aptly sum up the kind of milieu into which Chesnutt’s work emerged. Chesnutt was for his audiences a moderate writer with the temperament and ability to communicate with both white and black audiences; a mixed-race writer who captured the distinct feeling of being ‘without a name’; a writer in the grand tradition of literary realism, one who had his finger on the pulse of the present and the truth, one who writes in the modality of reality rather than romance; and finally, Chesnutt is perceived as a writer whose literary work has a mission, whose work is work in the struggle for racial equality. Reading Annis’ words, among others’, one is given the sense that Chesnutt meant a great deal to a great many, yet in his time, his work did not sell well and did not garner any kind of mainstream popularity. Though he is now considered to be one of the very first African-American “high literary” writers, Chesnutt’s work also occasionally found him at odds with black leadership’s image of the “respectable negro” and out of step with its objectives. Further, his agitations for racial equality would likely have lumped him in with the black agitators that Thomas Nelson Page so feverishly denounced, the lot whose insistence on black education and equality read, for white supremacists, as a desire to cohabitate with white women. If the above assessment of Chesnutt’s place on the political spectrum sounds confusing, that’s because it is; Chesnutt was both of the literary and outside of it; communicative with black leadership and at odds with them; influential and ignored; black and white. Further, Chesnutt, much like Page, affected a kind of eminent reasonableness about his work through an embrace of craft. Chesnutt’s literary sensibilities have made him — as many who have taken a survey course in American literature might already know — an eminent figure in the development of literary
realism. It is his devotion to craft, above all else, that renders his documentation of the condition of black people in America efficacious; it bespeaks his objectivity. As Page’s work was for R.Q. Mallard, so was Chesnutt’s work for Annis — reality in print. It can therefore be said that Chesnutt’s work was not only meant to challenge Page on the subject of black desire, but to challenge Page at his own game — the faithful representation of reality. It is in such a way that the queer emerges on the scene of black desire as that which goes unchecked and unmitigated, as the unfaithfulness of the desiring black body to the objectives of a dominant formation. Throughout Chesnutt’s writing, and especially in his 1900 novel The House Behind the Cedars, we are shown ways in which the desiring black body — particularly those black bodies emblematizing amalgamation — were triangulated and hailed by forces intending to channel it. Chesnutt’s writing, in short, is about how the overconditioning of sexual desire by political forces led ultimately to the dissipation of black life. Yet, as this chapter argues, Chesnutt was hardly heterotopian with regard to the proliferation of diverse sexualities, and in his work we often find a prescriptive attitude about how sexual desire must be channeled in order for black

26 It is worth noting that not everyone agrees with this assessment; indeed, the definition of “realism” as it pertains to the work of Charles Chesnutt and Thomas Nelson Page is important to much of the work I do in this dissertation. Joseph R. McElrath Jr., who has written extensively on Chesnutt’s correspondence, characterizes Chesnutt’s work as romantic literature engaged with questions of “moral realism” and social critique. In fact, he claims that Chesnutt’s early letters about the development of The House Behind the Cedars — some of which I discuss below — are evidence that he spurned literary realism after failing to get it published (92). His reading of The House Behind the Cedars as a didactic political novel dabbling in elements of realism is fairly convincing. But, for me, the question of defining “literary realism” has much less to do with genre and tropes than with audience anticipation and context — a realist text’s relationship to “facts” or “the truth” is, as we see in Page’s work, often inverse; further, a realist text’s success hinges upon it unveiling the truth lying beneath the “facts,” what can readily be observed, often through a deliberate focus on minor, gestural details. I think all of Chesnutt’s work, despite its melodramatic and grandly symbolic posturing, accomplishes this — The House Behind the Cedars, in particular, begs close reading.

life to sustain itself. Like Du Bois, he meant to channel black desire along right lines, to theorize an ecstatic black intimacy rather than suppress it altogether.

Before delving into this chapter’s central analysis of Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars*, I would like to lend a little context to the novel — namely, how Chesnutt came to writing, his literary methodology, his political relationships, and the reception of his work. I will also discuss an important scene from Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*.

Charles W. Chesnutt was born in and, outside of a decade or so in North Carolina, lived most of his life in Cleveland, Ohio, a scene somewhat detached from the racial hot-bed of the South and the emerging black urbanism of the Northeast. He was mixed-race and could pass for white, but chose not to. He spent most of his adult life working in law, primarily as a court stenographer. Chesnutt began writing fiction seriously in the late 1880s, under the encouragement of his literary mentor, George Washington Cable. In early correspondence between the two, Cable gave Chesnutt a great deal of advice on craft, instilling in Chesnutt an appreciation for the values of literary realism. On May 30th, 1889, Cable told Chesnutt, “[D]on’t found fiction on fact. Go by on the other side. Found your fiction on truth, but keep away from actual occurrences of historical value. ‘Touch not, taste not, handle not.’” In doing so, Cable described for Chesnutt the value of literary realism: that it uses a gestural, detailed representation of fact, almost a slight rearticulation of reality, to get at the elusive thing called truth. The beauty of realism, under this definition, is that it knows itself to be artifice, but, in a near postmodern way, believes life itself to be lived under various misconceptions of or blindness to “the truth.” Literary realism is work that appears real yet tells us the truth better than our own limited life experience does.
The House Behind the Cedars began its life early in Chesnutt’s writing career as a long short story entitled “Rena Walden,” but did not get published for over ten years. In its early draft stages, Cable found the novel ungenerous toward its audiences and Chesnutt to be a somewhat judgmental author:

You must remember that you are writing for white Americans and English — the most cultivated people of the world’s most cultivated age. There is no danger that you will be supercilious or flippant. The danger is that in regarding these things with proper tenderness and fraternal charity, you will assert and ask too much of these qualities. Again, you must remember in your description of persons that the greatest element of strength is to yield all the ground you honestly can to the possible prejudices of your reader. Make your comparisons upon this standard and do this in a spirit of large and generous good nature.

Publishers thought the same. Cable passed “Rena Walden” along to R.W. Gilder, editor of the magazine Century, who rejected it:

I am extremely sorry not to find it feasible. Its subject is new, and the point of view. But somehow it seems to me amorphous — not so much in construction as in sentiment. I could talk to you about it more clearly than I can write. There is either a lack of humor in the author, or a brutality in the characters, lack of mellowness, lack of spontaneous imaginative life in the people, lack of outlook — I don’t know what — that makes them, as here depicted, uninteresting. I think it is the writer’s fault, rather than the people’s. The result seems to me a crude story, not a thoroughly human one.

While we do not have access to these early drafts of The House Behind the Cedars, Gilder and Cable make them sound naturalistic and preachy, perhaps a dull political tract rather than a treatment of humanity. It would seem that Chesnutt’s ambition was for an interracial literary audience and that he would not send a presumably lesser version of the work — perhaps a traditional tragic mulatto protest story steeped in the language of black pathology — along to an African-American periodical; Cable agreed: “I hope you will not push into print anything that is unworthy of your pen. We mustn’t let any temptation lower our standards. Let us not determine to please the best critical judgments we can find and not print till we do. I hope you will lay ‘Rena Walden’ carefully aside for the present and start anew.”
Nevertheless, Chesnutt did not react well to Gilder’s criticism. In a letter to Cable, he insisted that the fault lay not so much in the writing, but in his “amorphous” way of looking at things:

There are a great many intelligent people who consider the class to with Rena and Wain belong as unnatural. I had a gentleman with whom I had just dined, for whom I had been doing some difficult work, a man of high standing in his profession … whom I had heard declaim enthusiastically about the doctrine of human equality which characterized our institutions — I say this gentleman remarked to me in substance that he considered a mulatto an insult to nature, a kind of monster that he looked upon with infinite distaste, not to say disgust; that a black Negro he looked upon with some respect, but any laws which permitted the intermarriage of the two races, or tended in any way to bring the two races nearer together, were p scourious and in the highest degree reprehensible.

Chesnutt understood his subject matter to be unique, interesting, and contentious, thus holding the potential to be literary; however, his execution, in order to earn him the respect of the mainstream literati, would have to be more humanistic, would have to do what later Harlem Renaissance novels are often thought to do: depict the inner complexity of the desiring black subject. It was perhaps for this reason that Chesnutt made love and desire central to his thematics. A reader’s sympathy for Rena and Wain would emerge not out of anger at the injustice of the law, nor the inequality of the races, but out of Chesnutt’s ability to make a reader feel the power of their desires and the complexity of their characters, to defamiliarize miscegenation as an unavoidable accident of being rather than an end unto itself. As Chesnutt would put it to the publisher Walter H. Page in 1898, “I have tried to draw, in Rena’s character, a fine character forced inevitably into a false position. The heroine, instead of being the interesting lay figure of the story as you read it before, I have tried to make a living, loving, suffering, human woman.” [I.M.] One of Chesnutt’s last letters to Cable came five years after Gilder’s rejection of “Rena Walden.” In it, he writes,

I believe I am much better qualified to write now than I was five years since; and
I have not used up a fund of interesting material which I might have expended on ‘prentice work. Furthermore, I have saved from ten to fifteen thousand dollars since I was with you at Northampton, and have the feeling of security which even a little of this world’s goods gives, so that I can now devote more time, if necessary, some money to securing a place in literature.

Chesnutt’s place in literature began to be established near the end of the 1890s with the publication of a number of his short stories in literary magazines. These stories would later come to be collected and published by Houghton, Mifflin, and Co. in the form of *The Conjure Woman and Other Tales* (1899) and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color-Line* (1899). Both collections sold well, particularly the less contentious “local color” subject matter of *The Conjure Woman*, which was reissued in 1929. The titular tale of *The Wife of His Youth* quickly became known as Chesnutt’s signature story. In it, a light-skinned mixed-race man belonging to a club called “The Blue Veins” (in order to be a part of this club, one’s skin must be light enough to show veins) meets an elderly black woman who has been searching for the husband she married before the abolition of slavery. Little does she know that this man is her husband. The man asks the society hypothetical questions about whether or not a man in such a position should acknowledge the woman and they agree he should. The man takes the elderly woman out from behind a door and acknowledges her as “the wife of his youth.” This story is about the twisted and fractured romances of a light-skinned biased postbellum world, but is also an allegory for Chesnutt’s stance on respectability politics and the political representation of black Americans. Although the light-skinned man is in the position of acknowledging and thereby upwardly absorbing the dark-skinned woman, giving him privilege, Chesnutt simultaneously argues that the black rights movements of the twentieth-century cannot leave behind their memory of

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slavery or their mothers and cannot hope for a kind of upward absorption or amalgamation to be their sole emancipation. Much like Tavia Nyong’o in *The Amalgamation Waltz* (2009), the Chesnutt of “The Wife of His Youth” is interested in amalgamation not as an absorption, but as the potential for the ecstatic illustration of difference. He is, for all intents and purposes, interested in race and racial difference as theories of history.

Chesnutt’s first two novels, *The House Behind the Cedars* and *The Marrow of Tradition*, were published in 1900 and 1901, respectively. *The Marrow of Tradition*, a loose fictionalization of the 1898 Wilmington Riots, was a more contentious and overtly political effort than Cedars and Chesnutt’s short stories. The short stories often revolved around “curious incidents” in the lives of black people; *The Marrow of Tradition* was unmistakably meant to expose and shame Southern white supremacism, and draw attention to the growing problem of black disenfranchisement and disarmament. In some sense, the novel seems out of joint with Chesnutt’s progression as a writer. In his stories, he had become enamored with micro-analysis of human desire and the life of the individual. *Marrow of Tradition* might be more rightly characterized as a protest novel in the vein of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the sentimental tradition. Yet it also reflects Chesnutt’s growing interest in the tenability of interracial sympathy and desire as “the thin veneer,” the promise that holds civilization together. The episodic novel, while ambitiously cataloging a series of events in a fictional Southern town called Wellington, is bookended by keystone events occurring between two families, The Millers and the Carterets.

In an early scene in the book, the Carterets’ youngest child is choking on a piece of a rattle. In order to remove it, a surgery must be performed. Upon the recommendation of Dr. Price, the family sends for a white specialist from Philadelphia named Dr. Burns, accompanied by a black surgeon named Dr. Miller. Major Carteret, upon learning Miller is black, refuses to let
him operate on the child with Burns. Miller, arriving late, is told that Dr. Burns operated on the child alone because of the severity of the matter, but he soon learns the truth from a servant before leaving. The novel comments upon this: “Truth, it has been said, is mighty, and must prevail; but it sometimes leaves a bad taste in the mouth” (265; I.M.).

The rest of the novel, as mentioned above, is episodic. Among other things, an older black servant named Sandy is framed for the murder of a white woman and narrowly escapes being lynched. The tensions put in play by the novel culminate in a riot instigated by the white citizens’ efforts to confiscate arms from black men and suppress Negro enfranchisement; this effort is led by Major Carteret, who declares this effort to be pacificatory: “I should not advocate murder …. We are animated by high and holy principles. We wish to right a wrong, to remedy an abuse, to save our state from anarchy and our race from humiliation. I don’t object to frightening the negroes, but I am opposed to unnecessary bloodshed” (390). This sort of rhetoric is exactly what interests Chesnutt — the terrible consequences of ostensibly reasonable, sensible language.29

As soon as the disarmament effort starts, it descends into armed violence. Any black citizen who resists is unceremoniously executed and the violence grows increasingly chaotic.

29 Stephen P. Knadler says as much in his fantastic essay, “Untragic Mulatto: Charles Chesnutt and the Discourse of Whiteness” (1996). Essentially pinning *The Marrow of Tradition* as a whiteness studies text — a text interested in making the rhetorics and constructions of whiteness visible — Knadler argues (as do I) that Chesnutt partook of a wide array of literary influences, representing back to white audiences defamiliarized depictions of their own racial performatives. This is why he picks up on the generic tropes of local color, chivalric romance, and Southern pastoralism — not to be assimilationist or accommodationist, but to draw attention to the damaging, invisible centrality of whiteness in dominant culture. While Knadler reaches many of the same conclusions that I do about Chesnutt’s relationships to dominant literary culture, I believe my work helpfully augments what Knadler is doing under the Muñozian concept of disidentification; I also suggest that Chesnutt is not only skewering constructs of whiteness, but patrician and patriarchal political structures (both black and white) and their triangulations of women and the sexually transgressive as capital. See also Matthew Wilson’s *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles Chesnutt* (2004)
from there. Dr. Miller, upon learning of the unrest while away, rushes to the town only to get there too late to save his son, who is killed by a stray bullet. In a twist of tragic irony, Major Carteret’s son once again begins to choke, this time due to croup, and needs an emergency tracheotomy to survive. Dr. Miller happens to be the only person in the town who can perform such an operation, so, due to the case’s “imperative necessity” (439), Major Carteret swallows his pride and asks Miller to perform the operation. At first, Miller refuses, laying the blame for his child’s death upon Carteret. In that moment, Major Carteret has an epiphany: “[F]or a moment, the veil of race prejudice was rent in twain, and he saw things as they were, in their correct proportions and relations, — saw clearly and convincingly that he had no standing here, in the presence of death, in the home of this stricken family. Miller’s refusal to go with him was pure, elemental justice” (441).

Major Carteret leaves, but before long, the Millers are visited again; this time Dr. Miller opens the door to find Mrs. Carteret, a woman “so near the image of his own wife, whom he had just left, that for a moment he was well-nigh startled. A little older, perhaps, a little fairer of complexion, but with the same form, the same features, marked by the same wild grief” (443). Mrs. Carteret implores Dr. Miller to come save her child, but he again refuses: “’My people lie dead upon the streets, at the hands of yours. The work of my life is in ashes, — and, yonder, stretched out in death, lies my own child! God! woman, you ask too much of human nature! Love, duty, sorrow, justice, call me here. I cannot go!’” (444). In this moment, Chesnutt depicts Miller as despondent and uninterested in the perpetuation of life. Racial inequality and racial antagonism begets mutual death for children of both races. Mrs. Carteret falls to her knees in front of him — “at the feet of a negro” the text reminds us — and begs to God for mercy. Amidst this, we are reminded of another reason that Miller will not accede to her request — Mrs.
Carteret, is of course, the estranged sister of Janet Miller, Dr. Miller’s wife, and Mrs. Carteret has never acknowledged this. Miller tells Mrs. Carteret that she must ask her own sister for Dr. Miller to come save the child, and only then will Miller heed the request. In other words, Dr. Miller plainly states that before any healing can occur between closely-linked races, just as it is between blood relatives, their deeply rooted kinship must be acknowledged. Janet, at first, is unreceptive to Mrs. Carteret’s reasoning, even that she is obligated to help the child as his aunt. Mrs. Carteret, desperate, finally tells her sister that their intermarrying parents were legally married and that she is therefore entitled to half their father’s estate. Once again, this does not move Janet:

“My mother died of want, and I was brought up by the hand of charity. Now, when I have married a man who can supply my needs, you offer me back the money which you and your friends have robbed me of! You imagined that the shame of being a negro swallowed up every other ignominy, — and in your eyes I am a negro, though I am your sister, and you are white, and people have taken me for you on the streets, — and you, therefore, left me nameless all my life! Now, when an honest man has given me a name of which I can be proud, you offer me the one of which you robbed me, and of which I can make no use. For twenty-five years I, poor, despicable fool, would have kissed your feet for a word, a nod, a smile. Now, when this tardy recognition comes, for which I have waited so long, it is tainted with fraud and crime and blood, and I must pay for it with my child’s life!” (447; I.M.)

Janet has longed for an acknowledged kinship between her and her sister that would transcend their races. Indeed, their parentage dictates that their racialization, decided merely by Mrs. Carteret’s ability to pass due to a lighter complexion, is socialized and arbitrary, that though they remain sisters, one is fairly simply black and the other fairly simply white. Thus, the dramatic conclusion of this novel centers not only on the loss of the Millers’ child — a quite literal symbol of the dissipation of black life under the regime of white supremacy — but on the loss of Janet’s desire to love her sister, a sacrifice of kinship and familial love made on the altar of racial solidarity and its sense of justice. One perceives the core message of the novel emerging
here: racial solidarity, even an insistence on racial homogeneity and desire for the same race, is the road to the death of the next generation of black and white children. Much the way Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* argued that the degradation of the black family — their hurt at losing one another to the system of slavery — was the central argument for slavery’s immorality, *The Marrow of Tradition* argues that the evil of white supremacy is in how it channels desire so strongly toward racial solidarity as to destroy even consanguine relationships between sisters. The novel, however, ends in a more well-mannered way. Rather than pushing the Millers toward militantism and racial separatism in the wake of the Wellington Riots, Janet relents: “‘I throw you back your father’s name, your father’s wealth, your sisterly recognition. I want none of them, — they are bought too dear! …. But that you may know that a woman may be foully wronged, and yet may have a heart to feel, even for one who has injured her, you may have your child’s life, if my husband can save it’” (447).

Mrs. Carteret pledges to change Janet’s mind about accepting kinship and the novel closes with Dr. Miller rushing to the aid of her child. Upon arriving, he asks if the child is still alive: “‘Yes, thank God,’” answered the father, “‘But nearly gone.’ ‘Come on up, Dr. Miller,’ called Evans from the head of the stairs. ‘There’s time enough, but none to spare’” (448). The novel, like most good protest novels, leaves the problem dangling at the end. While we are mostly assured that the child will live due to Dr. Miller’s competent efforts, his fate is left uncertain, a point ham-fistedly given over to the readers with Evans’ reminder that time is running out to resolve racial antagonism. This gambit, ending the novel with this gesture toward the preservation of *white* life, is rather conservative. The black characters do not give themselves over to radicalism and violence, even if the novel valorizes the self-defensive negro resistance...
led by Josh Green;\(^\text{30}\) instead, the novel ends with a subtle effort toward piecing back together the broken family. The family, of course, is not just the Carterets and the Millers, but blacks and whites, fluid, intermixed, and tragically divided. Even though Chesnutt’s novel ostensibly acts as a critique of white supremacy, his goals are in some ways surprisingly similar to those of Thomas Nelson Page, as he gestures toward the reconciliation of the races and away from racial agitation; the only difference is in their respective end games. Chesnutt is working within the terms of the literary and the proper as they made themselves available to mainstream society. It does not matter that his entire novel has worked essentially as an exposé of how white supremacy works actively to degrade black life, a thinly-veiled lamentation on the Wilmington Riots — whatever bitter\(^\text{31}\) resentments linger, the closing gesture of the novel is toward a renewed nonviolence, a truce necessary to even begin to talk about healing racial relations. Like Page in *Red Rock* and later in *The Negro*, Chesnutt has crafted an ostensibly true (but not factual) realist tale observationally informed and cultivated by the intimate relations between black and white men in America. Yet, unlike Page’s insistence that enfranchisement and education had only inflamed racial tensions, Chesnutt believes these kinds of efforts toward racial equality are the only way in which future violence can be prevented; like James Baldwin after him, Chesnutt

\(^{30}\) Not everyone, however, believes Josh Green’s death to be a valorization of his heroism; Sally Ann Ferguson, for instance, claims that *Marrow of Tradition’s* final insistence on amalgamationism as the path to racial equality is condemnable accomodationism, and that it kills Josh Green off to get there (117). While that is certainly plausible with regard to *The Marrow Tradition*, the remainder of Chesnutt’s body of work, especially *The House Behind the Cedars*, does not subtend such a claim, nor does it subtend a notion that Chesnutt is light-skin biased. I am more inclined to think, like Todd McGowan, that Green and Miller’s actions “are not really actions at all, but reactions, caught within the symbolic web of the Father. Neither Miller nor Green are able to become what Frantz Fanon calls ‘actional’” (60). McGowan’s reading of Janet Miller’s final decision to save the Carteret’s child without acknowledging her sister and their white father as a kind of acting outside of the axiomatics of white paternalism is marvelously done (71-72).

\(^{31}\) William Dean Howells, initially a Chesnutt supporter, famously referred to *Marrow* as a “bitter” novel (882).
believes that an emphasis on love coupled with an insistence on saving white people from themselves is the key to stemming racial inequality. And because he is such a good writer, armed with a strategic defamiliarization of recent history, Chesnutt succeeds in making people listen, succeeds in appearing eminently reasonable.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the fact that the novel closes not on a pact made between black and white men to solve the race problem, but on a tenuous agreement between mixed-race women — sisters — to allow a white child to live. Chesnutt, reflecting Du Bois’ and others’ interest in proper gender roles for black women, depicts Janet’s simultaneous nobility and strength, her generous sympathy — a sympathy Dr. Miller does not attain — and her life-giving nature as that which adheres to black women. The exemplary nature of the Millers coupled with the believability of their grief in the face of death lends them an exceedingly real morality, as though morality could only be attained through an intimacy with pain. The Negro, it seems, has learned a great deal, too, from his intimate relationship with the white man — yet, instead of insisting on the old tender feeling between master and slave, Chesnutt depicts this intimacy as an antagonistic one, skewing across and severing all the other ties that bind us.

This novel ends in the thematic register of what the queer theorist Lee Edelman would call “reproductive futurism,” the mandate that the sole purpose of human life is to reproduce and that anyone who does not reproduce — especially the homosexual — is committing himself and humanity to death. Here, racial antagonism’s threat to the world is not only that it creates disorder and chaos, but that it cuts short the life of a child, the chance for a future. As such, it may be possible to suggest that the novel paints violent resistance and, in the case of the Millers, justified anger as the road to doom; what begets the death of these children is their parents’ disregard for the power of human intimacy and sympathy, their putting petty matters before the
sanctity of their child and the mandate that they must propagate themselves. It is only when the novel gestures toward even a tenuous resolution between the families, especially the sisters, that the child is allowed to live; the only consolation we have for the death of the Millers’ son is that Janet and her sister may reconcile. In the novel’s ethos, when consanguinity and domesticity are upheld and affirmed, the future is safe for children. As such, it can be said that *The Marrow of Tradition*, vociferous in its protest as it is, works largely on patriarchal terms, its moral center being its insistence on putting a house in order. As such, it can hardly be called an effort toward an expansive notion of intimacy when its bar for racial reconciliation — literally, not letting a child die and acknowledging one’s sister — is so low. Chesnutt confronted these issues of intimacy and desire differently, perhaps more subversively and substantively, in his previous novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*. This would seem to suggest that as Chesnutt attained influence in black cultural leadership, his willingness to take risks as an author waned.

As mentioned above, Chesnutt’s theories on the honest depiction of black desire, while more expansive than his conservative peers like Washington, were hardly heterotopian; he understood how the stakes of the discourse and the measure of his influence necessitated the measured timbre of his proposals. Further, his effort to craft a politically viable black sexual propriety was not confined to his novels, but was undertaken as a collaborative cultural project between Chesnutt and some of his closer interlocutors. While Chesnutt’s correspondence shows him to be curiously non-conversant with black fiction writers like Sutton E. Griggs, Pauline E. Hopkins, Frances E.W. Harper, or Paul Laurence Dunbar, Chesnutt did discuss the representational ethics of black sexual propriety with Robert C. Ogden (a Tuskegee trustee), Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois, among others. As John David Smith has previously written, Chesnutt was an amalgamationist who, while hyper-conscious of their effects, sought to
deemphasize racial distinction (230). He also celebrated his own mulatto identity as evidence of America’s already being significantly “browned” (Huddle qtd. in Smith 230). This quickly put him at odds with William Hannibal Thomas, a writer who was differently interested in his mulatto identity not as evidence of America’s eventual post-racialness, but as an idealized — and very real — racial distinction that carried with it a superiority to the full-fledged Negro. It was because of this that Chesnutt undertook, with the help of his peers, a remarkable three-year long investigation to discredit Thomas, the popularity of whose work had done a great deal to libel African-Americans and to propagate mythologies of an essentialized Negro sexual impropriety (Smith 231). This was also in no small part undertaken out of resentment — Chesnutt and his peers in the idealistic wing of black uplift politics had long sought to gain a listening white audience, yet none of their books received the level of attention Thomas’ did, which, as I have noted above, was treated in some circles as gospel and was reprinted multiple times in its day. To have something so counterproductive to his cause circulating so rapidly incensed Chesnutt, who not only dressed-down Thomas in reviews of his book, but also engaged in character assassination of Thomas in an effort to pressure McMillian to withdraw the book (they never did). In addition to calling him a liar, a rank opportunist, and a con-artist, Chesnutt further claimed Thomas’ hypocrisy with regard to sexual conduct. Much in the same way modern queer advocates take an interest in the sex lives of homophobic politicians and public figures, Chesnutt became deeply invested in undermining Thomas by drawing attention to his own sexual improprieties. In a series of 1904 letters to McMillan and Robert C. Ogden, Chesnutt specifically claimed that Thomas himself was a rapist and a “degenerate”:

I have heard it claimed here that the book was written by an educated colored man, who would undoubtedly be fair toward his own race, and that therefore his statements could be taken as the truth …. but its fallibility as a conclusive test, or as proof that culture implies character, is illustrated by the fact that a Harvard
College instructor is today on trial for murder, and that a distinguished English author [Oscar Wilde] recently died in obscurity and disgrace after having served a penal sentence for an unnameable crime. A negro may become a degenerate as well as a man of any other race — his author would have you believe that all the colored people belong in that category.\(^{32}\)

While acknowledging the good in the multilateral effort to refute Thomas’ work, one must also note the glaring ironies in Chesnutt et. al.’s efforts to suppress the book through character assassination. While the details of Thomas’ purported “degeneracy” are now hazy at best, Chesnutt’s insistence on undermining Thomas’ credibility by proclaiming his sexual impropriety suggests that Chesnutt and others believed in the notion that authorial purity begets credible critique, that to be an uplift man meant having “character,” or to put it more bluntly, exemplary manhood or womanhood. Chesnutt simultaneously proclaimed that Thomas’ book could not be truthful because of his impurity while writing fiction in which black lives — particularly the lives of light-skinned black women — were under constant manipulation by the forces meaning to channel them. Chesnutt propagated two theories of black sexual propriety — that it was under constant scrutiny by the forces of white supremacy and that black people had to be paragons of moral virtue, of sexual restraint, in order to uplift the race. This is to say that Chesnutt fought against the pathologization of black sexuality at the same time that he idealized and concretized the ways in which it was virtuous. This is arguably a weakness in the notion of a feminist or sexually progressive Chesnutt — that he knew black sexuality and gender performance to be under constant unfair scrutiny, but that he worked primarily under a modality of counteridentification with what white people believed about black sexuality; rather than insisting on what transgressive black sexuality could be or do, he advocated for the notion that

\(^{32}\) This passage is taken from a draft of a letter to McMillan Company, which originally published Thomas’ *The American Negro*. This draft was sent to Robert C. Ogden on May 27th, 1904.
modalities of interracial desire were profoundly normative and healthy and, further, that they had little to do with sexual degeneracy (queerness, rape, pre-marital sex) altogether. *The House Behind the Cedars*, a novel that performs a variation on the tragic mulatto narrative, bears out the notion that Chesnutt could only see in black sexuality and racial difference a means by which white people controlled the narrative of their superiority, a means by which the dissipation of black life could only be hastened. The death of Rena Walden at the close of the novel exemplifies Chesnutt’s theory that, under the strictures of black gender and sexual pathology, the representation of the mulatto woman’s exemplary womanhood relies on the representation of her unconsummated desire and its unnameability. Christian in its ethos, Chesnutt’s depiction of Rena Walden is one of a sacrificial lamb for free black desire; her tragic willingness to conform to dominant sexual mores coupled with her unwillingness to be corrupted by powerful men — from both black and white leadership — is Chesnutt’s way of suggesting her ironic yet scrupulous deference to what society holds to be true. For Chesnutt, mulatto women who desired white men but did not act upon it were exemplary citizens, defenders of the virtue of black women. To put it another way, Chesnutt, and probably Du Bois, would rather see Rena Walden dead than happy. It is for this reason that I would like to suggest *The House Behind the Cedars* as a kind of prototype of what I am calling the *queer pathology novel*, a novel in which the purity of the queer subject is consecrated by her tragic deference to societal norms. Like Nella Larsen’s *Passing* would do with the character of Clare Kendry in 1929 or James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* would do with its titular character in 1955, *The House Behind the Cedars* would put in play an uncorruptable free radical, insist on the tragic inexpressibility of her legitimate feelings, and then summarily execute her at the climax. In a manner of speaking, *The House Behind the Cedars* is a blueprint for the queer pathology novel in America.
The Queer Pathology Novel

Queer pathology novel is a portmanteau term I use to describe an overlap of the informal genres of the “black pathology” novel and the “tragic queer” novel. Myriad African American novels and US queer novels written since the 1890s are identifiable with tendencies of literary naturalism, a movement which describes environmental determinism over beings rather than propagating the romance of individualism. Naturalistic black pathology novels exist in a broad periodic range and include canonical texts like Richard Wright’s _Native Son_ and Sapphire’s _Push_. While it is difficult to pin down a central coinage or origin point for this term, the black pathology novel is best defined through parodies of its form and subject matter, from George Schuyler’s _Black No More_ (1931) to Percival Everett’s _Erasure_ (2001).

The tragic queer novel genre also seems to have no origin or formal coinage and is best defined through satire. Mallory Ortberg’s “Sad Queer Classics, Fixed” (2015), for instance, humorously attempts to rewrite scenes and synopses for novels like Radclyffe Hall’s _The Well of Loneliness_ (1928) and James Baldwin’s _Giovanni’s Room_ to turn them into celebrations of utopian queer living. Instead of Giovanni being publicly executed at the end of the latter novel, in Ortberg’s version he and David agree that their room is a “very nice room” and presumably decide to reside in it together henceforth. While no one denies the importance of novels like Baldwin’s or Wright’s, many scholars and casual readers express exasperation over their massive circulation given the limited, grim portrayals of queer and African American life they offer.

While I do not fetishize the term queer pathology novel as a totalization of Chesnutt’s work on sex and race, it serves as a useful neologism to discuss, as part of queer cultural history, the ways in which Chesnutt diagnosed the violent effects that dominant sexual and racial proprieties had
on people of color — especially mixed-race women of color — in the early Jim Crow period. In my reading of Chesnutt as a naturalist author, I avoid a strict interpretation of naturalism as a genre concerned with a dispassionate description of social determinism. Following the lead of Jennifer Fleissner, I observe the deployment of naturalist writing as a description of “compulsions” rather than a mapping out of inexorable doom. I therefore allow, especially where representations of the lives of women-of-color are concerned, that Chesnutt’s naturalism “is an attempt not to discard the body … but, against all odds, to try to make it mean differently,” to make it a “space of surplus” (Fleissner 278). Chesnutt and Annis’s intimacy with Rena Walden allows them to point toward nameless modes of being, an ethic which resonates well with queer theoretical discourse.

Reading Chesnutt, however, does not simply involve mapping queer ideas onto black texts and forming analogies between contemporary LGBTQ political struggle and black sex politics of the early Jim Crow period; Chesnutt’s work, I argue, provokes us to think as much about queer method as it does transgressive sexuality. Chesnutt, in “trying on” the identity of Rena Walden, attempts to perform exemplary black womanhood that is heroic even amidst intense sexual scrutiny.33 Yet because House Behind the Cedars is purely descriptive in the naturalist sense rather than didactic, Chesnutt’s investment either in normative ideas of feminine purity or the disruption of them is hazy. The depiction of Rena’s sexual sublimation is equal parts heroic and tragic. Thus even as it is a novel that lays bare the toxic disciplining of sexual and gender performance for women of color, it is also one that may suggest the heroism of remaining repressed. In the spirit of women-of-color feminism’s own ambivalence about how

33 Ryan (2011) notes this literary “crossdressing” as well (38). In Sutton E. Griggs’ Imperium in Imperio we are given a more literal depiction of this when, “wanting to do what he could to exalt the character of the colored woman,” Bernard Piedmont dresses up as a black woman to take a job as a nurse (92–93).
much these texts had to offer in the way of progressive sexual politics, Chesnutt gives us an opportunity to think of queer critique and recovery as more than an all-or-nothing proposition.

In claiming that Cedars is a queer pathology novel, I must start with Chesnutt’s title change — proposed by his publisher — from Rena Walden to The House Behind the Cedars. What is it that compelled Chesnutt’s publisher and Chesnutt himself to retitle the novel in a way that emphasizes one of its settings over its central character? It could be that the former title implies a character study, whether cautionary and moral (e.g. Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, Jane Talbot) or educational and philosophical (e.g. Emile, Candide, David Copperfield, Roderick Random, Arthur Mervyn); the latter emphasizes the scene, or perhaps the spectacularization of Chesnutt’s political sphere, almost as if to site the work Chesnutt wants to do with this novel. I cannot help but think, again, about the ways in which houses, in queer novels, function as spaces for a critique of domesticity. In the climactic scene of Larsen’s Passing, Irene Redfield cannot cope with Clare Kendry remaining a free radical, nor her potential to disrupt Irene’s domestic tranquility; the window she arguably pushes Clare out of ham-fistedly suggests that there is no room in Irene’s house for Clare, who defies its boundaries. Clare is doomed to interstitiality, to death. Similarly, in Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room — the title of which also refers to its central staging ground for sexual transgression — the main character David is filled with constant anxiety about losing his manhood to the maid’s quarters they inhabit, about becoming a maid forever destined to clean up Giovanni’s messes; thus, in the novel’s climactic scene, he leaves the room, catalyzing Giovanni’s downfall and death. In all three of these novels, there is something about the room or place: it is sometimes a space for radical possibility that

34 Walter H. Page of Doubleday proposed this change in a letter written to Chesnutt on July 19th, 1900.
temporarily houses the radical expression of desire, sometimes a carefully defined enclosure that rebukes threats to stable taxonomies of desire, and sometimes — as it is in Chesnutt’s novel — a space meant to emphasize the loneliness of one’s condition and their invisibility to society. But it is not as if each of these stagings simply instrumentalizes a space to serve as a metaphor for the taxonomy it is trying to undermine and/or refigure; rather, like most good metaphors, these stagings work two ways, leaving each referenced scene — the apartment, the maid’s quarters, the house behind the cedars — touched by the reference. The room, as it were, is not a stable reference point for the taxonomy — each disidentification with a taxonomy is also critical of its stage.35

The Waldens’ house behind the cedars is reminiscent of two other houses constituted in an interstitial space on the boundary of society. One is Hester Prynne’s cottage on the outskirts of Boston in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. It is not that Hester and Rena’s houses marks their alienation from society, but rather their existence as the boundary line of acceptable being, people allowed to live, despite their transgressions, to serve as a warning for others. One could even call them something like the uncanny of domesticity.36 Finally, I would be loathe not

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35 Theorizing the “stage” and “staging” of performatives and performances that challenge orthodoxy are important to the interdisciplinary field of performance studies, particularly in the work of Diana Taylor and José Esteban Muñoz. See Taylor’s *Stages of Conflict: A Critical Anthology of Latin American Theater and Performance* (2008) and Muñoz’s chapter “Stages: Queers, Punks, and the Utopian Performative” in his book *Cruising Utopia*. While performance studies’ theory of “stage” is not directly relevant to my work, I am influenced in part by the rigorous attention performance studies scholars like Taylor and Muñoz pay to space and staging as opposed to just the body itself. Chesnutt, too, appears very interested in how streets, houses, and other spatial and platial formations work to express or repress desire and being. See also Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1974), Michel de Certeau’s chapter “Walking in the City” in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), and Samuel R. Delany’s *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999). 36 I am reminded here of E. Patrick Johnson’s chapter “Mother Knows Best” in his book *Appropriating Blackness*. Johnson compellingly notes ways in which black gay men have used the tropes of domesticity and the house (especially in drag ball culture) to disidentify and remake domesticity in their own image.
to recognize that the surname “Walden” is also the name of the pond outside Concord, Massachusetts where Thoreau lived and wrote *Walden* — if this is a coincidence, it strikes me as a profoundly conspicuous one. Thoreau’s work is often misunderstood as proclaiming the independence of man from the confines of society and its domestic trappings; in fact, I find that *Walden* actually restages domesticity or homesteading in terms of bachelordom, that Thoreau’s work does not make the case for his independence from society, but his dependence on its symbology to constitute his own experiment with male sovereignty. It would seem that, prior to and in the years following its publication, the Waldens’ house has quite a few literary bedfellows considering the same metaphors of taxonomy and desire. What is at issue is not Rena Walden herself, but the spaces that foster or inhibit her capacity to desire freely. *The House Behind the Cedars* is not just a tragic mulatto story — it is a story about the untenability of antinormative desire in a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal world. It diagnoses the pathologies of desiring black subjects under such a world and illustrates how the infrastructure of white supremacist heteropatriarchy and the more conservative elements of black uplift triangulate and hail these subjects into being. Rena becomes painted with the queer brush; her body is a transgressive object of knowledge producing what we call order.

**Route of Desire: Rena Walden as an Antinormative Heroine**

The novel signals its interest in space and infrastructure early and often. The opening scene of the novel describes John Warwick, Rena’s brother, walking from the Patesville Hotel to the titular house behind the cedars and pondering the passage of time. He lingers at the market-house in the center of town, contemplating its tall tower, with its four-faced clock, [which] rose as majestically and uncompromisingly as though the land had never been subjugated. Was it so irreconcilable, Warwick wondered, as still to peal out the curfew bell, which at
nine o’clock at night had clamorously warned all negroes, slave or free, that it was unlawful for them to be abroad after that hour, under penalty of imprisonment or whipping? …. A few moments later, Warwick saw a colored policeman in the old constable’s place — a stronger reminder than even the burned buildings that war had left its mark upon the old town, with which Time had dealt so tenderly. (2-3)

Warwick observes the uncanny character of a town in which black people may now move and desire differently, but still according to the flows of its infrastructure. The market-house’s transitional functionality in the Reconstruction era does not necessarily connote massive upheaval in the flows of society and culture. The novel’s theory of time in the Southern slave town is not negational or synthetic, but accretive and residual. Consecrating the commitment of the black body to the smoothing of society is the black policeman who replaced the constable. As Althusser once argued, power regimes appointed through revolution beget new power regimes. In the wake of the war, the colored policeman becomes a symbol for black politics making an object of knowledge out of the black body. Black people become responsible for ruling, and thus subjugating, themselves. To attain privilege within a system of capital, these newly minted black subjects must learn to move according to the flows of infrastructure, something John seems all too comfortable doing. In short, the novel flags early on the ways in which Rena will be pulled apart by the heteropatriarchal capitalist forces that will try to channel her desire along right lines.

Warwick’s attainment of his own cachet and ability to move freely as a mixed-race subject — he passes as white throughout the novel — make him somewhat of an avatar for Chesnutt; it is no surprise then to find Warwick in control of long observational stretches, nor is it a surprise when he espouses tidy mission statements of the novel like “‘Death is the penalty that all must pay for the crime of living’” (4). When Warwick finally encounters and follows his sister, Rena, she is coyly defamiliarized as a “young woman [coming] down Front Street from the direction of the market-house.” Rena, in fact, emerges through an intersection, a flatiron
junction where slave auctions used to be held. She is all too visible and yet indistinct, an effect poured out of the square’s spectral past, part slave and part subject. As they unknowingly chart the same path to the house, Warwick incestuously admires Rena’s beauty because he does not recognize her — he believes she is a white woman. In fact, “few people who met the girl greeted her …. some others whom she passed at gates or doorways gave her no sign of recognition” (5). It is as though she has mystically emerged out of a crossroads where past meets present, unable to live in either.

The strains that comprise her being in society come to illustrate Rena’s identity only as she ventures further into poverty and degradation, which is to say, into the black folks’ neighborhood. Her being visible relies mostly on contextual detail. When she helps an elderly black woman hoist a basket of laundry, Warwick notices and delights in her voice and its similarity to the old woman’s: “The corruption of the white people’s speech was one element — only one — of the negro’s unconscious revenge for his own debasement.” When she helps a “half-naked negro child out of a mudhole,” he figures her for a white do-gooder. But when she finally turns to face him, his unaccountability as a white man in a black neighborhood seems equally strange to her, and she distrustfully picks up her pace (6). What Warwick calls her timidity is in fact this woman’s protectiveness of herself; the threat of her rape or her otherwise being made disreputable is implied by the presence of the white man behind her, an implication rendered ironic by the fact it is her brother. Warwick only finally recognizes Rena when she opens a gate and goes “into a yard shut off from the street by a row of dwarf cedars.” Though he has “already discounted in some measure the surprise he would have felt at seeing her enter there had he not walked down Front street behind her …. [there remains] sufficient unexpectedness about the act [to] give him a decided thrill of pleasure.” Warwick’s act of voyeurism culminating
in an unexpected thrill of pleasure suggests the orgasmic nature of recognition. But this recognition is afforded, concurrently, with Rena’s careful seclusion, with her being “shut off from the street” by the cedars. Chesnutt’s descriptive prose is not especially subtle in this regard: “On dark or wintry days, the aspect of this garden …. might well have seemed a fit place to hide some guilty or disgraceful secret. But on the bright morning when Warwick stood looking through the cedars, it seemed, with its green frame and canopy and its bright carpet of flowers, an ideal retreat from the fierce sunshine and the sultry heat of the approaching summer.” Like with Warwick, this novel introduces us to Rena first and foremost as pleasure-seeking voyeurs interested in guilt, dirt, and disgraceful secrets; we are invited to recognize our own complicity in her invisibility and interstitiality and how it gives us pleasure. The subtle references to Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* throughout the introduction bear out the scene’s interest in Rena’s road to cipherdom: “The girl stooped to pluck a rose, and as she bent over it, her profile was clearly outlined. She held the flower to her face with a long-drawn inhalation, then went up the steps, crossed the piazza, opened the door without knocking, and entered the house with the air of one thoroughly at home” (7). Like Hester Prynne before her, Rena is at home in her cipherdom. She stops to smell a rose in her seclusion, not unlike the rose outside the garrison door at the beginning of Hawthorne’s novel and not unlike the color of Hester’s “A.” Further, all this description of gates, entering, and exiting is tightly bound up with the language of sexual intercourse. Warwick feels an “almost irresistible impulse to enter” the garden; “a thousand cords of memory and affection drew him thither; but a stronger counter-motive prevailed. With a great effort he restrained himself” (8). Picking up again on the semi-incestuous nature of Warwick’s voyeurism, the novel describes Warwick’s desire to enter the house and thus consummate his blackness by affirming his relationship to Rena and his mother. He is given a
chance to enter and emerge through a gate, into a domestic space inhabited primarily by women of color. His ability to restrain himself due to counter-motives suggests a near masturbational drive toward autonomy in a liberal world — Warwick cannot, as a mixed-race subject, afford ecstatic intimacy, even with his own family. To be a proper subject capable of navigating and being recognized in the market-house, he must be free of any ambiguous taint, capable of being hailed by discourse as a taxonomically stable desiring subject. We are not talking about, here, race as something self-evident and understood prior to its conception; we are witnessing race as something contested and controlled primarily through the act of sex, an act constitutive of the concept of family, racial or otherwise. Blackness and its affiliations look a great deal like sexual orientations — they condition our pleasure, bind us in the cords of memory, and yet we try to sublimate them.\textsuperscript{37} The remainder of the novel concerns itself with what happens when the cipher, Rena, is afforded the opportunity to become a desiring subject capable of navigating the infrastructures of heteropatriarchal society. Her failed rehabilitation into society, from mongrel to white woman, suggests the innavigability of sex laws by fully realized, desiring mixed-race subjects. She, like Giovanni or Clare, is the unnameable desire to be that cannot be.

Once Warwick finally meets with Rena and their mother Molly, he is able to convince Rena to move in with him in order to help raise his child, Rena’s niece (Warwick’s wife has died). Mis’ Molly didactically thinks that “She must lose her daughter as well as her son, and this should be the penance for her sin. That her children must expiate as well the sins of their fathers, who had sinned so lightly, after the manner of men, neither she nor they could foresee, since they could not read the future” (21). The pun here on “sinning lightly” references the light skin of Molly’s children, following after their father and “could not read the future” suggests their

\textsuperscript{37} See Sara Ahmed’s \textit{Queer Phenomenology} (2006) for a wonderful theorization of memory, tendency, and the spatialization of desire with regard to sexual orientation.
inability to know if their offspring will appear black or white. According to law, mixed-race children born into slavery followed the condition of their mothers; yet this novel suggests that these children, in their inability to desire freely, continue to pay for the sins of their white father. Thus, Mis’ Molly tells us, as a post-slavery subject, that the sexuality of colored people will continue to be shaped and contested long after slavery is over by the radicality of reproduction. The mongrel past of sexual impropriety makes itself known and cannot be anticipated out of existence.\(^\text{38}\) This suggests not only that the promise of eventual post-racial amalgamation is, in the purview of the novel, an impossibility, but that racial separatism is equally untenable because of its pathological, nonsensical relationship to a purity that never was, a purity that cannot be anticipated or manufactured other than through a will to death. Outside of a passing riddled with scrutiny and danger, invisibility, death, and ultimately extinction are what awaits the mixed-race subject. A society conditioned by a scant set of legal recognitions cannot afford them otherwise — it almost always has a convenient blind spot where it stores the abject.

Rena’s implied chastity in remaining at home leaves her with a sense of longing for the worldliness she has been denied, but Rena is unprepared for her immediate triangulation — her hailing into discourse — as an object of desire for men. She is, thus, unable to balance her commitment to a cosmopolitan desire with her continued status as a body that marks the boundary line of transgression. Putting aside John Warwick, three men emerge in the novel as both Rena’s suitors and the limits of her conditions of possibility. The first is Frank Fowler. Frank is a “workman, a dark-brown young man, small in stature, but with a well-shaped head, an expressive forehead, and features indicative of kindness, intelligence, humor, and imagination”\(^\text{38}\)

\(^{38}\) Though Darwinist thought does not leave much of a trace on Chesnutt’s fiction, the idea of evolution being the creation of “monsters” as a result of “accidents” mirrors, perhaps, Mis’ Molly’s words here on the post-slavery subject. See Chesnutt’s “The Future American Race” (1900) for Chesnutt’s take on mixed-race reproduction as evolutionary progress.
Frank, who is of the laboring class, speaks primarily in dialect. Everything about him — his good nature, humility, diminutive stature, lack of refinement — are exactly what make him an impossible object of desire to the lighter skinned Rena. Yet Frank, from early on, is tipped to be the only man who respects and cares about Rena, who even sublimates his desire for her out of care for her wellbeing: “Frank …. clothed her with the attributes of the superior race. Only her drop of black blood, he conceived, gave him the right to feel toward her as he would never have felt without it” (87). Frank, to an extent, is the novel’s closest approximation of a hero, cast essentially in the tradition of and with direct allusions to chivalric romance:

In the Pre-Raphaelite movement of the late-nineteenth century, chivalric romance was quite popular and its influence well known in the cultural imaginary — the novel itself mentions the influence of Walter Scott’s novels on the South (31). Chesnutt’s descriptions of Frank riding in a cart seem here to depict Frank in the tradition of Chrétien de Troyes’ twelfth-century poem

*Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart.* In Chrétien’s Lancelot mythology, Lancelot — in his attempt to save Guinevere from Meleagant — accidentally whips his horse to death and is thus forced to swallow his pride and ride in a cart like a prisoner. Rena’s mother sees Frank as unfit for Rena, but Chesnutt’s literary knowledge traffics in a winking “father knows best” subtext, clueing the literary reader into Frank’s eventual heroism, as well as the cart’s centrality to that heroism. It effectively suggests that the reader pay attention to the lower orders of black life, out of which might issue a heroic corrective to the pathologies of black desire in a white supremacist world. This could seem disingenuous coming from a light-skinned lawyer from Ohio, but despite the
patronizing dynamic, Chesnutt’s commitment to the lower orders of the black caste system in America is also borne out in short stories like “The Wife of His Youth.”

It is not exactly clear whether or not Chesnutt is having fun with the popularity of chivalric romance in his time or adopting it as a kind of populist appeal, but our introduction to the second potential love interest for Rena — the white George Tryon — continues to explore this chivalric tropology, as it takes place at a jousting tournament. Chesnutt does not get enough credit for his humor and dry wit, and the incongruity between the modernizing South after slavery and the white people campily aping Arthurian lore shows that Chesnutt, often very reverent, was not above signifying on white ignorance. During the tournament, Rena drops her handkerchief and Tryon ties it around his lance as a good luck charm. When he wins, he bestows upon her the honor of being the “Queen of Love and Beauty” and Rena instantly becomes the talk of Clarence, South Carolina. Layered within this is a quite smart critique on the part of the novel of the instrumentalization of women, white or black. Once Rena is in society, she also becomes of it, and is hailed immediately into its sociocultural network. Her ability to perform white realness, also, is incredibly arbitrary. All she must do is look pretty and drop a handkerchief and she is immediately drawn into the campy courtship culture of white heteropatriarchy.

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39 In a brief essay for *American Literary Realism*, Earle V. Bryant theorizes an analogic relationship between Rena Walden and the character of Lady Rowena from Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*. While Bryant does not delve into the full implications of such an argument, I am inclined to think that Chesnutt was not modeling his narrative off of *Ivanhoe*, but rather signifying on *Ivanhoe*. The anti-elitism and realist strains in most of his writing would seem to preclude an earnest interest in pre-Raphaelite traditions.

40 See, for instance, his hilarious anti-elitist short story “Baxter’s Procrustes” (1904), about a group of literary critics who all unknowingly lavish praise on a book with no content because they will not break the decorative seal in order to read it.
The drawing of Rena into a capitalist infrastructure predicated on white male superiority first involves her being rendered flatly white; next, it must involve her becoming a medium of desire between men. When Tryon and Rena announce their marriage to John Warwick, the novel opines, “Never does one feel so strongly the universal brotherhood of man as when one loves some other fellow’s sister” (49). This corny filler aphorism does more, however, than take up ponderous space — it also describes a very important way in which Rena’s life and desire is a matter crucial to relations between men.41 Universal brotherhood cannot involve physical contact — sodomy is precluded by the boundary of the law. Therefore, Warwick’s closeness to Tryon can only be enhanced by use of a sexual proxy, in this case, Rena. It is no coincidence that Rena has already foreshaken the last name of “Walden” to become “Rena Warwick.” The not-so-subtle implication that she has entered into a legalistic bond with her own brother and that he has in turn pimped her out to Tryon to improve their own bond is also the rough suggestion of Rena’s object status.42 When she lived in the house behind the cedars — her sort-of Walden Pond — she, as someone living on the border of a dehierarchalized possibility, was responsible for crafting and inhabiting a domesticity between women, between her and her mother, that restaged sovereignty without heterosexuality or whiteness; the price was its invisibility. In this strange new world with such courters in it, she gives up her restaged sovereignty to take part in the thin

41 This is most notably theorized in Eve Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). One among Sedgwick’s many contributions to queer theory, here she claims that relationships between men and women in novels often involve triangulating women as proxies for men to express desire to each other. Women characters are therefore often treated as capital or conduits, just as Warwick and Tryon treat Rena as a conduit for their fraternal desire.

42 In her own essay on *Cedars*, Kerstin Rudolph (2013) focuses on the character of John, “exploring the kinship relations at play that allow light-skinned African American men, such as John, to establish a white identity through and at the expense of mixed-race women who must remain marked as such” (27). Melissa Ryan (2011) puts it another way: “In attempting to transcend race, Rena encounters gender” (40).
veneer of society, to purchase dearly what could be called a conditioned, meager privilege. But she cannot be the rehabilitated object of the white man — “her hidden disability” precludes the possibility (51). The novel itself — despite Chesnutt’s amalgamationism — takes on quite a pragmatic tone with regard to the promises of love and marriage. The idealistic John Warwick describes marriage to Rena as “‘a reciprocal arrangement, by which the contracting parties give love for love, care for keeping, faith for faith. It is a matter of the future, not of the past.’” He adds, “‘George Tryon loves you for yourself alone; it is not your ancestors that he seeks to marry’” (54). Warwick, in this sentimental idealism, misses exactly the point: that Rena would be welcomed into a contractual relationship that would do little to rupture white supremacy, a contractual relationship based on a key disavowal — Rena’s of her own blackness. Warwick arguably allows his love for Tryon, his love for whiteness, to smooth over for him the perpetual inequity built into a marriage contract. It is not egalitarian nor based off of coupledom, as he describes; it is, like his earlier spying on Rena, a voyeurism for society, a performance for others. It is a performance of concern for the future, for the perpetuation of Tryon’s always already diluted whiteness. *What could be queerer and more antinormative than a black uplift novel calling into question the eminent emancipatory promise of legal partnership?* If marriage is the province of the cultured, of the white, then Rena’s marriage into the legal recognition of her whiteness would seem to serve nothing but whiteness. As if to underscore the ways in which marriage is such a highly corruptible institution, the novel even depicts Tryon reading a highly racist anti-amalgamation article in the newspaper on the day he finds out Rena’s secret:

The writer maintained that owing to a special tendency of the negro blood, however diluted, to revert to the African type, any future amalgamation of the white and black races, which foolish and wicked Northern negrophiles predicted as the ultimate result of the new conditions confronting the South, would therefore be an ethnological impossibility; for the smallest trace of negro blood would inevitably drag down the superior race to the level of the inferior, and
reduce the fair Southland, already devastated by the hand of the invader, to the frightful level of Hayti, the awful example of negro incapacity. (71)

It is no surprise that Tryon finds out about Rena’s blackness and avoids committing the “unpardonable sin” of marrying her (96). That he finds out in almost the exact middle of the novel, however, is somewhat of a genre-bending move for Chesnutt that goes a little way toward distinguishing this novel from typical tragic mulatto tales. The great trial of Rena’s life is not dealing with the pathologies of interracial desire, nor her being mixed race; the worst is to come, as this narrative begins to veer toward an uncanny (yet markedly different) Madame Bovary-esque morality tale in its latter half. That Tryon chooses not to sever his ties with Warwick — to continue thinking of him as a white man — is an explicit nod from Chesnutt that the trials to be faced by Rena are hers to face as a desiring woman of color (103). The more the desiring woman of color serves as the flashpoint of social relations between blacks and whites in America, the more messianic her passion becomes.

Chesnutt further emphasizes the gender-related nature of Rena’s problems by, after Tryon’s discovery, jumping to a brief interlude where we learn of Warwick’s past with Judge Straight. Judge Straight, speaking in Booker T. Washington-like aphorisms, instills in Warwick a drive for things like money; he identifies success with whiteness. It is the conspicuously surnamed Straight himself who gives Warwick the idea, finally, to leave Patesville and pass for white. Warwick’s gender and complexion give him the mobility to do this, but Rena is, for the time being, firmly tied to the domestic space.

Thus far, the novel has introduced three men as the triangulating analogs to Rena’s experience, who bandy her about as a status symbol, alienate her, and love her. Before introducing the narrative’s final potential love interest for Rena, it makes its pitch once more for Frank:
There would have been no legal barrier to their union; there would have been no frightful menace to white supremacy in the marriage of the negro and the octoroon: the drop of dark blood bridged the chasm …. there are depths of fidelity and devotion in the negro heart that have never been fathomed or fully appreciated. Now and then in the kindlier phases of slavery these qualities were brightly conspicuous, and in them, if wisely appealed to, lies the strongest hope of amity between the two races whose destiny seems bound up together in the Western world. Even a dumb brute can be won by kindness. Surely it were worth while to try some other weapon than scorn and contumely and hard words upon people of our common race, — the human race, which is bigger and broader than Celt or Saxon, barbarian or Greek, Jew or Gentile, black or white; for we are all children of a common Father, forget it as we may, and each one of us is in some measure his brother’s keeper. (118)

Let us pause to reflect on this important passage. It would be quite easy to mock the patronizations of Chesnutt’s prose here. Frank, in being manipulated as Chesnutt’s hero among the lowly, is turned in this passage into the least threatening black man imaginable: the faithful servant. He, despite his valor, is one and the same as the “lovable darkies” torn from the pages of Thomas Nelson Page. And to what end is Chesnutt painting Frank with this brush? Why would Chesnutt, a realist novelist interested in the complexity of human psychology and human relationships, absorb and employ a caricatured depiction of Page’s faithful darky? One such way to read this manipulation is that it is done for the benefit of white audiences and conservative black leadership figures. Chesnutt meta-textually nods to this: “Even a dumb brute can be won by kindness …. Surely it were worth while to try some other weapon.” His not-so-subtle nods to violent uprisings and sensationalism in black uplift culture are not only meant to bolster Chesnutt’s appearance as the literary father of his movement (the sensible realist); they are meant to be disidentificatory. It not only exhibits Chesnutt’s keen awareness of the racial-political tropology available to him in Post-Reconstruction America, but also his critical acumen with regard to the available strategies of black cultural uplift. Chesnutt is performing disidentifications with the available routes and channels of black expression and desire. He wants Frank to be the hero and he is willing to borrow from Page, though with a difference. Rather than
reproducing the sentimental ideology of tender master and slave relations before Reconstruction, Chesnutt instead suggests that the tenderness and faith Page observes in the “old negro” is in fact at the heart of black identity itself, carried out through its nobly chivalric working class (the earlier throwbacks from Frank to Lancelot similarly appropriate European antiquity to this end). It does not even matter if Chesnutt finds such characterization banal or tedious as a literary realist — it anticipates the audience; he knows the terrain; this is the work of disidentification. Queers know that this work is not always pretty or based out of transcendent truths — it is the bricolage propriety one engages in within dominant formations in order to survive and derive pleasure.

As the novel carries on, Rena slips more comfortably into her role as the Christlike martyr of the narrative and Warwick’s appeals to secular rationality only serve to alienate him from her further (121). Tryon continues to struggle with his decision to leave Rena, taking on somewhat of a beard in the “demure, pretty little blonde” Miss Blanche Leary. Tryon’s deferral to “reason, common sense, the instinctive ready-made judgments of his training and environment” aide him in moving on from Rena, but what ultimately ties him to her is exactly the thing that transcends those forces — Christian love. Much like the relationship between David and Giovanni in Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room, the war playing out is personal and political, one of competing ideologies: bodily love and desire vs. political rationalism. In a time in which emergent black leadership was hotly contested, Tryon and Rena’s struggle with societal rationality and ideology serve as near allegory for the way people like Du Bois and Washington fought for the love of Americans. Rena, like the average American black woman, becomes the capital of this fight.
While Tryon struggles with the “thrill of lawless pleasure” and considers alternative options to marrying Rena, Rena turns her attentions toward “humanity” (130) and away from intense politicking (she becomes a teacher); in doing so, she is met by her final suitor: Jeff Wain. Though Mis Molly and others find it “quare that he should n’ be married at his age” (132), Rena gives him a chance. Wain is, for all intents and purposes, a stand-in for the respectable mulatto uplift leader. He owns the schoolhouse where Rena teaches and though he speaks in a kind of rough dialect, he comes off to most as charming and intelligent (it is only revealed later that he physically abused his ex-wife). What is more, Rena allows herself to relax her inhibitions with regard to the political weight of her partnerships. As George Tryon jealously spies on her with Wain, Rena dance and listens to music; she appears, to Tryon, “with the mask thrown off, a true daughter of a race in which the sensuous enjoyment of the moment took precedence of taste or sentiment or any of the higher emotions” (150). While this again looks like a passage in which Chesnutt absorbs white supremacist caricature of the black soul in order to anticipate his audience, it may also be true to say that, for that moment, Rena is engaging in a kind of presentism that exceeds, swells, or challenges the narrative of her fall. Her ability to attain

43 Interestingly, “For Humanity” was the slogan for the Pauline Hopkins edited journal Colored American Magazine. Rena’s continued insistence on a dedication to “humanity” throughout the latter half of the book — as a chaste educator, no less — demonstrates the contestability of the notion of humanism amongst black political and cultural leaders.

44 See this project’s introduction for more thoughts on thematics of presentism and excess. “Presentism” and “excess” are often written about as fundamental values of queer theory, presentism accounting for the queer’s refusal of the reproductive mandate and “excess” referring to the queer’s embrace of non-utilitarian, excessive sexuality (among other things, such as flamboyant gender performance, camp, etc.). Queer antinormative or antirelational critique encourages a queer culture that embraces these values. See Michael Warner’s The Trouble with Normal, Lee Edelman’s No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive, and Judith Halberstam’s The Queer Art of Failure. This dissertation’s iteration of queer theory, while considering these catachretic queer values to be important (and playful), is not entrenched in them; in other words, it is not an end unto itself to point out when Rena is “being queer” when she does something to which Warner or Edelman may attach value.
pleasure amidst her triangulation by multiple politicking men is our last look at what could have
been for Rena had her desire not been so hotly contested. It is a haunting irony that we
experience this scene through the malicious, judging eyes of a tragically ignorant Tryon, that the
only way to imagine something like a free black pleasure is through a damaging stereotype. Of
course, this is exactly what appears unique about Chesnutt’s writing style: his confident
absorption of white supremacist and other forms of dominant ideology that inhibit black
women’s ability to desire.

As Wain and Rena’s relationship founders, Rena continues to teach. She finds the work
difficult, but nobly engages in “lifting the black mass still floundering in the mud where slavery
had left it …. the mud in which, for aught that could be seen to the contrary, her little feet, too,
were hopelessly entangled. It might have seemed like expecting a man to lift himself by his boot-
straps” (164). In addition to a sly shot at Washington-esque self-sufficiency, this passage once
again illustrates a way in which Rena is temporarily allowed to live for herself through
alternative intimacy, acting as the uplift mother of the Reconstruction generation. Tryon has
repressed Rena’s desires through the ostensible rationality of the white supremacist order;
Warwick has used his sister as social lubricant. In a different kind of novel, Rena and Wain
would marry and run the school together, simultaneously reversing the trend of the tragic mulatto
narrative and pointing toward a future for mixed-race subjects. Instead, just as Chesnutt has slyly
absorbed the repressive political rhetoric of his time, the novel uses Wain as a biting symbol of
black uplift’s entitled patriarchy. Wain constructs a ruse to become alone with Rena in the
woods. His motivation may be as innocent as a “declaration of love,” but in the moment, Wain
takes her about the waist and tries to kiss her. The rapacious gesture sends a panicked Rena
away. Wain, in his entitlement, eventually spins this as “a mere exhibition of coyness …. merely
intended to lure him on” (166). It is at the same time that Rena discovers Tryon is living in the same town: “Caught thus between two emotional fires …. Rena was subjected to a physical and mental strain that only youth and health could have resisted, and then only for a short time” (167).

The triangulation of Rena and its physical taxation of her continues to escalate. Tryon immediately attempts to meet with her, but the ever-noble Rena responds curtly, “You are white, and you have given me to understand that I am black. I accept the classification, however unfair” (172). “Accepting the classification” again nods to Chesnutt’s textual strategy — to take the ways in which white supremacy taxonomizes and represses desire and absorb it, for better or for worse. Rena’s passivity, as well as her short-lived autonomy as an educator, exemplify the temperate morality and integrity of women of color under the pressing conditions of heteropatriarchal white supremacism. It is quite nearly a naturalist literary methodology, to test what might reasonably happen to someone like Rena — the paragon of black women’s chastity and virtue — under the conditions set by Thomas Nelson Page, William Hannibal Thomas, and others. But once again, this points to a certain lack in Chesnutt’s novel: the ability to imagine otherwise or to imagine disidentificatory trajectories by and for women of color. Like Tryon himself, if he could see “her lying in her shroud before him, he could at least [cherish] her memory” (97). Rena must serve — for both Tryon and Chesnutt — as, once again, the mongrelized border of respectable desire, the memorialization of the borderline.

Chesnutt pulls out all the stops for his masterful, melodramatic, and symbolically overstuffed conclusion. Tryon tricks Plato, his errand boy, into arranging a meeting with Rena in a deserted clearing, down a “road through the woods to a point where, amid somewhat thick underbrush, another path intersected the road they were following” (178). Just as at the
beginning of the book, with the emergence of Rena out of a flatiron junction, the novel ends with her being drawn into an intersection, one at which Tryon, like Wain before him, will attempt to fully and finally interpellate and consummate Rena as his object of desire. She briefly attempts to take an alternate route, but Plato warns her off going through a swamp for fear of snakes (180). When Plato runs off, Rena steps into “the junction of the two paths, where she paused doubtfully …. she became aware that a man was approaching her from each of the two paths. In one she recognized the eager and excited face of George Tryon, flushed with anticipation of their meeting, and yet grave with uncertainty of his reception. Advancing confidently along the other path she saw the face of Jeff Wain, drawn, as she imagined in her anguish, with evil passions which would stop at nothing” (181). Rena’s choice is to turn and run the other way, into the “underbrush” and “prickly shrubs and briars.” It begins to rain heavily as she finds “herself penetrating deeper and deeper into the forest” (182). She falls into a “morass,” and as she becomes more lost, encounters a “huge black snake.” Wain seeks shelter and Tryon leaves, hoping not to alienate her further. Rena, toiling through this shock, begins to succumb to her sickness in the form of a brain fever. Rena, triangulated by men who largely stand in for racial ideologies and their patriarchal conditions, chooses first to abandon society and, then, to die. In a stunning reversal of what could have been caustic sentimentalism, Rena’s boldest choice is itself quite nihilistic. She embraces the death drive as a desiring black body rather than be triangulated in a bifurcated path. One can imagine how powerful a statement it would be to leave Rena lost and alone in the woods, confronted by snakes, a desiring body unfaithful to pursuant men. But Frank Fowler is still in play.

45 This could obviously be an intensely loaded symbol — the mythology of the black penis, Satan and temptation, and patriarchy all rolled into one. The only reason I do not linger on it is that this chapter is much more interested in narrative trajectory and spatial metaphors than pure sexual symbolism.
Frank, seeking Rena out on a whim, rides his mule and cart out from Patesville. Along the way, he hears a noise from the thicket and is startled to find there a white woman; the white woman, however, is actually Rena, who, in a delirium, has wandered from her sickbed and back out into the wild, thinking she is still being pursued. The parallels between Warwick’s misrecognition of Rena as an anonymous white woman in the novel’s opening scene and Frank’s misrecognition of her in this one are conspicuous, as Rena’s terrible anonymity as an object of desire is once again played up. Frank knows well that if he is seen with this white woman — who appears to have been the victim of a violent crime — he will undoubtedly be accused of her rape.

Rena first cries out “‘Mamma, oh, mamma!’” and her voice clues Frank to her identity. She resolutely clings to the consanguine bond between her and her mother as something like a home. In this moment, Rena does not recognize Frank, partially because of her fever, but also because, once again, Frank has never entered her view as a possibility for partnership. She instead, as Frank tries to lift her into the cart, misrecognizes him in return: “‘Yes, I know you, Jeff Wain. Go away from me! Go away!'” (191). When Frank curses Wain, Rena performs another insulting misrecognition of Frank, mistaking him for George: “George …. do you love me? How much do you love me? Ah, you don’t love me! …. I’m black; you don’t love me; you despise me!’” (192). As he valorously takes her back to the house behind the cedars in a cart — expressly against Molly’s wishes that her daughter ride in a carriage — Rena finally becomes the tragic Guenevere to Frank’s Lancelot. Facing death at the hands of suspicious whites, Frank heroically rescues Rena so that she can die in the exact place she started, preserved in her integrity as a tragic desiring body, yet also transposed into royalty. When Tryon finally finds Molly’s home in Patesville, fully devoted and ready to marry her, it is too late — not only has
Rena finally recognized Frank’s love for her, she has died. And not only has she died, she has died within the reach of a final interpellation: she is, according to Homer Pettifoot, who breaks the news to Tryon, “‘Mis’ Molly Walden’s daughter Rena’” (195). The intensely abrupt last line of this novel, a melodramatic dagger, serves to put Rena once more into her role in the symbolic order, paying for the sins of her sexually transgressive mother and father. She is robbed of her brother’s pseudonymous surname, “Warwick”; she spurns the names “Tryon” and “Wain.” And even in her final reabsorption into the symbolic order of the Walden family, her name still lacks meaning in and of itself. To be nameless, to Chesnutt and Rena, is to find that one’s desire is too pure to navigate the vulgar economy of societal love. She becomes instrumentalized as the dead queer of *House Behind the Cedars*, unfaithful to the available roads she travels, unable to be faithfully reproduced, represented, and recognized by others. In brief, *The House Behind the Cedars* becomes a queer pathology novel that sacrifices its protagonist on the altar of ironic purity, via her unwillingness to be used as a sex object for white supremacy or black uplift. It valorizes sexual and gender antinormativity as a resistance to dominant political formations, as a brand of tragic heroism. Finally, it sites this sexually transgressive heroism in the nameless body of the mixed-race subject, her blackness forever tangled with queerness to the point of indistinguishability. Ironically, though, this sexually transgressive subject is *chaste*, *straight*, and *light-skinned* — the implications of this reversal of expectations are endless. In her chastity, she is marked by a periperformative of transgressive sexuality, a declaration of her will not to have sex; but, to add another layer of complexity, this already assumes that her sexually transgressive

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46 For more on the theory of periperformative sexuality, see Eve Sedgwick’s essay “Around the Performative: Periperformative Vicinities in Nineteenth-Century Narrative” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Much like in *The House Behind the Cedars*, one of the central points of analysis in Sedgwick’s essay is the periperformative of the marriage vow, “I do.”
status is not already foisted upon her by her mixed-race status, that she is not always marked queer and propelled toward sexual antinormativity.

**Namelessness and Consecration**

Despite the fact Chesnutt won the Spingarn Medal in 1928, Chesnutt did not seem to have a lasting influence on twentieth-century authors beyond the Harlem Renaissance, and few scholars have noted any continuity between his work and the work of similar authors like James Baldwin, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, or Wallace Thurman. Yet, as I have illustrated here, Chesnutt’s work serves as a magnificent and thematically complicated example of the prototypical queer desire ethos of the twentieth-century. But despite the fact that so much of *Cedars* and Chesnutt’s analysis of mixed-race sexual identity seems to resonate with queer epistemology, it would be unsatisfactory to simply “queer” Chesnutt and the Nadir. Following Peter Coviello’s recommendation in *Tomorrow’s Parties* (2013) that queer theorists ought to be attempting to understand pre-twentieth-century theories of expansive intimacy and transgressive desire on their own terms — that is, without the codified body of the queer, usually the gay male, holding us up against the wheel of the present — I would instead like to dwell on what something like *Cedars* might offer to a current queer cultural and political scene that has depended on and arrived at a queer body whose purity is consecrated by birth. For anyone who has grown more than a little weary of trendy and patronizing “Born This Way”-isms that seek to taxonomize and instrumentalize the queer body for political purposes, *Cedars* offers an excellent lesson in how using sexually transgressive bodies and attempting to channel their desires flattens and dissipates them; the same lesson is essentially illustrated by the political contestation of queer bodies in the 1980s during the emergence of the HIV/AIDS crisis. The extent to which
conservatives wanted to use queer bodies as flags or as cathexis points for the assertion of heterosexual normativity as a “healthy lifestyle” hastened queer deaths. And even now, the degree to which bourgeois white gay families have emblematized the whole of queer politics has caused damaging visibility issues for transgender rights and other vectors of anti-queer discrimination. Rena Walden’s death might give us pause as we consider centering the queer subject’s political visibility on an always already state of homogenous being. The moment she rejects Tryon’s hand in marriage is the moment her queerness turns antiassimilationist, however conditioned and limited it might be.

Chesnutt was not an objective observer of sexually repressive race politics, but rather a participant in them. His idealization of Rena’s virtue amidst the intense triangulation of her being by heteropatriarchal white supremacy partially reproduces Du Boisian propaganda about women of color’s sexual propriety as the last defense against white supremacist ideological and physical violence. Chesnutt cannot speculate options for Rena, avenues for agency and choice, however far fetched; he must give her over to Frank at the end, using Rena’s body once again as a flag to celebrate the integrity of a few good negroes. Did it perform a diagnostic of the fleeting condition of the sexually non-normative under the watchful gaze of race politics? Most certainly, but only at the expense of using Rena herself as an effect; ironically, Chesnutt’s queer pathology does with Rena exactly what Warwick, Tryon, and Wain do: it exploits her. But queer method and recovery should not only seek out what we consider to be exceptional acts of queer propriety and sexual subversion in culture. To do so consecrates an ideal of queerness as a body or a cipher rather than a method.

In this chapter I have been a little more generous to the sexually transgressive potential of novels of the Nadir than African-American literary scholarship of the late 1980s and early 1990s,
challenging the strict divide between the Nadir and the Modernist period. I have also offered a
critique of gender and sexual politics in Chesnutt to reflect changes in the study of gender and
sexuality since the emergence of queer theory, which is especially important given that there is
little work on gender and sexuality in Chesnutt at all. But most critically this chapter makes the
case that Chesnutt’s *Cedars* and novels like it — even if they do not seem legible as queer texts
because of a lack of engagement with homosexuality — offer something to queer critique itself.
In the way *Cedars* toils with namelessness and political pressure as the pathologies of a desiring
mixed-race subject, it raises questions about the discontents of any identitarianism that becomes
so overwrought as to stifle any freedom of movement. When queer critique privileges an
antinormativity tied to a very specific kind of body, it avoids thinking about the ways sexual
transgression is social rather than inherent, and thus negotiated and experienced. To consider the
mixed-race, chaste, straight, and light-skinned Rena as a subject navigating sexual normativity
certainly stretches the definition of queerness as a metric, but it also allows us to think of
transgressive sexuality — in this case, in the form of mixed-race identity — as a concept rather
than in degrees and, thus, to think of ways of challenging sexual repression that get beyond an
identitarian arms race.
Chapter 3: Cruising Ethiopia: Worldmaking, Antinormativity, and Other Aesthetic Strategies in the Work of Pauline E. Hopkins

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there.*

(1)

— Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

We’re lying in the shadow of your family tree
Your haunted heart and me
Brought down by an old idea whose time has come
And in the shadow of the gallows of your family tree
There’s a hundred hearts or three
Pumping blood to the roots of evil to keep them young

— TV on the Radio, “Family Tree” (2008)

**The Historiography of Black Queer Worldmaking**

For black feminists practicing literary studies, the years between 1987-1993 were a prolific time. The institutionalization of cultural and ethnic studies had occurred steadily through the 1960s and 1970s. It was the latter end of the “Canon Wars,” the heated debate in literary scholarship over whether there should be a canon and whether or not, if there were one, it should be deliberately expanded to include more work by people traditionally marginalized in Western culture. Proponents of canon expansion were “winning” the fight, although “winning” is not the right word to describe it given that they soon had concerns about the co-optation of multiculturalism by dominant forces. Increased support, however marginal, to the institutionalization of minoritarian knowledges in the 1980s and 1990s made recovery work much easier and, as a result, dozens of new texts by African-Americans circulated in rapidly.

through literary and cultural studies; however, much of this recovery work would not translate into mass readership of proto-feminist work, which inevitably found itself outside the bounds of the “literary.”

Due to decades of entrenched institutional racism, black feminist scholarship was quite novel at this time and there was a growing appetite and audience for it; however, because of the limitations of the literary studies discipline, black feminists had to do the legwork of inventing an analytic method on their own. This is particularly true with regard to scholarship on recently recovered nineteenth-century domestic and sentimental novels by women of color. Nina Baym’s *Woman’s Fiction* (1978) and Jane Tompkins’ *Sensational Designs* (1985), among other groundbreaking New Historicist and feminist texts taking an interest in the sentimental and domestic traditions (and also calling into question the predominance of modernist-quama masculinist aesthetic attitudes) were important, but, as with much literature-oriented 1970s and 1980s cultural studies scholarship, the methods they invented by-and-large lacked a critical race theory dimension.

Women-of-color feminists of this time knew that debates circulating around the institutionalization of ethnic and cultural studies programs, women-of-color feminism, sexuality studies, and canon expansion were remarkably similar to debates that raged in the African-American literary tradition at the end of the nineteenth century, right around the time of its inauguration.48 Thus, the linear progressivist notion that twentieth-century modernity and its aesthetic and educational prerogatives authorized people of color was lacking — the Harlem

48 Pauline E. Hopkins and others explicitly suggested in their work that they were inventing an African-American literary subculture in the Post-Reconstruction period and Kenneth Warren, in his popular book *What Was African-American Literature?*, has popularized the notion that African-American literature is a historicizable genre centered on an array of formal codes and social concerns that emerged in Jim Crow America and “ended” after the Civil Rights movement.
Renaissance, Civil Rights era literature, and the Black Arts Movement did not fully liberate people of color, let alone women of color. In much the same way, 1920s and 1930s free love ideology on homosexuality and gender couldn’t have foreseen The Lavender Scare or how the HIV/AIDS crisis and the Reagan administration’s response to it would engender a new Puritanism, rife with prohibitive attitudes about intimacy in America. The disciplining of knowledge throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries not only involved a push toward inclusion, but this inclusion catalyzed a standardization of knowledge that couldn’t help but exclude, thus enduing all presently circulating archives with a trace of what has been omitted.49 Indeed, the question at the heart of the 1990s, 2000s, and beyond about emerging disciplines, recovery, and minoritarian knowledge construction is not, “How can we make this archive more inclusive?” but, “How can we make our construction of this archive and our scholarship less totalizing, messier, transhistorical, polygeneric, interdisciplinary, or aware of its scope?”

As Roderick Ferguson has noted in The Reorder of Things (2012), it was out of black feminism that these latter interdisciplinary questions emerged and it is in queer theoretical scholarship that they grew. But the primary lesson to receive, when one looks back at the influx of black feminist literary criticism between 1987-1993, is not that black feminism emerged in the 1980s and then queer theory emerged in the 1990s to supersede it — that is anathema to what many of those writers really argued about the genealogies of their critique. What they argued was that black feminism’s traditions went back much further than their twentieth-century institutional markings would have us believe; if black feminism can be described as a historicizable genre, it emerged in 1890s women-authored black uplift novels and through The National Organization of

49 See Michel Foucault’s The Order of Things (1966) and, more specific to the latter point, Jacques Derrida’s Archive Fever (1995). Derrida essentially argues that all archives bear the trace of exclusion and absence, an argument related to the problematic nature of “inclusion” as a central principle of social justice.
Colored Women’s clubs. This is, of course, at the same time that the “fairy” emerged on Bowery stages in New York (Chauncey 99), thus ushering in queer theoretical discourse in a gestural economy, however ephemeral or limited. These discourses, the discourses of transgressive sexuality and sexual liberation in America and the discourse of a woman-of-color feminism, overlap.

As Hazel V. Carby argues in her landmark essay “‘On the Threshold of Woman’s Era’: Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory” (1985), women-of-color authored domestic and sentimental novels of the late-nineteenth century were different than the sentimental and domestic novels that came out of the homogenously white segment of the Cult of True Womanhood. Genteel as they may seem on first approach, novels and other texts by Frances Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, and Pauline E. Hopkins are largely about resisting sexual oppression and making a mark on African-American political discourse (264). As feminists (and I suggest no qualifying “proto” where Cooper, Harper, and Hopkins are concerned), Carby and her nineteenth-century predecessors understood that disciplining sexual desire was a fundamental technology of not only patriarchy, but its comrade-in-arms — white supremacism:

Black feminists understood that the struggle would have to take place on the terrain of the previously colonized: the struggle was to be characterized by redemption, retrieval, and reclamation — not, ultimately, characterized by an unrestrained utopian vision …. thus, these black feminists expanded the limits of conventional ideologies of womanhood to consider subversive relationships between women, motherhood without wifehood, wifehood as a partnership outside of an economic exchange between men, and men as partners and not patriarchal fathers. (276)

While I will trouble Carby’s point about “unrestrained utopian vision” a bit later on in my ruminations on Hopkins, I do want to point out that Carby seeded what would become a popular thought in this essay (which, incidentally, appeared in the same 1985 issue of Critical Inquiry as Gayatri Spivak’s “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”): that subversive
relationships between women, whether homosocial or erotic, played a role in black uplift
discourse generated by women-of-color. Carby would go on in *Reconstructing Womanhood*
(1987) to argue that feminism, women-of-color-oriented or otherwise, was not totalizable in
specific bodies, epochs, or books, but that black feminism should be “regarded critically as a
problem, not a solution, as a sign that should be interrogated, a locus of contradictions” (15).
Indeed, when black feminism is described in this way, one can see how it would be quite
amenable to overlaps with, say, sexuality studies — it, after all, calls into the question the notion
that sex, race, and gender are stable categories that developed exclusively to one another; as I
have argued earlier, a primary problem that drives this project is sexuality studies’ predominantly
white and Eurocentric norms, at least where examinations of literary culture are concerned.

In the introduction of this project, I discussed Ann duCille’s 1990 review of John
D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman’s *Intimate Matters* and particularly noted duCille’s positions
that few, if any, gender and sexuality scholars consider black sexuality “in the context of a
culture of resistance” (110). duCille warned that as long as we believe that concentrating on
“white, middle-class, heterosexual attitudes and activities’ is ‘inevitable,’” that gender and
sexuality studies would only service to “marginalize, phenomenalize, and misread those othered
Americans whom history has traditionally sought to annihilate, enslave, colonize, and exclude”
(127).

DuCille’s call for a race-focused gender and sexuality studies works on a number of
levels. I do not agree with all the criticisms she makes about *Intimate Matters*. But I do think her
notion that poor citational methods reproduce identititarian hierarchies resonates with this project
in particular — if we go on believing that queer discourse popped up out of nowhere as the
natural result of decades of growing support for progressive, free-love ideology, we actually fail
to account for women-of-color’s experiences as experiences garnered from within the subjectivity of the sexually transgressive, the sexually othered — the “queer.” When we center sexuality studies and queer theory on women-of-color, we perform a much more influential and useful act of antiracist theorization. Moreover, we tap into a longer, more robust conversation about American sexuality that does not codify it in gay-white-male bodies, a conversation that allows for the fact that African-Americans are still subjects of sexual oppression today. Finally, we revisit the notion that historiography, as we practice it, is always objective and right and that the arc of progress, through time, bends toward justice.

This chapter argues that nascent women-of-color feminism from late-nineteenth century America, especially in archives that were avowedly part of an emergent African-American literary tradition, sentimental novels, and domestic novels, seeded the recent and very popular concepts of queer worldmaking and queer utopianism, particularly as these ideas are expressed by theorists José Esteban Muñoz and Elizabeth Freeman. As such, it argues that queer theory should attempt more often to center on late-nineteenth-century work by women-of-color and that the novels and magazine writings of Hopkins in particular are a font of inspiration and information on the historical emergence of queer worldmaking. This is because her work is largely based on the notion that patriarchal and white supremacist dominance were purchased through the sexual repression of women and the disciplining of their bodies, and that sexually non-normative others held an epistemological and political key to antiracist progress. Her work abounds with themes of antinormative worldmaking and, even from within a genteel, middle-class, heteronormative genre, a little free love ideology. Finally, this chapter provides a much-needed complement to the grim sexual and gender determinism of authors like Charles W. Chesnutt, whose approach to the pathology of human sexuality, while in many ways offering an
incisive and powerful diagnostic of gender and sexual oppression in its time, could not as readily lay the groundwork for an upheaval in sex politics.

**Utopianist Impulses and the Question of the Genteel in Hopkins Scholarship**

Claudia Tate’s *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century* (1992) offers a very ambitious, thorough look at about a dozen sentimental and domestic novels written by women-of-color at the end of the nineteenth century. While many scholars, including Tate, are careful to offer nuanced arguments about the extent to which these women’s ideas were radical — rhetorically or substantively — Tate also offers a fine recapitulation of her argument almost midway through the book, writing that she reads these novels as

interventions in late-nineteenth-century social and literary ideologies …. symbolic expressions of their own racial, sexual, and personal desires …. desire as wistful longing, reflective dream, emotional displacement, sanctioned aspiration, and practical ambition, conscious and unconscious, rational and irrational, potentially real or exclusively imaginary …. I read these novels as allegories of racial and sexual liberation, as plots of self-definition, self-individuation, indeed as quests that privilege an exploration of the black-female desiring subject of the Reconstruction era. (95)

Tate’s words here, though contextualized by a book that still takes a fairly originalist approach toward the work of these writers, do add something to black feminist epistemology’s attitudes toward late-nineteenth-century black uplift texts by women-of-color. Whereas Carby suggests that these texts did not offer an “unrestrained utopian vision,” Tate’s words are, I argue, more in line with the spirit of these texts: they are strategic and cunning expressions of desire, of wistful longing, real and imaginary, but always coming back to the construction of a black and female desiring subject who can effect sexual and racial liberation. In queer theory, this kind of work — which primarily emerges through utopianist, paraliterary, and speculative art (especially sci-fi
and fantasy) — is often referred to as a kind of queer worldmaking. To quote José Esteban Muñoz, whose book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* is the most authoritative book on queer utopianism and futurity, “queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future …. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present …. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*” (1). Muñoz offered this argument as an antidote to the popular (though sometimes mischaracterized) circulation of the negativity thesis in queer theory, particularly Lee Edelman’s polemical essay against the reproductive mandate, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. He did this in part because of his position that the gay white male-centric canon had become too iconic in queer culture; he also argued against the notion that the role of the queer in culture is, simply put, to embody antireproductivity and negative critique; he argued instead that queer action was imbued with a concern for the future in many ways, especially once removed from gay white males and recentered on people of color (“Antisocial” 825-26). 

I have already discussed how recent work by Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, Darieck Scott, Robert Reid-Pharr, and Mason Stokes, among others, pushes for an interrogation of the terms “black” and “queer,” experimenting with their synonymous value. If, risking false equivalence, we read Tate’s theory of women-of-color worldmaking and utopianism above as also a theory of *queer*

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50 Muñoz argued this in a roundtable at a reportedly contentious 2005 MLA Convention, which also featured Lee Edelman, Robert L. Caserio, J. Jack Halberstam, and Tim Dean. In extending Muñoz’s argument to nineteenth-century literary studies, I also suggest that much of what drives both nineteenth-century American literary scholarship and gay male scholarship is an interest in exceptional male alienation. This is why work by Herman Melville and Henry David Thoreau is so amenable to scholarship by gay white men — it not only reaffirms feelings of sexual exceptionality, but also feelings of male exceptionality. Ironically, these archives, when analyzed under the umbrella of a queer theoretical discourse, create criticism in which patriarchy and gay activism suddenly make strange bedfellows.
worldmaking and utopianism, then it would seem we have every reason to understand Muñoz, Tate, and Hopkins’ work as being part of a long and often beautifully rendered series of questions on sexual liberation and how best to effect it.

Finally, as Muñoz discussed in *Disidentifications*, what might characterize queer-of-color relationships more than anything is the act of disidentification — the compulsory relationship queer-of-color people form with dominant culture as they revise it, extract pleasure from it, and survive it. Muñoz, like Tate, Carby, and Ducille, understood that political legibility and utopianism were not mutually exclusive concepts — one could write sexual utopianism from within the most recognizable forms, the forms that seem to belong to patriarchy, heteronormativity, and white supremacism. Hopkins, also a black feminist, writing about sexual oppression and liberation in a speculative, sci-fi modality, understood this, too, a point that emerges when one looks over the waves of Hopkins scholarship that have emerged since 1985.

This last point, that Hopkins was — and I risk anachronism here — a black feminist writing disidentificatory, utopianist, paraliterary speculative fiction about sexual liberation, should suggest also that the writers who very often do fall under this umbrella — Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler — are the spiritual heirs of Hopkins. While I am not particularly invested in the discussion of a path of influence, I do think it’s productive to think of Hopkins, Delany, and Butler as occupying similar discursive territory and to cross a wide periodic boundary to do so. As Abdur-Rahman and Scott’s transhistorical work shows, and as Elizabeth Freeman has previously argued, the questions we ask about erotics often challenge the definite nature of linear progressivism and its historiographic practice, in no small part because they are attempts to understand how sexually transgressive people, for whom reproduction and family are

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51 See Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), which makes a very fine case for how theories of erotics almost always involve some kind of temporal disjunction.
not guaranteed, can pass on culture; if we want to center sexuality studies on women-of-color, it involves reworking our methodologies in a way that risks temporal anachronism. To this point, scholarship on Hopkins discusses her use of alternative historiography often, though not typically in the same breath as an analysis of transgressive sexuality.

Speaking more generally of Hopkins scholarship, since about 1985 — after most recovery work had occurred — it can be broken into a few categories, which of course share some concerns and qualities: black feminist criticism, including critique about Hopkins’ tenuous relationship with Cult of True Womanhood ideologies; the “genteel v. radical” debate, which generally has to do with whether or not Hopkins’ novels are resonant with late-twentieth century race and gender politics; analyses of monogenism and other nineteenth-century scientific ideologies in her work; and theorizations of Hopkins’ alternative historiographic impulses, including her interest in Ethiopianism and Egyptology. There are valuable outliers, too,

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52 See, in addition to the aforementioned work by Carby, Tate, and Ducille, Deborah Horvitz, "Hysteria and Trauma in Pauline Hopkins' Of One Blood; Or, the Hidden Self" (1999), and Jill Bergman, “‘Everything We Hoped She’d Be’: Contending Forces in Hopkins Scholarship” (2004).


including work on Hopkins and music or sonics\(^{56}\) and Hopkins’ usage of the “tragic mulatto”
trope, amalgamation ideologies, and post-racialism.\(^{57}\)

Most relevant to this project, however, are the surprising few essays on Hopkins’
treatment of sexual transgression and sexual ideology that have circulated through queer
theoretical circles. Let me be careful in differentiating, here, black feminist criticism about the
subject of sexual ideologies in Hopkins and queer scholarship about the same subject. In much of
black feminist criticism, the guiding principle of the work and the umbrella category for it is that
of African-American studies. However, scholars like Tate, Carby, and Ducille have been cunning
in the interdisciplinary drift of their work — they understood, as Carby’s words above suggest,
that the question of race in the late-nineteenth century and beyond was a question about sexual
propriety. Further, as Ducille’s words above suggest, black feminism certainly takes as a given
that sexuality studies methodology is vital to an understanding of race, but sexuality studies,
understood as a discrete institutional formation from critical race theory with a separate
audience, has had more trouble making race a vital part of its understanding of sexuality. So, for
scholars whose work is avowedly committed to producing knowledge on the history of sexuality,
its changing character, its epistemological value, and its range of expressions and
representations, non-white archives have either acted as a blind spot or a curio. In sum, the
currency of my project is not in an analysis that unearths or explains Hopkins’ theories of sexual
transgression for an African-American studies audience — black feminism has already done a
fine job of this. Rather, the thrust of this work is to improve the archival breadth and knowledge

\(^{56}\) See Nicole N. Aljoe, “Aria for Ethiopia: The Operatic Aesthetic of Pauline Hopkins's of One
Blood” (2012) and Daphne Brooks’ “Divas and Diasporic Consciousness” in her book *Bodies in

\(^{57}\) See Melissa Asher Daniels, "The Limits of Literary Realism: Of One Blood’s Post-Racial
Fantasy by Pauline Hopkins" (2013) and JoAnn Pavletich, "Pauline Hopkins and the Death of
the Tragic Mulatta" (2015).
base of queer discourse so that I may urge it toward a more forthright analysis of race as sexuality.

Queer scholarship on Hopkins, limited as it is, is intelligent and influential. I think, first and foremost, of the work of Siobhan Somerville. Somerville’s essay “Passing Through the Closet in Pauline E. Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*” was originally published in *American Literature* in 1997 and has since been republished in revised form in her monograph *Queering the Color Line* and Cathy Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher’s critical anthology *No More Separate Spheres!* (2002). It is probably one of the most widely-read essays about Hopkins’ work. Somerville’s work is primarily about the synchronic development of homosexuality and blackness as identities in scientific and sociological discourse of the early Jim Crow era. Her concern with Hopkins, however, offers what might be the only gentle critique of early black feminist criticism on Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*. While there is no lack of analysis on sexual transgression in *Contending Forces* in 1980s and 1990s black feminist scholarship, the few characterizations in their work of this transgressive desire as “lesbian” or “queer,” even when it is explicitly described as such, are curious. Somerville, thus, makes an attempt in “Passing

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58 The only other work that I think falls under this category is Vincent Woodard’s "Deciphering the Race-Sex Diaspora in Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces*" (2006). Woodard argues that “Hopkins adds gender and sex to [a] cultural nationalist framework, creating a race-sex diaspora that speaks from nineteenth-century black female experience.” He further claims that Hopkins has four theoretical goals: to situate black female sexuality in black cultural formation, to craft a mythology of black women’s experiences, to gender the middle passage, and to suggest sex and gender as mediums of race against masculinist formations (72). Woodard and Somerville’s work is both highly valuable to my own in that neither takes for granted the centrality of sex and gender to Hopkins’ conceptions of race.

59 Carby, in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, appears to make no reference to lesbian themes or subtext in Hopkins’ or anyone else’s work, nor does Tate in *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*. DuCille makes mention of lesbianism in *The Coupling Convention*, but only in regard to Harlem Renaissance works by Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset. The Harlem Renaissance is already widely perceived to be a central archive for sexual libertinism and sexual transgression, including homoeroticism.
Through the Closet” to read Sappho Clark’s self-chosen name, as well as her intimate relationship with Dora, not exclusively as symbolic tools for describing radical relationships between straight women of color; rather, she explores the implications of a more literal reading of Sappho and Dora’s potential lesbianism. Even in this, Somerville does not necessarily write in order to argue that they are, but rather to argue that the potential for lesbianism in this scene is palpable and important (80-81). I do not conduct my work with the same interest in the utilization of homosexual subject matter and representation in black uplift novels — I find in recent years that sometimes the reclamation of homosexuality in pre-Victorian literature, for instance, is a bit overdone and simple — but I do find valuable the way in which Somerville centers sexuality studies on African-American literature, the way she finds the signs for a genealogy of transgressive sexuality within this literature. She succeeds in not making black sexuality other to a normative and homogenously white sexuality.

Another gap in Hopkins scholarship, aside from a lack of interest from queer studies scholars, is the limited range of texts they approach. Without a doubt, the most popular text in Hopkins criticism is also her only non-serial novel: Contending Forces. Far fewer essays discuss Hopkins’ magazine fiction, and when they do, they typically discuss Of One Blood rather than Hagar’s Daughter (1901–1902) or Winona (1902–1903). While we might not get far speculating on the reasons for this, I would assume that this is because non-serialized novels have an air of prestige in modern literary studies that serialized fiction, because it is geared toward popular audiences, doesn’t; perhaps this is also because Contending Forces is a quite masterful epic with an ambitious scope, a range of ideologically representative characters from the Post-Reconstruction era of racial uplift, and a substantive and forthright political voice. Still, I find that the number of articles on Contending Forces, although few in comparison to work by Henry
James or Edith Wharton in the same era, has caused scholarship on it to become a touch recursive.

In this chapter, I attend to a gap in queer Hopkins scholarship by also attending to Hopkins’ magazine fiction and select correspondence during her tenure with *The Colored American Magazine (CAM)*. Hopkins’ archival papers consist primarily of correspondence from a white benefactor of *CAM* — John C. Freund, founder and editor of the magazine *Musical America* and devoted follower of Booker T. Washington. Much of this correspondence is also addressed to Colonel William Dupree, a Civil War veteran and the proprietor of *CAM* during Hopkins’ editorial tenure. In addition, Hopkins’ archival papers contain one lengthy letter from Hopkins to William Monroe Trotter, a co-founding member of the N.A.A.C.P and a political opponent to Booker T. Washington’s accommodationism; the letter details, in a highly conspiratorial and charged manner, Hopkins’ unceremonious exit from *CAM* upon its purchase by Booker T. Washington. Hopkins claimed to Trotter that she was forced out of her position due to conspiracy from what she saw as a highly powerful Washingtonian cabal of political operatives. While the Freund correspondence does not contain return letters from Hopkins or Dupree, one can infer Hopkins’ responses to Freund’s pressure to make the magazine more male exceptionalist and civically oriented, especially from the letter she writes to Trotter.

While scholars like Hanna Wallinger, Sigrid Anderson Cordell, and Jill Bergman have all attended to or at least referenced Hopkins’ correspondence with Freund, scholars have not yet undertaken extensive textual analysis of these letters. This is in part because these valuable texts, while having their significance documented in scholarship, are not themselves widely available. Looking at them closely and anew from the perspective of a study in transgressive sexuality and gender performance yields a crucial observation about Hopkins: that she was highly skilled in
disidentificatory political tactics and that, by comparison to most political writing of the time on
the question of race, Hopkins’ work did embody, at times, a kind of unrestrained, or at least
quasi-restrained, utopian vision. This bolsters the larger claim I make in this chapter, that
Hopkins’ work embodies or perhaps even seeds the concepts of queer worldmaking and queer-
of-color disidentification through its challenges to the disciplinary structures that interpellated
and exploited transgressive and normative sexualities and gender performances.

After this exegesis of the Freund letters, I offer a few notes on Contending Forces before
switching the brunt of my attention to Of One Blood. Scholars have compellingly argued that Of
One Blood is a novel that trades in doctrines of Ethiopianism, as well as in nineteenth-century
race and evolutionary sciences. Further, they have argued that Of One Blood plays with the trope
of the tragic mulatta on its way to offering a poignant challenge to America’s overdetermined
and intractable race politics. Picking up on these arguments, particularly those that highlight the
novel’s tendencies toward alternative historiography as a kind of magical thinking, I suggest that
Of One Blood is a paraliterary speculative fiction that hybridizes high and low literary tendencies
in order to challenge increasingly inflexible ideas of sexual and gender propriety in both white
supremacist and black uplift movements of the era. Further, I argue that Of One Blood
anticipates the theoretical genre of queer-of-color worldmaking in both cultural theory and
novels of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, including in work by Octavia Butler
and Samuel R. Delany. Much like work by Butler or Delany, who are also black science-fiction
authors concerned with gender, sexuality, and race, Hopkins’ work challenges the stultifying
border between theory and literature that is so often received as doxa. Challenging such a border
is important to queer-of-color critique because it allows us to accurately value the autonomy of
organic intellectuals — including the authors of underserved cultural work — and look at their
cultural works as epistemological, philosophical endeavors into the production of minoritarian knowledge. In concluding remarks, I discuss what this means for the relationship between women-of-color feminism, queer-of-color critique, and queer theory and suggest also that a further look into the sentimental and domestic traditions from queer studies scholars could yield excellent results.

“Papa Freund” and The Erotic Dynamics of White Patronage

“I would suggest to you that, in the future, you do not put young colored women on the front page. This is a mistake.” John C. Freund, editor of the magazine *Musical America* wrote these words in a letter to Pauline E. Hopkins, editor of *CAM* on January 27th, 1904, about eight months before Hopkins would leave the magazine under conspicuous circumstances. Freund goes on to explain in the letter that Hopkins should be focused on portraits of men whose accomplishments would transcend the boundaries of race, so much so as to impress upon white people the virtues of blacks. These men (and some women, he concedes) would come from universities, associations, organizations, and clubs, thus giving white people an adequate idea of what the “better element in the colored race” was doing. In doing so, Freund argues that she would inject “heart and life” into the colored people.

One pictures, in this exchange, how Hopkins and the magazine’s proprietor, Col. Dupree, would have received such letters from white patrons. At play here is a traditional, explicit example of what Kimberlé Crenshaw would influentially call “intersectionality”; in the original sense, Crenshaw meant this to describe the aspects in which an oppressed minority might be oppressed and interpellated under a number of different identitarian vectors as they move through society. This would trouble the prevailing mode of identity politics in which social subjects moved through society primarily under one consolidated sign, one around which most of
their political identity would be organized (1242–44). To catalog such oppressions as they manifest here, Freund condescends to Hopkins as a woman; more generally disallows the notion that women could attain significant social power to impress whites, whether Freund means it tactically or earnestly; dabbles in the kind of class elitism propagated by both Du Bois and Washington in their time; and, less evidently, suggests that the “heart and mind” of the black American could only ever be taken seriously through propagandistic and severely limited representational strategies. More implicitly, one might argue that Freund, as a benefactor, lords his wealth over Hopkins to bolster his patriarchal authority over her, a point I further argue in my analysis of Hopkins’ letter to William Monroe Trotter below. To recap: Freund oppresses Hopkins according to gender, class, and race; more implicitly, his antagonism of Hopkins takes on an erotic dimension.

The concept of racial antagonism as having an erotic dimension is one I borrow from Sharon Patricia Holland’s *The Erotic Life of Racism*. Holland claims, attending to the black/white binary as it is represented and desired in the United States, that racism, in its quotidian circulation, involves a kind of desire or expectation of the other. This is true especially of the practice of interpellation or hailing, in which the racialized other acts as a medium between a desiring subject and his or her ideology. For Holland, “The erotic …. touches upon that aspect of racist practice that cannot be accounted for as racist practice but must be understood as something else altogether” (27). The erotic dimension between Freund and Hopkins takes place on a number of levels, but primarily exists in what Freund desires of and from Hopkins by way of her acquiescence to his racist ideality and white paternalism.

From Freund’s letters on file in the Pauline Hopkins collection at Fisk University, one can ascertain a narrative of antagonism between Freund, Hopkins, and Dupree. The day after
Freund wrote the above letter to Hopkins, he wrote another to Dupree restating many of the same points and touting the same representational strategy. However, he also urges Dupree to do so under the pretense that it will boost sales and circulation. Freund writes,

You must not endeavor for a moment to publish a general literary magazine …. You should make your magazine the exponent of the work of the colored people, whether individuals, clubs, universities, churches, organizations of any kind whatever. This would at once give you an increased circulation, make the magazine regarded, not only by the colored people but by all the whites, as the exponent and representative of the better class of the colored race; in other words, I would try and make news the leading feature of the magazine rather than criticisms, essays, and literary matter generally.

Perhaps Freund expects largely the same thing as many of the foremost race men of his time: a kind of marketable respectability politics, one that will transcend audiences and be virtuous by merit of its visibility alone. He suggests, however, that this cannot be made via “general” literary culture, but only by way of propaganda. Freund, then, desires a certain kind of representation of the Negro, and in his three-way discussion between Dupree and Hopkins attempts to interpellate and capture such a Negro in representation. What, however, is Freund’s motivation for such desire? Is he merely a confused altruist, or has he settled on a picture of black ideality that serves him, a black ideality he desires?

In some letters, one would assume the former. For instance, Freund suggested to Hopkins in another letter that the objective of CAM “must be to exploit” the “work being done by the Negro people …. The magazine must not argue and fight prejudice on general lines …. but it must prepare the way for a better order of things by demonstrating persistently what the colored people have already [done] for themselves, and thus prove beyond controversy that they can be uplifted, and that their future is assured, provided only they obtain opportunity and justice.” Freund, here and elsewhere, maintains that, while black literary culture can “advance the culture,” more would need to be done to engage white audiences. Perhaps, then, Freund’s
interpellation of Hopkins as subjugated to his will and his brand of patronage are inextricable — he sees a narrow view of political visi/viability which involves deference to the wills and tastes of whites. In his letter to Hopkins, he does not express desire for representations of black “work” as his own desire, but he implies, by commanding about Dupree and Hopkins, that it would be in their best interests to take his advice. Freund, then, would put Hopkins in a difficult position, a position out of which she wrote most of her literature. Hopkins would have to ask herself if her literature would be written as agitation for black rights under the widest range of imaginative expression possible, or if she would have to see circulation and visibility as the highest order of politics and, thus, create an image of black propriety which whites like Freund could desire.

Freund would continue to write Hopkins and Dupree for two more months before withdrawing his support, directorially and financially, from the magazine altogether in April of 1904. In his final few letters, Freund stressed more than ever that his ideas for the magazine’s editorial strategy came directly from Booker T. Washington — in the end, he withdrew his support because Dupree and Hopkins were unable to guarantee that the magazine would operate solely to describe the “work” being done by black people. In a particularly striking passage, Freund tells Hopkins, “The work itself is to me so exhilarating that if I have any regret it is that my face is not black and that with such education and force as I have, I cannot go right out into the open and battle for justice alongside Booker T. Washington.” If we are to take Freund’s desire in earnest — a desire to be black — we might also understand that his antagonism to Hopkins and Dupree is merely an extension of his wish. Freund understands himself to be the emblem of black ideality, other than for the whiteness of his skin. This then explains what he desires out of Hopkins, Dupree, and CAM — proxies by which he can exercise his subjecthood in black political formation. Who is the ideal woman of color? A white man.
On April 16th, 1905, about a year after the above exchange between Freund, Hopkins, and Dupree, Hopkins gave a narrative of her experiences with CAM and with Freund in a letter to William Monroe Trotter, a narrative I will paraphrase here.

Hopkins came to the CAM in May of 1903. “There seemed to be at that time,” Hopkins writes, “no one else as well qualified to fill the position, for as yet the editing of a high-class magazine was puzzling work even to our best scholars.” Hopkins tells Trotter that, from the beginning, the paper was difficult to make profitable, a common issue among black periodicals. They explored a variety of different topics in the magazine and earnestly debated the idea that “industrial education” was the central strategy by which they could petition for black rights. Early in the magazine’s history, Hopkins and Freund engaged John C. Freund for permission to publish a series of articles he had written on Jamaica. Freund, in addition, began to furnish CAM with a fifteen-dollar monthly contribution. “So genial, so kind, so disinterested did he appear,” writes Hopkins, “that he very soon won our entire confidence …. I thought it a case of pure philanthropy, one of those rare cases which are sometimes found among wealthy, generous, and eccentric white men.”

In early 1904, Freund would become the primary consultant for Hopkins and Dupree with regard to how to make the magazine more profitable; what they had not anticipated was that Freund would primarily attempt to make the magazine more profitable through a drastic change in editorial policy. In the earlygoing of their relationship with Freund, Dupree and Hopkins would write these editorial suggestions off as a kind of negotiable tension of white patronage — later, they would be forced to contend with it more directly.

Amidst the growth of their professional relationship, Hopkins also suggests in her letter to Trotter that Freund may have had more than purely professional designs upon her. In February
of 1904, Freund sent Hopkins a bouquet of Russian violets, the books *Self-Help* (1866) by Samuel Smiles and *Eternalism* (1902) by Orlando J. Smith, a set of expensive furs, and a $25 check:

I had seemed to be a favorite with our benefactor and these special attentions made my position in the office very [uncomfortable]. As I am not a woman who attracts the attention of the opposite sex in any way, Mr. Freund’s philanthropy with regard to myself puzzled me, but knowing that he was aware of my burdens at home, I thought that he was trying to help me in his way. I was so dense that I did not for a moment suspect that I was being politely bribed to give up my race work and principles and adopt the plans of the South for the domination of the Blacks.

Much is striking about Hopkins’ description of Freund’s “attentions” here. She seems to imply at first that Freund’s attention was more than platonic, but it is a possibility she humbly excuses. However, Hopkins depicts Freund’s efforts to bribe her as not so different from an effort to win her romantic favor. Thus, Hopkins appears the victor in ethical purity in this exchange, as she essentially rejects Freund’s efforts to make her into an ideological prostitute, one who opens her legs readily for Southern domination. Whether Freund did in fact want to win Hopkins romantically or merely subjugate her to his ideology via material reward is uncertain — perhaps both are true. But that does not seem to make a difference here; for Freund and Hopkins, white paternalism and its structure of dominance operates through the same materials of the erotic — flowers, money, books, and furs. That Freund apparently does not send the same material rewards to Dupree is telling in this regard.

Because Freund held with CAM’s staff what Hopkins would call “the patriarchal relation of ancient days,” the staff began to call him, amongst each other, “Papa Freund.” This title, I think, is meant both as admiration of his support and as a subtle denigration of white paternalism. Where Hopkins is concerned, one might go a step further and call him “Sugar Daddy Freund.” However, as Hopkins would tell Trotter, Freund’s patience and goodwill — his efforts to enlist
the staff at CAM — only lasted so long. When Hopkins refused to exclude critiques on lynching or, moreover, anything “that would be offensive to the South,” Freund lost his patience. Hopkins, meanwhile, began to grow suspicious that Freund himself was simply acting as a conciliatory proxy for Booker T. Washington. Amid the financial duress of CAM’s proprietors, they sold the magazine to Fred R. Moore of the National Negro Business League, and Timothy Thomas Fortune was installed as editor along with Hopkins as associate editor. Hopkins accepted, begrudgingly, resolving to “succeed to the powers that were …. to keep the magazine alive unless they asked me to publicly renounce the rights of my people.” Only a few months later, Hopkins would be, in her words, “frozen out” and “forced to resign.” She ceded her role as associate editor to Roscoe Conkling Simmons, a nephew of Booker T. Washington. Finally, Hopkins tells Trotter that she has it on good authority that Fortune ghostwrote Washington’s Up From Slavery as well as his famous Atlanta speech (“Cast down your buckets!”); from this, along with Fortune and the New York Age’s money debts to Washington, Hopkins surmises that Washington has effected a long-planned takeover of the magazine. Ironically, Hopkins notes, CAM, against the expectations of Freund and Washington, suffered under its new management and folded, in particular because its new conciliatory platform was unpalatable to its primary readership: black Americans. Thus, conciliation, contrary to Freund’s expectations, was in fact bad for business and, moreover, bad for the race. In closing, she remarks:

With the knowledge which we possess, can we be expected to worship Mr. Washington as a pure and noble soul? Can we be expected to join in paeans of praise to his spotless character and high principles? One cannot help a feeling of honest indignation and contempt for a man who would be a party to defraud a helpless race of an organ of free speech, a band of men of their legal property and a woman of her means of earning a living.

Hopkins’ experiences as the editor of CAM seem to have taught her much. She walked away from the position with a distaste for patriarchal patronage, which she depicts as highly sexist and
racially infantilizing; she also suggests, in her remarks to Trotter, that gender and sexual propriety were important to the doctrine of conciliation and that this was a doctrine shared by paternalistic whites and conciliatory blacks alike. To renounce the rights of her people, for Hopkins, would have also involved her own conciliation to Freund and Washington and everything they represented, especially Freund’s dishonest and highly sexist attempt to coerce Hopkins with lavish gifts. Through these letters, we find Hopkins imagining a kind of black sexual and gender propriety rooted less in the performance of virginal purity and domestic production, and more in a resistance to ideological corruption. For Hopkins, the “young colored women” on the cover of the magazine were paragons of black women’s virtue because of their integrity, their unwillingness to renounce the rights of their people. Thus, Hopkins roots the production of women’s ideality in a context outside of the gender binary and its production of public and private spheres. What, then, would this definition of black women’s integrity mean to Hopkins’ depiction of black women’s sexuality? Knowing that sexual and gender propriety were important to the production of a nascent antiracist movement, how would Hopkins write women-of-color characters to reflect Hopkins’ notion of a fealty to equal rights and justice? What revolutionary acts of stalwart autonomy did Hopkins design for her characters in the assertion of their sexual, desiring selves?

As I have mentioned previously, Hopkins’ letters show her to be well-versed in disidentificatory and negotiative political tactics even in the face of insurmountable patriarchal control. But her utopian vision is difficult to call “restrained,” if only because her unwillingness to represent young colored women as subjugated to white and black men in power is what ultimately got her fired from CAM. Because of Hopkins’ invention of her own standard for ideal womanhood rooted in uncompromised antiracism, and because her novels relish speculative
modes in which the gender binary and sexual desire proper are often challenged and invented, it is clear that Hopkins operated primarily out of a disidentificatory modality of queer worldmaking, a modality that did not begin or end with the authorizing touch of black and white patronage and which would not offer up polite, idealized women for a male-dominated cause. Hopkins’ representation, or rather her invention, of young black men and women’s sexual agency, however genteel on its surface, was underwritten by her commitment to agitational race politics. Moreover, this offers, in Hopkins, a quite modern, intersectional sense of the interrelations and performative ethics of race, sex, and gender; one might even say that, for Hopkins, blackness — in its power to agitate and its will to live without authorization — is antinormative, transgressive, or queer.

**Cruising Ethiopia: Hopkins’ Antinormativity in *Contending Forces* and *Of One Blood***

As I’ve mentioned above, much of the previous scholarship on Hopkins, especially where queer sexuality is concerned, is focused on her 1900 novel *Contending Forces*. This chapter attempts to fill in a gap in queer scholarship on Hopkins by turning attention toward *Of One Blood* and the way it grapples with sexual utopianism and worldmaking through the paraliterary. Before I do so, however, I think it would be best to linger on *Contending Forces* a bit longer in order to point out a few key ways in which scholars have read sexual transgression in Hopkins’ work.

First of all, *Contending Forces*, by merit of the fact it is about the intergenerational development of a sometimes ambiguously raced family over a matter of decades, is plainly premised on the very real relationship between the production of race in America and the disciplining of its reproductive values and habits. Additionally, Hopkins lends irony to this intergenerational development by wedding the bloodlines of two families, the Montforts and the
Pollocks, whose sentimental and political attachments would otherwise leave them utterly bifurcated. On one hand, this is a way for Hopkins to suggest that the resulting image of the historical production of the American family is but a thin veneer over its actual mangrove-like genealogy. But on the other hand, this signals an interest Hopkins would continue to have throughout her magazine fiction: the scientific debate over polygenesis and monogenesis.

In nineteenth-century America, the differentiation between white and black — which the Plessy v. Ferguson decision would argue was actually a differentiation between man and black — was typically based off the scientifically racist and anti-Darwin school of polygenesis. While polygenesis is a broad school of thought, American race scientists, as well as politicians and other cultural figures who adopted their theories, took it to mean that blacks and whites were not only different races, but distinct species, that they shared no common ancestor. This was different from merely basing an argument about black subjugation on an assignation of value to complexion alone — this ostensibly “logical” argument instead fed off the not-so-subtle implication that blacks were not men. Thus, where a concept like “the rights of man” was concerned, using this discourse made it easier to circumvent the dispensation of rights to people of color. Further, interracial reproduction would seem increasingly taboo because of the parallels it would attain to, say, bestiality. The products of interracial reproduction — the amalgamated — would be treated in the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy; subjected to enough psychic stress, depicted as an “accident” or evolutionary misfortune, their social power to upend polygenism by blurring racial distinction would be severely disciplined and constrained.

As scholars have previously noted, Of One Blood finds Hopkins full-throatedly advocating for monogenism by way of her embrace of Ethiopianism, the doctrine of thought in which all world culture is derived from ancient Africa. However, the same interest provides the
premise for *Contending Forces*, which suggests that just beneath the legibly produced network of race relationships in America lies not only racial indeterminacy, but a highly consequential blood relation between all beings. This premise is further compelling because it finds Hopkins escaping the generic axioms of the genteel, domestic, and sentimental traditions, which she is often accused of being a part of. The domestic tradition in literature, for instance, roots its representation in the principle that consanguinity is the highest order of connection between people; the sentimental tradition, on the other hand, roots its representation in the principle that sentimental attachments transcend blood relation, that the wide range of intimacies we experience as humans essentially produce societal meaning. Hopkins, while adopting elements of both traditions, seems to endorse neither viewpoint. Her work implies that consanguinity is important, but also that the incredibly extensive ways in which humanity is linked renders consanguinity’s narrow focus on the family to be wrongheaded. Therefore, in Hopkins’ work, sentimentality inevitably *is* consanguinity; this would seem to also imply that all intimacy between strangers has the power for transgression because it dabbles in the genealogical pool of blood connection. Everyone, it would seem, can act in a sexually transgressive way.

Set against Hopkins’ metaphysical principles about human connection, race, and reproduction are her political principles. Hopkins’ does not allow her work to devolve into a kind of post-racial mushiness — in fact, it is her metaphysical theory of race and sex that makes her depiction of sexual and racial discipline all the more troubling. No scene in *Contending Forces* makes this more apparent than the scene of Mrs. Montfort’s “whipping” at the hands of Hank Davis and Bill Sampson. As many scholars have observed, the whipping — replete with images of garments being ripped, pooling blood, and a snakelike whip — is likely a coded rape (68–69); thus, it not only calls attention to the way sexual violence is used by white supremacists to
punish and subordinate black people, but it shows that the inevitable production of raced beings as a result of this rape would continue the very amalgamationism that these white supremacists claimed to oppose, even under the auspices of maintaining racial “purity.” The courtship narrative running through the second half of the book is evidence of the futility of white supremacist efforts to sexually subjugate black people (this is all keeping in mind that Mrs. Montfort’s race is never fully determined and that her “African blood” is only a matter of gossip in the novel). Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman takes a reading of this scene further to suggest that Hopkins is using a form of transgressive sexuality to depict the perversion inherent in the racial subjugation of gang rape; to Abdur-Rahman, such sexual subjugations through transgressive sex acts often become galvanizing incidents of conscious resistance. By killing off Charles Montfort before he can witness the act of sexual impropriety, Abdur-Rahman argues, Hopkins allows him, as a symbolically black figure (keeping in mind again that Charles is apparently white), to maintain his manhood, thereby circumventing some of the ritual subjugation of black men in lynch culture (75–76). This is keeping in mind, as I’ve shown earlier in Charles W. Chesnutt’s takedown of William Thomas Hannibal, that a nineteenth-century understanding of sexual impropriety was quite fluid and that rape and sodomy existed on a spectrum of pathological, transgressive sex acts.

The other scene in Contending Forces that tends to draw attention from scholars of sexual transgression is the one in which Sappho Clark and Dora Montfort engage in an intimate conversation between women of color, one with lesbian themes. Although Dora thinks that relationships between women of “the same sex” are bound to turn out “disastrously” for one or the other, she nevertheless develops, with Sappho, a “mutual interest” (98). In the chapter entitled “Friendship,” the girls lock themselves inside Sappho’s room where they avail
themselves of bonbons, cream pie, and gossip. Amidst these presentist pleasures and one-on-one intimacy between women, both express an ambivalence toward marriage. When Dora further suggests her disinterest in monogamy, she describes herself as feeling “unsexed” because of it. Sappho calls it “queer talk” (115-22). Sappho’s name, of course, is a direct allusion to the classic Greek poet from the island of Lesbos who wrote erotic poetry about free love and intimacy between people of all sexes. Sappho and Dora’s semi-erotic indulgence in sweets and gossip, much like Rena Walden’s dancing in The House Behind the Cedars, privileges presentist pleasure over concern for the future — as the novel’s narrative voice opines about their relationship, “Care was forgotten; there was new joy in living” (114). Hazel V. Carby suggests rightly that, in this encounter, Sappho embodies the pleasure that can be derived from utopian relationships between women (“Threshold” 275). To illustrate the scene’s relationship to the mutual emergence of black women’s sexuality and homosexuality in American culture, Siobhan Somerville goes further than Carby by suggesting the potency of the lesbian thematics in the novel as lesbian thematics: “Without embracing or rejecting the possibility of lesbian desire, [Hopkins] registers its existence as an ambiguous site for renarrating African American women’s sexual and political desire” (109). Gloria T. Randle adds a third dimension to one’s understanding of this scene: the importance of Sappho’s name as a self-chosen name, an act of self-determination by a woman of color. While endorsing Carby’s reading of the scene as a celebration of friendly intimacies between women of color, Randle also suggests that Hopkins uses the name Sappho not to “characterize her heroine’s sexuality, but to call the reader’s attention to issues of sexuality and to provoke the reader to ask why, of all the names at her disposal, the author would purposely choose one that brings to mind female intimacy” (204–05).
One is almost tempted to call the whole scene itself, via Randle’s analysis, an act of political lesbianism.\(^{60}\)

In such a reading, whether or not Dora and Sappho desire each other in the conventional, sexual sense would be beside the point — their temporary rejection of meager political power qua domestic propriety in favor of presentist pleasures is a queer act in and of itself. Where the sexual production of race is concerned, it is also an act that produces racial relationality on a sentimental, affective level rather than a consanguine one. This, then, is the real power of *Contending Forces* as a queer text: it is able to theorize racial autonomy or the production of race affinity without reproduction and its institutional outlets like marriage. Regardless, *Contending Forces* does eventually couple Sappho and Dora with suitable partners, but the mere suggestion of its utopianist sexual politics is palpable. There’s no one saying, after all, that Dora and Sappho cannot remain “friends” after they marry.

The above is a compelling and established way to read *Contending Forces* and, moreover, much of Hopkins’ work can be discussed under the same thematic umbrella. In my reading of *Of One Blood*, I show how the implications of a “queer” reading of *Contending Forces* not only carry over to the former novel, but that Hopkins indulges in radical, utopianist ideologies about human sexuality that *Contending Forces* actually works to contain. This is to say that, despite the fact *Contending Forces* contains the most homoerotic content of any Hopkins text, that does not make it her “queerest” statement on sexuality and race, nor is that metric beholden to or qualified by the traditional markers we term “queer.” *Of One Blood*, for instance, has a great deal to teach queer analysis about the realm of possibility for sexual

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\(^{60}\) The concept of “political lesbianism,” as well as its central phrase, “Feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice,” are widely attributed to the feminist author Ti-Grace Atkinson. Its proponents generally hold that lesbianism can be a political choice meant to directly combat the constraints of heteropatriarchy.
transgression as a utopian political imaginative. And while homoeroticism may certainly be a part of the text’s internal imaginary, as it is with any text that attempts to theorize and propagate heterosexuality, homoeroticism is not what makes the novel queer.

While the narrative of Of One Blood circulates through the lives of a few characters, it is especially centered on Reuel Briggs⁶¹ and, to a lesser extent, his sister Dianthe. The plodding opening scene introduces us to Reuel as he toils through a melancholic state, questioning the meaning of life and contemplating suicide. Reuel pores over a text called “The Unclassified Residuum,”⁶² a title suggesting escaped or lost knowledge, or at least that which escapes a taxonomy. One is reminded of W. Pratt Annis’ observation to Charles W. Chesnutt that it is “too hard to live without a name.” Indeed, Reuel finds himself in his own state of unclassified residuum as a mixed-race person passing for white. The book itself is about the promise of mysticism and mesmerism to modern medicine. Only a mixed-race person concealing his “Hidden Self,” to quote the title, has access to this residuum; he can commune with it because he himself is a kind of residuum.

I am reminded also of what Gloria Anzaldúa once mused in Borderlands/La Frontera (1987): “[T]he mestizo and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls” (106–07). Much of Anzaldúa’s work is about how people living in borderlands develop experiential epistemologies that challenge dominant materialist formations like capitalism and nationalism. I point out the similarity not to suggest that I believe, like Anzaldúa, that queerness, akin to mestizo, transcends normative disciplinary knowledge thus

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⁶¹ Reuel’s name is pronounced like “rule,” but has a certain polysemy with the word “royal.” It in fact means “friend of God.”

⁶² Hopkins in fact excerpts selections from the psychologist William James’ “The Hidden Self” but fictionalizes the text and gives it a pseudonymous author.
connecting people globally; I simply suggest that such a promise drives both Anzaldúa and Hopkins’ work. Reuel, as racially and thus sexually antinormative, is a mystic of the unknown, capable of connecting people, making worlds, and producing life.

Much of this opening scene, heavy in its foreshadowing, reflects Hopkins’ own relationship with literary culture. Hopkins, after all, has an avatar in the novel. Like Dianthe, she was a soprano and member of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, so the act of making Dianthe herself a Jubilee singer is Hopkins’ way of putting herself into the action. “The Unclassified Residuum” itself anticipates the criticism that Hopkins would encounter on her fiction, that it was “‘only the effects of the imagination’” (3). Hopkins struggled against conciliatory patrons who saw limited promise for emancipation in literature as an imaginative discourse; she was just as unlikely to gain an audience with the truly “literary” authors of her day like Chesnutt. *Of One Blood* is a speculative fiction that rides a line between fantasy and science fiction. It raises questions about scientific authority, but ultimately poses imaginative, fictional answers to trouble it. This finds Hopkins in the realm of the paraliterary, a kind of writing embraced by authors like Samuel R. Delany for the social power that results from its illegibility as literature. Delany has deliberately employed camp aesthetics and worked in unfavored genres — including pornography — for decades because he found them hospitable to the most subversive questions he could ask about sexuality and race. Reuel’s relationship with scientific medicine is similar. He is as well trained as any other doctor, but finds that science’s insistence on a stable taxonomy, a progressionist history of knowledge, and an ideology of authority causes it to fail in its intention: the ability to save or extend human life. Hopkins’ magazine fiction occupies a similar space as Reuel’s mesmerism: it offers a way to save black and queer life where disciplinary, incorporated knowledge fails.
What drives Reuel through the anxious pathology of living as an antinormative person in a normative world are his previsions of Dianthe. These take the form of ecstatic, near-masturbatory visions of her idealized image: “[H]e saw distinctly outlined a fair face framed in golden hair, with soft brown eyes, deep and earnest …. Rose-tinged baby lips, and an expression of wistful entreaty. O how real, how very real did the passing shadow appear to the gazer!” Reuel remains conscious, however, that this is another “‘effect of the imagination’” (5). He misses the sign, though, that this vision portends the entry of primary antagonist Aubrey Livingston, a mixed-race man who does not know he is mixed-race and who, thus, passes for white. Aubrey, Dianthe, and Reuel are also unaware that they are siblings. That Reuel misses the sign, that Aubrey and his vision of Dianthe are related, suggests also the siblings’ inability to see the familial and primordial connections between all of them; such a hyperconsanguinity would be a radical form of intimacy, but the siblings are bound to the narrow vision of the family and the sentimental, direct familial connection and erotic attraction, respectively. The text’s playfulness with these categories — primordial connection, familial relation, and the erotic — suggests its subversive attitude about all human relationality: that it is subversive because it always risks a kind of incest. Hopkins’ philosophies of intimacy between strangers would make her an interesting bedfellow to Walt Whitman, who similarly theorized all the metrics for human connection that emerged via the material world and labor alone. Aubrey, of course, is a skeptic to Reuel’s mysticism because the material world is disciplined to his benefit as a white person who comfortably believes in his whiteness. There is simply no need to inquire further through any hermeneutic.

Daphne Brooks, in her book on nineteenth-century black popular performance and its political valences, *Bodies in Dissent* (2006), provides an intelligent reading of Reuel’s initial
sighting of Dianthe in the flesh. Brooks argues that Hopkins “aggressively seeks to mix the ‘business’ of African American uplift with the ‘pleasure’ of popular aesthetic production and consumption” (284), a tendency which lies in contrast to other authors’ emphasis on the literary and authorship as being apart from popular consumption and pleasure. According to Brooks, the scene in which Reuel and Aubrey watch her sing with the Fisk Jubilee Singers is about black song as a kind of identity formation in excess, a pleasure that produces self-affirmation, agency, autonomy, and identity for women of color. Brooks further claims that divas, in works like Hopkins’, take an authoritative role as the sonic and creative bridge to expressions of black history and becoming that awaken or catalyze self-discovery for black men (320). As Dianthe sings “Go Down, Moses,” Aubrey and Reuel, but especially Reuel, find themselves entranced:

> It strained the senses …. Reuel was carried out of himself; he leaned forward in eager contemplation of the artist …. Surely it could not be — he must be dreaming! It was incredible! …. There before him in the blaze of light — like a lovely phantom — stood a woman wearing the face of his vision of the afternoon! (15)

Reuel’s strained receptivity to Dianthe’s sonic truth, coupled with his “lean[ing] forward in eager contemplation” evokes the political promise of vulnerability, especially in queer theory where it is coupled with the promise of anality, the opening up of the male to femininity. Reuel finds himself penetrated by knowledge and truth on a visceral level. It is only through this vulnerability to gendered aesthetic excess that he, the unclassified residuum, can later access the truth of his racialized being and the totality of its history.63

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63 For wonderful recent work on the concept of masculine political vulnerability, see Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* (2006), in which she theorizes the political utility of shame and value to black queer politics. Reuel’s visceral receptivity to Dianthe in this scene is strongly reminiscent of Stockton’s work, as well as Darieck Scott’s in *Extravagant Abjection* (2010). They provide a much needed complement to more widely recognized and masculinist iterations of black power.
With a coterie of esteemed doctors looking on, Reuel later brings Dianthe back from “seeming” death after she is injured in a train wreck. He does this through what he calls the secret of life: “volatile magnetism.” This mystical belief holds that a “magnetic agent” constituting something like life-flow “is constantly drawn into the body through the lungs, absorbed and held in bounds until chemical combination has occurred …. When respiration ceases this magnetism cannot be drawn into the lungs” (32–33). The symbolic depth of volatile magnetism is quite something; not only does it evoke lynching, the process by which black people are deprived of respiration, but it holds that what we are breathing is not just air, but each other’s bodies, which, on the atomic or even molecular level, is technically true. While volatile magnetism is scientifically insupportable, it does dabble in a few basic realities of physics. My limited understanding of physics can only allow me to speak of this in layman’s terms, but in touch, for instance, surfaces never truly come into actual contact with one another, but are constantly repelled by a magnetic field; their actual touching would involve an interactive merging at the atomic and molecular levels, such as in violence where the definite boundary of flesh is torn. When you hold hands with someone, for instance, your hands do not cease to cohere; they maintain bodily integrity. The science studies scholar Karen Barad, whose interdisciplinary studies of gender, sexuality, and physics have been influential in recent years, thus describes touch as our perception of our inter-agential relations; all touching, for Barad, “entails an infinite alterity, so that touching the Other is touching all Others, including the ‘self,’ and touching the ‘self’ entails touching the strangers within. Even the smallest bits of matter are an unfathomable multitude” (214–15). So while it might not be technically correct or scientific to say that there is something like a magnetic life-flow that we breathe, it is true that all consumption and respiration involves attraction between others, however they might be defined.
In context with Aubrey, Dianthe, and Reuel’s hidden interrelationality, volatile magnetism is simply meant to suggest that bonds of intimacy are not only ever ideistically created through bourgeois apparatuses like the family or the state, but through a materiality over which we have limited control and that sometimes renders itself through registers that are disciplinarily invisible. Dianthe, cut off from a magnetism with Reuel, Aubrey, and, most importantly, Ethiopia, is unable to breathe. The very transgressive intimacies society denies her are vital to her being. The novel’s interest in Ethiopianism begins shortly after this with a subtle allusion to its central principle. When Aubrey reveals to Reuel that he knows Reuel is passing for white, he does so by leaning across the table and stretching out his hand to Reuel (44). Ethiopianism is partially influenced by Psalm 68:31: “Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth its hands unto God.” Aubrey’s stretched hands catalyze Reuel’s impending voyage to Africa; the course of events taking place after this are all part of a network of events presaging an Ethiopian renaissance. But as Reuel and Aubrey hold hands in this scene, it is unknown to either of them that they are brothers, nor that Aubrey is part of the same family lineage as Reuel and Dianthe; in bourgeois Western society, their magnetism, literally alluded to here, can only be understood in the sense that they repel one another through antagonistic sexual competition. The sexual pathology of Western society, in fact, puts them all in danger of violating the incest taboo. In the latter part

64 Shawn Salvant argues that Of One Blood is about the value and occurrence of incest where mythologies of race and gender are concerned: “The problem of Hopkins’s novel — the problem of one blood — is precisely this problem of incest as the seemingly unavoidable end of monogenesis” (661). She suggests further that monogenesis does not operate as incest in late-nineteenth century racial culture because incest is a measure of purity and impurity in blood relations (662). Reuel’s relationship to Candace reflects monogenist values; his relationship with Dianthe reflects impurity wrought by Americanism (670). See Salvant’s "Pauline Hopkins and the End of Incest” (2008). Mason Stokes’ The Color of Sex, discussed previously, also explores the relationship between homosexuality, heterosexuality, and the practice of racial purity in late-nineteenth-century America.
of the book, it becomes apparent that if Hopkins has an unrestrained utopian vision on sexuality and gender, it is one that reverse pathologizes white supremacist America and attempts to build a queer world — a queer future — in the most Muñozian fashion possible: by looking to the mythic past.

Despite the fact Reuel is the unclassified residuum or magical queer of this novel, he is also in need of convincing that not all meaning can be derived from material observation. Trusting his faculty for reason over his affection for Dianthe, Reuel leaves on an “archeological” (treasure-hunting) expedition to Ethiopia, putting Dianthe in the care of Aubrey: “I intrust her to you as I would intrust her to my brother, had I one” (59–61). Reuel’s poverty obstructs his capacity for utopian vision, which also puts Dianthe in danger of Aubrey’s sexual predation. Indeed, there are many junctures in Of One Blood where the reader is invited to read an anticapitalist streak into the novel, which doubles as a pathologization of Western ideology on sexuality and gender. Take, for instance, this description of Reuel’s expedition company: “The expedition with which Reuel Briggs found himself connected was made up of artists, savans and several men — capitalists — who represented the business interests of the venture” (75). While the text offers here no direct rebuke of the capitalists, it does imply their inferiority to the artists and to Reuel, despite their necessity. One might think of it as an allegory for the expedition of Colored American Magazine: a ship on which the wishes and desires of the colored American are carried, led by artists, savans, and mystics, and buoyed, unfortunately, by capitalists. Knowing Hopkins’ disinterest in pleasing patronage, as well as her dislike of Booker T. Washington’s uplift ideologies, one might read into Of One Blood a distaste for the thrifty promise of bourgeois rights, which would include domestic ideality; this is why it is inevitable that Reuel must abandon the treasure hunt to find the ancient city of Telassar. As the company
gets closer to Meroe, Reuel and Professor Stone’s attentions turn from antiquities to present realities. As Reuel says, attempting to conceal his racial interest among the company in which he passes, ‘‘For my part, I shall be glad to add to my ethnological knowledge by anything we may learn at Meroe’’ (88).

As the company reaches Ethiopia, Professor Stone rapidly becomes the mouthpiece for Ethiopianist ideology, claiming Ethiopia’s technological influence on Egypt, as well as an “identity” between the two cultures (99-102). Meanwhile, Reuel experiences visions of Aubrey’s duplicity and resolves to return to the United States immediately following their visit to Ethiopia. However, Reuel soon receives a letter claiming that Dianthe has drowned in a boating accident (in fact, Aubrey has drowned his own wife in order to pursue Dianthe). Amidst his sadness, he explores an Ethiopian Sphinx inside the Great Pyramid before being ostensibly chloroformed by the Ethiopians living secretly beneath the pyramid. It is only through this “profound unconsciousness, deep, merciful, oblivious to pain and the flight of time,” that Reuel can awaken to the utopian kingdom of Telassar as its rightful king (112). This again sets the conscious, rational mind and its recognitions and legibilities against what is the truth; indeed, in a rather obvious metaphor, Reuel must be dragged down into his own id or viscera in order to see the reality of things, beneath and beyond a world of material abstraction and into utopia itself.65

When Reuel encounters the Ethiopians in Telassar for the first time, he is presented with an epiphanic manifestation of the concept of amalgamation. Rather than seeing a homogenous black populace from which the world’s populations derive, he sees a spectrum of complexions “from a creamy tint to purest ebony” (113). The text deftly theorizes a kind of African identity

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65 Again, suggesting the influence Edward Bellamy had on Hopkins, the protagonists in both Of One Blood and Looking Backward only achieve consciousness through an ironic and fortuitous spell of unconsciousness, a kind of felix culpa. See note 20.
that is not dependent upon a Western concept of complexion. Thus, it begins to radically suggest the world’s always already amalgamated state, which naturally implies generations and generations of miscegenation, miscegenation that is both sexual and symbolic. It is no coincidence that this novel implies the traffic of knowledge and progress alongside its theories of sexual and racial progress. However, one must also note that, despite the text’s utopian theorization of the Telessarians’ prehistoric amalgamated qualities — a quality that makes them a kind of pre-racial paradise — Telassar is not beyond the touch of the overworld’s societal organization, nor its ideologies. Utopias in literature are almost always rooted in critiques of the present. It is true of almost all utopianist fiction that it renders its vision of utopia as a kind of counterhegemony of real world conditions; thus, it must also use the elements of that real world in the process.

First and foremost — and perhaps presenting an obstacle to the notion that Of One Blood espouses liberative gender and sexual ideologies — Telassar is monarchical and quasi-patriarchal; though it is ruled by Queen Candace and “a Council of twenty-five Sages, who are educated for periodical visits to the outer world,” Candace is also a “virgin queen who waits the coming of Ergamenes to inaugurate a dynasty of kings.” Telassar’s virgins “live within the inner city, and from among them Candace chooses her successor at intervals of fifteen years” (130). Telassar’s residents are also ruled by Ai, their prime minister. The architecture of the underground city has a look about it that is meant to evoke multiple geographic and historical specificities: “The building was dome-shaped and of white marble, surrounded by fluted columns, and fronted by courts where fountains dashed their spray” (117). This is the architecture of both the Classical and Neoclassical periods and, thus, it represents generations of democratically organized society from Greece to the United States. Telassar acts as both a
simulacrum of modern society as Reuel knows it, but it is also said to have experienced its zenith “six thousand years before Christ’s birth.” Modern society, by contrast, “is yet in its infancy” (119).

As presaged by the lotus lily on his breast, Reuel is Ergamenes, the king prophesied in Meroe’s lore to restore Ethiopia. But it is in Ai’s description of this prophecy that the reader might encounter some confusion about Meroe’s relationship to the modern world. Reuel is described as the “son of a fallen dynasty, outcast of a sunken people” and his forefathers are described as the leaders of a wealthy and powerful civilization comprised of “pure-blooded Ethiopian[s]” (124). Reuel, however, as the returning son of the fallen dynasty, has already been through a long path of amalgamation as it has occurred in modern society, and therefore his restoration of Ethiopia cannot restore it to its “pure-blooded” status. This suggests, then, that “pure-blooded,” for Hopkins, does not represent a kind of perfect analogic relationship between racial identity and blood, nor that she envisions an Ethiopian society that rises and spreads its values globally; it is more accurate to say that Reuel, the unclassified residuum, opposes and negotiates the concept of purity altogether, as well as the apparent distinctions the novel embraces between the inside and the outside, the overworld and the underworld, the civilized and the primitive, the scientific and the spiritual, or the transgressive and the normative. Under this proposition, the endogamous and exogamous understanding of racial purity and sexual relationality fall entirely away, supplanted by a kind of harmonious impurity. One could say that when Reuel, the impure and unclassifiable, is asked to restore Ethiopia as the inheritor of its lineage, the novel finds itself theorizing Ethiopianism as a radical doctrine of racial and sexual difference. Keeping in mind the earlier description of Meroe’s wide complexional difference, the novel seems to pathologize modern society, in its infancy, as primitively incestuous; in its rush to
taxonomize its own purities and impurities, it insists upon taboo relations in order to maintain a racial ideology derived from false historical consciousness. To sum up, restoring “pure-blooded Ethiopia” would involve sexual indulgences in everything the modern world considers queer. The Ethiopianist prophecy that restores Ergamenes is a queer vision of global racial diversity.

Despite this, the novel paradoxically upholds a distinction between the blood of Meroe and the blood of society, such as in the scene where Reuel, in explaining the subjugation of black people in America, explains the “one drop” rule to Ai (129). One must remember that even though Reuel and Ai continue to speak of Meroe’s blood as though it were different from the blood of modern society, the novel has already tacitly endorsed the notion that their blood is the same. One might regard this as a continuity error in the novel, but one might also see in this flaw a certain genius: that we are so entrenched in a racial ideology that is predicated on blood purity that we do not even have the language to describe the utopianist vision of the novel — a civilization that embraces difference so emphatically as to erase differential power relations altogether. This is not at all unlike Muñoz’s idea of queerness in *Cruising Utopia*; Muñoz saw queerness not only as an ideology, but as an ephemeral assemblage of slippery legibilities. To put it in Hazel V. Carby’s words, such ideology does not attempt to cohere itself in an idealized body, but remains a problem, a locus of contradictions. It makes sense that the restoration of Ethiopia that Ai envisions cannot seem to decide upon a totalized and consistent ideology on blood, race, sex, and reproduction — utopia, which we must remember means “no place,” is not an effort to actually think a perfect and harmonious place into being, but rather to imaginatively illustrate the fact that the present, to put it in Muñoz’s words, is a prison house.
The most curious contradiction of the novel’s apparent value of liberative sexual and racial ideology is its depiction of the ostentatious marriage rites undertaken between Reuel and Queen Candace:

The heavy curtains were lifted now, and discovered the Queen reclining upon a pile of silken cushions — a statue of Venus worked in bronze .... Grave, tranquil and majestic, surrounded by her virgin guard, she advanced gracefully, bending her haughty head; then, gradually her sinuous body bent and swayed down, down, until she, too, had prostrated herself, and half-knelt, half-lay, upon the marble floor at Reuel’s feet.... Knowing now what was expected of him, he raised the Queen with one hand, addressed her courteously in Arabic, led her to her silken couch, seated himself, and would have placed her beside him, but she, with a gesture of dissent, sank upon the cushions at his feet that had served her for footstools. (136–37)

To those seeking feminist or queer subtext in *Of One Blood*, the image of Queen Candace prostrate before and subservient to Reuel would appear regressive. Why would a feminist like Hopkins, who has previously demonstrated in her work the importance of self-determination for women of color, indulge in such a patriarchal utopianist vision? I would not excuse Hopkins in this regard, but for the fact that the image is inconsistent with what we know of her gender and racial ideologies. Perhaps the problem is that we are allowing the tyranny of the present to guide us in our reading; perhaps this is actually an opportunity to ask a question about queer and feminist legibilities, a generous one: how could Candace’s kneeling before Reuel be understood as an action on behalf of women’s agency and sexual self-determination?

I offer that the passage is remarkably subtle in its depiction of Candace’s vulnerability to Reuel. First of all, she is half-kneeling and half-lying down, which suggests an action somewhere between repose and worship. In the same gesture that she offers faithful devotion to Reuel, she implies something else in the act of her lying down, something perhaps erotically agential. Reuel attempts to uplift Candace and put her eye-to-eye with him as his equal, but this gesture only reifies Reuel’s position of power over Candace by allowing him to uplift her. When they go to sit
in their thrones, Candace rejects Reuel’s gesture at equality in favor of the cushions at his feet. Does this imply that Candace desires submission to Reuel, or are we habitually reading her gestures through the hermeneutics of Western patriarchy? The lack of analysis in the novel of Candace’s actions suggests that they could mean anything. Candace could embody a kind of radical passivity or vulnerability, a rejection of the notion that she must wield power in the gestural economy of the patriarchy. Moreover, Candace is compared favorably in this scene to Dianthe; she is “ideally perfect” and Venus-like, “the embodiment of all chastity,” yet she is the very image of a living, sensuous woman. This comparison, aside from once again reaffirming Dianthe and Reuel’s royal lineage, implies that Candace’s primary purpose is to tell to the reader the tale of two Dianthes, both subject to Reuel’s desire, but differently conditioned by their surroundings.

Candace does eventually take her place at the side of Reuel, but only after she has contracted from Reuel his unswerving devotion to their “destiny,” to “give to the world a dynasty of dark-skinned rulers, whose destiny should be to restore the prestige of an ancient people” (138–39). Then, she bows in submission, rises to kiss his forehead, and puts her hand on his heart. In such a society moving toward the dehierarchicalization of race, a gesture of deference from Candace to Reuel would be emptied out of its meaning because gender and sexual propriety would not be disciplined in the aid of white supremacy. Candace can give herself freely to Reuel because she knows that Reuel has given himself up to the destiny of Ethiopian racial futurity. Reuel’s commitment to Candace, and thereby to black futurity, is emblematized by the ring Candace puts upon his finger as she proclaims, “‘Thus do I claim thee for all eternity’” (140). Candace can indulge in the gestural economy of submission to Reuel because, in reality, she owns his promise to her and, thus, to Ethiopia.
After many more pages in which Jim Titus and Charlie Vance seek out Reuel, and subsequently notify him of his true relation to Aubrey and Dianthe, Reuel recognizes his inability to stay in the Ethiopianist utopia forever, rejecting “with a mighty curse the bond that bound him to the white race of his native land” (163). Certainly, while it would be easier for Reuel and Hopkins to dwell in Telassar forever, its utopianist vision can only stand in relief to the present if the novel reattends to the fates of Dianthe and Aubrey. Reuel’s responsibility to whiteness is a responsibility to himself; in the modern world, which we do not have the option of leaving, such utopianisms can serve as political ethics.

It is only at this point that the novel finally detaches itself from its limited ominscience — Reuel’s perspective — to tell Dianthe’s story, which it does for almost the remainder of the novel. In fact, prefigurative symbols, such as Reuel and Candace drinking from the same glass upon their marriage vow, allude to actions that will take place in the latter part of the narrative. Rather than simply inviting comparisons between present-day America and the fictional Telassar as most utopianist novels might do, Of One Blood endeavors to show explicitly how America resembles a warped, corrupt version of Ethiopia’s promise. In doing so, it avails itself of the tragic mulatta trope in its depiction of Dianthe; however, when contextualized with the sexual self-determination of Candace, one cannot help but remark at how arbitrary Dianthe’s tragicness is.

In the prison house of the sexually pathological overworld, Dianthe finds that she has been made not only incestuous but also a bigamist by a duplicitous patriarchal white supremacy

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66 I’m inclined to agree with JoAnn Pavletich in her article “Pauline Hopkins and the Death of the Tragic Mulatta” (2015): “Of One Blood demonstrates that the values of true womanhood and the trope of the mulatta had outlived their usefulness to women, white and black, and especially to political efforts aimed at racial justice. Thus, Hopkins’s compelling last novel can be viewed as a rejection of the problematic literary negotiations for which the mulatta trope had proved so useful, but ultimately inadequate for her high literary and political aspirations” (648–49).
(169). Amidst psychic duress over this, she wanders into the woods nearby and, thereby, into a dreamlike vision in which she happens upon the one-room cabin of her estranged grandmother, Hannah, who describes to Dianthe her family history. Through this epiphany, Hannah and the novel both assert a monogenist, historical, and sociological principle about the antagonisms and intimacies of the white and black world — that they are “of one blood” (174–78). It would seem that the novel is endeavoring to tell two stories with the same theme. The first story is the utopianist story in which Reuel finds that the entirety of humanity, its technologies, knowledges, and arts, is rooted in Ethiopia, catalyzed by a society that is inherently amalgamated and, thus, rendered pure in its impurity; the second story is that of Dianthe, Reuel, and Aubrey’s inextricability from one another on material, domestic, genetic, and racial levels, which allegorizes the linked fates of black and white people in post-Middle Passage modernity. Hopkins employs the principle “of one blood” in these differing contexts to gesture at the imaginative capacity of people of color while attending to and ridiculing the racial and sexual dynamics of the modern world. The novel diagnoses Dianthe’s limited capacity for sexual determination in the same way Chesnutt does in *The House Behind the Cedars*. The difference is that Hopkins also draws a direct contradiction between Reuel’s capacity for sexual self-determination — his power as an unclassified residuum to engage in queer worldmaking — and Dianthe’s powerlessness. Further, the novel insists on the arbitrariness of Dianthe’s condition as a sexual commodity by investing Candace and Reuel with so much power. By removing us from one context and putting us into another, Hopkins uses utopianism, her “effects of the imagination,” to show the severe lack of imagination that results in the subjugation of women of color in America.
In the *Hamlet*-esque final act of the novel, Dianthe attempts to poison Aubrey as vengeance for Reuel, whom she believes was murdered. Aubrey discovers the plot and forces Dianthe to drink from the glass instead in a scene that directly parallels the wedding rites between Candace and Reuel. There are, however, two key differences between these scenes. First of all, Dianthe has been forced to her knees in front of Aubrey, whereas Candace knelt at her own volition. Secondly, Dianthe is the only one who drinks from the cup. Like Chesnutt does in *House Behind the Cedars* and like Sutton Griggs does in *Unfettered*, Hopkins here is registering a critique of the institution of marriage in its capacity to uplift the race. Again, unlike in a typical sentimental or domestic novel, the marriage between Dianthe and Aubrey offers no emancipation for Dianthe as a woman of color. She is simply forced into submission and poisoned altogether by the endeavor (181). This raises an important question: why does the novel punish Dianthe for the same thing it celebrates in Reuel? The ending of the novel suggests an answer.

Though Reuel arrives too late to save Dianthe, he and Ai use their powers to mesmerize Aubrey and force him to drown himself in the Charles. The novel explains the poetics of Aubrey’s fate: “Thus Aubrey had become his own executioner according to the ancient laws of the inhabitants of Telassar. Members of the royal family in direct line to the throne became their own executioners when guilty of the crime of murder.” Reuel returns to Telassar and spends his days “teaching his people all that he has learned in years of contact with modern culture.” However, “the shadows of great sins darken his life, and the memory of past joys is ever with him. He views, too, with serious apprehension, the advance of mighty nations penetrating the dark, mysterious forests of his native land” (192–93). Quite a lot happens in just these last two pages of the novel. Not only does it offer an additional critique of Western imperialism in Africa,
but it also suggests that Reuel, despite living in a society that in so many ways resembles utopia, finds his life to be anything but utopian. One is reminded here of the end of Edward Bellamy’s classic Marxist utopian novel, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1887), which may have acted as an inspiration to Hopkins. In that novel, the central character, Julian West, finds himself irreparably transported into a utopian future; although he finds himself in an undeniably more peaceful and harmonious culture, he is also haunted by the ghosts of the past, a kind of survivor’s guilt for all those who perished at the hands of late-nineteenth century capitalism. His role in the future as a historical lecturer is somewhat of a salve for his trauma, but West is unmistakably a troubled person at the novel’s end. Reuel, too, is broken; although he has not met the same punishment as Dianthe for his amalgamated being, he is nevertheless made the bridge between “modern culture” and the archaic yet racially and sexually liberated world of Telassar, inheriting the mantle of the unclassified residuum. This role has only been afforded to him by the curse of his prior experiences. He lives happily at Candace’s side, but he is troubled by a paradox of his being. Twice in the last thirty pages of the novel, a reference is made to Reuel’s “native land.” In the first, as mentioned above, Reuel finds himself bound to the white race in America, his “native land,” by Aubrey’s duplicity; in the second, near the end of the novel, Reuel finds that his “native land” is under threat of encroachment by “mighty nations.” Which land, for Reuel, is native — Telassar or Boston?

Neither and both. The novel endorses neither the utopianism into which Reuel has retreated, nor Dianthe’s naturalistic symbolic death at the hands of American inequity. Indeed, both of them have a power, a capacity for imaginative worldmaking, special sight — what Anzaldúa might call “la facultad,” — but whether or not this is sufficient to the cause of black uplift at the beginning of the twentieth century remains a question. There is no question that this
novel avails itself of and endorses the “effects of the imagination” in the romantic yarn it spins about the power of biracial people. In the mere suggestion that the entirety of the world is as queer as Dianthe and Reuel, Hopkins suggests that a kind of mass false consciousness haunts all of Western society, covering us in guilt even amidst our desperate strivings to remain pure. This is a bold message for such a small novel. In light of these observations, I want to conclude by suggesting three productive turns Hopkins scholarship could make going forth.

First of all, the debate over whether or not Hopkins’ work belongs to genteel, sentimental, domestic, or other traditions needs to be refigured. Indeed, generically speaking, Hopkins borrows liberally from all these traditions, as well as from the gothic and from her era’s growing speculative and utopianist fiction. But there remains little scholarship that attempts to understand her work outside the dynamics and parameters of the literary itself, which often insists on taxonomies and genericizing practices. Indeed, very little work attempts to understand Hopkins’ relationship to literary culture, nor her possible investment in the power of the paraliterary or popular modalities of writing. Given that Hopkins was met with constant opposition to her efforts within and extant to literary culture, one can only assume that she believed her own philosophical and political ethic to be that of the unclassified residuum. Her ideas, like Chesnutt’s, were “amorphous,” requiring an amorphous writing practice. Like Chesnutt, she derived this practice from her very being. It is her purchase on literary culture, her theory of it — to feebly give words to what is in fact unclassifiable. Her work calls into question not only the classifiable, but the structures that work to classify.

Secondly, the attribution of a radical vision to Hopkins’ work needs no qualification: she had a radical vision. Consider that Carby, Ducille, and Tate, among others, pinpointed Hopkins as a key figure in the development of an early black feminism, that they looked to her writing not
only in their recovery of a usable past, but as part and parcel of the work they were doing. Nearly one hundred years before the advent of formal queer-of-color critique, Hopkins was already putting sexual and gender propriety, discipline, and liberation at the center of her critical race theory, paying a price in visibility and legibility as a result. She, like Muñoz and Anzaldúa, promoted the idea that the sexually antinormative — in her case, the amalgamated — had a part to play in crafting a political society by smearing its legibilities and its ways of knowing. Further, she imagined unrestricted and egalitarian forms of sexual relationality in order to put in high relief what she saw as the sexual pathologies of white supremacist America. This is made all but clear in the outcomes of Reuel and Dianthe in Of One Blood: when taken out of the American context, the mixed-race American is not only free, he is king. Meanwhile, Americans, left to America’s racial qua sexual disciplining practices, find themselves drawn into arbitrary social conflict, misery, incest, and death. Most assuredly, her novels dabble in sentimental tropes like the tragic mulatta and in coupling conventions, but there remains no evidence that she fetishized such tropes or employed them earnestly. The perception of Hopkins as a conservative author has to do, I suggest, with the predominance of scholarship on Contending Forces, which draws attention from her more radical work. It also has to do with what I think is a widespread underestimation of Hopkins’ capacity for irony, which her work, in its analogic relationship to contemporary political society, is rife with.

Finally, I want to suggest that future work on Hopkins should mine the possibility that Hopkins’ work could be read as theory, much in the way that black.queer speculative fiction is read in the present. Certainly, Hopkins’ work first came to our attention via recovery efforts, which necessarily involved careful historiographic contextualization. But, in the process, criticism of Hopkins seems to have found itself entangled forevermore with the question of
Hopkins’ limitations as an author, coupled with an assumption that there were reasonable limits as to what her work could address. But Hopkins, like any other author, thought deeply about her aesthetic values and the social utility of the literature she wrote. In the face of an inhospitable patronage, she made the effort to publish it even when it put her livelihood in peril. The early stages of African-American literary development seem to inevitably cohere around a few key figures — Du Bois, Dunbar, Chesnutt, et. al. — who represent for us the most fundamental, self-conscious efforts to create the tradition; their early strivings are subsequently absorbed into the Harlem Renaissance, which represents for many the true emergence of African-American literature into literature proper, and thus into history under white recognition. This ignores that Hopkins was self-consciously producing fiction that was avant garde in its techniques and subject matter decades prior to Jean Toomer’s Cane, or any other work that has attained a self-conscious theoretical edge. One need look no further than the preface of Contending Forces to understand that Hopkins did not see herself as writing mere romances that she believed would serve the race. Discussing the social utility of literature as a record of social progress, Hopkins writes, “[W]e must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history, and, as yet, unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race” (14).

What drives Hopkins is her theory of a dormant fire and romance illegible in modern history — illegible, perhaps, because it has been disciplined out of existence. She writes these novels not to inject them into already recognizable traditions, but to question the traditions and ways of knowing themselves, to queer them. The traditions of dominance she critiques are predicated on the infallibility of art and literature in the civilized world; literature and culture, to borrow Matthew Arnold’s famous term, has often been invested with the responsibility to spread
“sweetness and light,” the hallmark values of civilization. But when civilization refuses to recognize anyone outside the Anglo-Saxon race, a theoretical intervention must occur to save it from its own racist mediocrity. For Hopkins, not only does this theoretical invention involve the creation of an African-American literary tradition, but the creation of a theory of sexual transgression and its unique political powers, a theory that precedes, and looks not unlike, queer theory.
Chapter 4:
Fettered Bed: Fidelity, Sex, Imperialism, and the Black Citizen in the Novels of Sutton E. Griggs

**Griggs and the Erotics of Dissensus**

Thus far in this dissertation, I have argued that the early Jim Crow era was a time of intense sexual politicking throughout literature and culture and that the advent of modern institutional racism in the United States was also the advent of a modern politics of sexual transgression. The degree to which sex and gender ideology play a role in our assumptions about racial propriety, whether that ideology is generated by white supremacists or an early black cultural elite, suggests that sex and gender ideology and race are mutually informed concepts and social control mechanisms. A modern queer politics, therefore, if it is to be a politics of sexual transgression, must take into account that the negotiation of racial ideology has always been part and parcel of its history, that, indeed, race is right at or at near the center of the question of sex in American culture and vice versa. I have also argued that authors in and outside the African-American literary tradition took part in various acts of bricolage propriety, some of which sought to destabilize prevailing definitions of sexuality and gender, some of which upheld them, and some of which negotiated and repurposed them. Charles W. Chesnutt, in writing what I have called an early queer pathology novel, set into motion a streak of intersectional naturalist work on queer-of-color life, novels that warned American readers about the dangers of overprescribing desire for political purposes even as they concretized a kind of heroism of self-regulation. Pauline Hopkins, on the other hand, set about using utopianist and speculative modalities to explore the queerest valences of monogenesis on her way to a new cosmopolitan blackness; for her, the African-American literary movement was defined by the sexually non-normative and, indeed, showed its greatest promise when the sexually and gender non-normative were put at the center of black political struggle.
In this final chapter, I turn to the work of a lesser-known author of the early Jim Crow period, Sutton E. Griggs. Perhaps the thing people talk about the most with regard to Griggs is his lack of scholarly attention itself, though few raise the question why, other than to apologize for perceived weaknesses in his writing. Griggs is most often shorthanded in criticism about him as a “militant” or a “black nationalist” novelist, but as later scholars have begun to acknowledge, these are largely misnomers; Griggs’ novels are, in fact, ambivalent about the promises of militancy or nationalism. Often they puppet available social positions in a Socratic style and only cryptically imply preferences for courses of political action. It might in fact be most fruitful to think of Griggs as we do Hopkins, as someone who was self-conscious about the stakes of blackness and the avenues through which one could explore the meaning of blackness. As an author, Griggs could not settle for a simple, mimetic, realist reduction of the black condition in America. In fact, while Griggs’ writing bears the stylistic markings of sensationalist or sentimental fiction, its complexity of plot, decentralization of heroic characters, and moral ambiguity perhaps make it more akin to the work of socially didactic modernist authors like James Weldon Johnson or Wallace Thurman.

Ross Posnock, as far back as 1997, described Griggs, along with Du Bois and Chesnutt, as someone who “faced the challenge of representing a figure who seemed neither to know his place nor to have a place and who seemed to affront every way of making sense of black identity in Jim Crow America,” as someone who “depicted the black intellectual as synonymous with enigma” (339). More recently, Eric Curry and Finnie Coleman have accounted for Griggs’ confusing social positions and antiresolutions as his way of modeling his theory of “collective efficiency,” in which black political ideologies are “not individualized in representative characters but rather communalized in the combinations they form” (Curry 24). Curry rightly
notes that this kind of thinking is welcome as an ameliorative to the more elitist proposition of the “race man” and his idealized and proper manhood (31). Griggs’ writing certainly has a kind of ideological flexibility and free circulation — even when characters appear to stand in for ideologies throughout a novel, their beliefs are subject to change. While one might not go so far as to say that Griggs was ideologically cosmopolitan, one could say he saw a great value in dissensus and the Socratic Method.

Although Griggs allowed his novels to serve freely as platforms for the most contentious debates about race in his era, it would be untrue to say that Griggs’ work was nothing but a sounding board. Griggs explicitly advocated a great deal of social ideology and availed himself of many literary tropologies that implicitly advocate some racial and sexual politics over others. Kenneth Warren has observed that almost all of Griggs’ novels are political romances, involving marriage plots that run concurrently with social unrest; typically, Griggs’ protagonists are trying to “get the girl” at the same time that they are navigating the social machinations of white supremacism (258). This creates some rather interesting implications with regard to which politics court romantic success, which romantic endeavors help to ameliorate political injustice, and which attachments actively hamper political movements. It also suggests cryptically which domestic partnerships are valuable to black politics and how and why they should be pursued. Who gets punished, in any given Griggs novel, for flouting the conventions of love and domesticity? What gender performance or sexual desire is most productive to the success of black biopower? In Griggs’ most famous novel, Imperium in Imperio, the character of Viola commits suicide in order to avoid complicity in amalgamation, leading her suitor, Bernard Belgrave, to ascend to leadership in a radical black separatist movement that promotes armed conflict with the United States. In his lesser-known novel, Unfettered, the main characters of
Dorlan Warthell and Morlene Dalton, who actively disagree about the merits of American expansionism, make the consummation of their relationship contingent upon a mutual resolution of the race problem. It is not simply that Griggs’ novels idealize certain sexual and gender performances and desires as they are relevant to his political commitments — this is true of Chesnutt, Hopkins, and any number of authors. What makes Griggs especially interesting is that he explicitly links sexual desire, gender performance, and courtship to his theories on sovereignty and imperialism. Griggs’ novels do not simply explore the linked thematics of domesticity, sex, gender, race, imperialism, and nationalism, but rather his novels unite these thematics in their pursuit of a grander, more philosophically abstract concept: fidelity.

I suggest in this chapter that Griggs’ ideologies on sex and gender politics are prescient. Long before anyone had ever uttered the word “homonationalism” or the term “imperial bedroom,” Griggs already showed a great deal of concern about how black desire, even in its most genteel and bourgeois forms, could be funneled into problematic social commitments, particularly those belonging to violent American imperialism. Thus, in novels like *Unfettered*, characters find themselves ruminating the ethics of romantic partnership and desire amidst the co-optation of black political desire. Like in contemporary queer culture, the characters of Griggs’ novels know love and sex to be fungible concepts, in that fidelity between people, often influenced by the conditions of raciosity, can stand in for fidelity to the state, or, in the particular case of *Unfettered*, fidelity to the party. Not only does antinormative deviation from prescribed gender and sexual mores in Griggs’ work have antinationalist undertones, but deviation from a prescribed desire for party or state is itself a kind of antinormative desire, a counteridentification with the logics of sympathy and affiliation. The will to be unrepresentable, to explore desire in and outside of socially acceptable boundaries, is in part what queer sexual ethics are about; it is
only recently that queer scholars have realized — perhaps because of the historical invisibility of
the sexually transgressive as a representable body — that this did not have to pertain to sex
alone, but could also describe the dynamics of desire and fidelity for representative bodies.

In this chapter, I argue that, in their deliberations of the logic of fidelity, Griggs’ novels
do not only exemplify racial cosmopolitanism, collective efficiency, or other political registers of
early “New Negro” discourse; they also suggest sex and desire from the personal to the political
and from the global to the local as the prime media through which the ethics of race politics
could be practiced. For Griggs, the ethics of fidelity in political and domestic spheres are not
separate, but mutually informed. For African-American desire to be unfettered would mean, for
Griggs, that it profoundly challenge the most common-sensical ideas about fidelity, whether that
fidelity be to state, nation, party, or person. Through a brief reading of Griggs’ Imperium in
Imperio and a more extended reading of his lesser-known novel, Unfettered, I argue that Griggs,
while seeing the inextricably of intimate and political desire in the lives of African-Americans,
did not advocate for specific gender or sexual proprieties in African Americans. Rather, as
Andrew Hebard observes, Griggs argued that a homogeneity of opinion or race within in any
given party and in any given social relation was undesirable because of its potential for
factionalism (74). Thus where sex politics of the late-nineteenth century are concerned, Griggs
might best be understood as a writer who shunned the overuse of normative sex and gender
values as properties of the nation in its global dealings and in black America in its dealings with
the United States. To put it another way, Griggs does not idealize the black citizen through
consistency of desire or political fidelity for fear that a normative black citizen could be
instrumentalized as a tool of the state.

Griggs Scholarship and the Separate Spheres
Since Griggs is still largely unknown by most literary scholars, before launching into a
discussion of Griggs’ work in earnest, I find it necessary to discuss a little bit more who Griggs
was, as well as to describe trends in the reception of Griggs’ work in the recent past. Most of
what is known about Griggs’ life is documented in Finnie Coleman’s *Sutton E. Griggs and the
Struggle Against White Supremacy* (2007) and the Tess Chakkalakal and Kenneth Warren edited
collection *Jim Crow, Literature, and the Legacy of Sutton E. Griggs* (2013). In addition to being
an author, Sutton E. Griggs was a baptist minister. Born in Texas, he spent much of his adult life
in Nashville, Memphis, and Dallas. He published his first novel, *Imperium in Imperio*, through a
vanity press and published subsequent novels through his own Orion Publishing Company (*Jim
Crow* 2). Unlike with Chesnutt, there is no evidence that Griggs pitched his work to a wider or
traditionally literary audience; he intended it primarily for a black, Southern readership, among
which his work was popular. Griggs, though ideologically slippery in his texts, might best be
characterized as an integrationist who decried violent conflict between races (*Jim Crow* 5–6).
People often become confused about this, however, because Griggs so often entertains multiple
viewpoints on race politics and strategy in his novels, including dissensus between characters for
which we have mutual sympathy, such as in *Imperium in Imperio* or *Unfettered*. As Chakkalakal
and Warren put it, “For Griggs the solution of the ‘race problem’ would remain central to his
fictional work,” and, thus, Griggs was one among many proponents, including Pauline Hopkins,
of a distinctly “black” literature (11). This black literature, however, was hardly to be
homogenous in values, spirit, and style, and Griggs’ literature often displays an openness and
generosity to militancy, black nationalism, and Garveyism even if it doesn’t endorse them. As
Ross Posnock, Finnie Coleman, and Eric Curry have all argued in some form, Griggs’ patient
and Socratic deliberation can be frustrating to readers, but it also makes him among the earliest
practitioners of cosmopolitan New Negro discourse, which put the spirit of unfettered, individualist thought above the ethics of unwavering solidarity.

Early criticism of Griggs came out at a time when the Black Arts Movement was the de rigueur movement by which much black political culture was judged. Indeed, we probably owe early interest in and recovery of Griggs to the militant, nationalist, and often masculinist tenor of late-1960s and early-1970s black political culture. In 1971, Charles D. Peavy called *Imperium in Imperio* the “classic” of the black revolutionary genre and suggested that the current genre of black militant novels was a continuation of Griggs’ long-abandoned work (180). But as early as Robert E. Fleming’s misleadingly-titled “Sutton E. Griggs: Militant Black Novelist” (1973), scholars have actually attempted to understand Griggs’ interest in militant thought not exclusively as an endorsement of it. Indeed, Fleming helpfully augments earlier work by Robert Bone and Hugh Gloster by suggesting that Griggs wrote *Imperium in Imperio* “as an appeal to readers’ fear …. a warning of possible violence to come, but not as an endorsement of that violence” (76-77). Still, Griggs was by-and-large pigeonholed by labels in the 1970s. In 1978, Roger Whitlow, like Peavy, would also proclaim Griggs’ work as “black revolutionary novels” (26). In 1979, Wilson J. Moses affirmed Rayford Logan’s earlier appraisal of Griggs’ work as “Literary Garveyism,” though Moses would augment Logan’s argument by suggesting that Griggs worked out his nationalist feelings primarily through the creation of a distinctly Negro, Pan-Africanist literature, not through actual advocacy for a return to Africa or the creation of a separatist nation (205–06). Aside from a few stray mentions, almost all criticism on Griggs disappeared in the 1980s and 1990s as postmodernism, post-soul aesthetics, and other black aesthetic movements emerged. It is only recently, with the new attention paid to sovereignty, globalization, coloniality, and the state in American studies, that Griggs work has reemerged as
an archive of interest. In earlier criticism, it seems Griggs’ work, via its interest in militancy, was understood primarily as advocacy for literal black separatism, when in fact Griggs’ work seems to show a deep-seated skepticism of the nation as an institution synonymous with the formal state or with a military apparatus.

Though much recent criticism of Griggs is concerned with how domestic ideologies of race interact with the prevailing definitions of Americanness as they circulate globally, race tends to be discussed without reference to gender or sex in much of this work. A good deal of feminist cultural studies scholarship has circulated since the 1980s which has attempted to understand the relationship between American imperialism and gender and domestic propriety, but it has primarily done so through examination of white women’s sentimental novels from the nineteenth century. A common oversight in literary scholarship is failing to see ways in which the conventions and ideologies of one genre can adhere to another, even if the identity politics of the two archives are not necessarily the same. As Chakkalakal, Warren, and Stephen Knadler observe, Griggs’ work is rife with conventions of sentimental and sensationalist fiction; typically, though, sentimental literature is associated with what is commonly known as “woman’s fiction.” Nina Baym, in her book of the same name, suggested that woman’s fiction was not only characterized by its audience, nor its concerns with the lives of women, but by certain generic hallmarks, sentimentality among them. As Baym and Jane Tompkins both note, a great deal of sentimental literature written by and for women in the nineteenth century is also anti-capitalist and abolitionist, most famously Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Further, sentimental fiction, as opposed to “domestic” fiction, typically shatters the ideal image

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of the American family in favor of non-consanguine or sentimental families, which is to say families that are families by choice. While these texts also have a genteel, conservative Christian ethos to them and skew far from our modern idea of what feminism is, they are also texts that, at their base, challenge domestic ideality and its cooptation while concurrently giving voice to the most pertinent issues of American national politics.

In her book *The Gender of Freedom* (2004), Elizabeth Maddock Dillon explores the liberalist construction of the private and public via the literary public sphere, a sphere in which domesticity and privacy are established as inextricable from the female gender performative and in which freedom to desire is pre-encoded through a heterogeneity of spheres, spaces, and identities. Maddock challenges the a priori notion that a public emerges out of a pre-existing private, and instead notes that the literary public sphere exists as a sort of intermediary between the two that allows them to mutually constitute one another. Many other scholars like Lauren Berlant, Lori Merish, and Cindy Weinstein⁶⁸ have written about the ways in which sentimentalism and sentimental consumerism in nineteenth-century literature have acted as representations of the values the United States claims to defend in its imperialist endeavors. Even so, these ideas about what the sentimental is or can do are not textually transient in literary scholarship; for the most part, it is uncommon for scholars of domestic and sentimental women’s literature to focus on African American texts and it is also rare for novels by men to be considered as part of domestic and sentimental traditions.

Still, two recent, key essays on Griggs have discussed gender politics in his work, at least implicitly. Andrew Hebard, for instance, reads *Imperium in Imperio* as a cautionary tale against

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the incorporation of biopower into imperial sovereignty; according to Hebard, Griggs, an integrationist, uses *Imperium in Imperio* to suggest that race conservation not be taken as a call for national separatism and race war. By using Viola’s antimiscegenation suicide as the impetus for Bernard’s race war, Griggs makes a direct link between women’s reading habits, sex politics of the private sphere, and nationalist politics; further, he implicitly warns his readers that racist sex and gender ideology, whether white supremacist or black separatist, can have intensely violent ramifications on a national level. Stephen Knadler, on the other hand, argues that Griggs “generates through the visceral disruption of sentimental identifications a different kind of patriotic black political subjectivity, one that does not displace the fight for social equality and justice within a democratic interiority” (676). Still, even as these arguments are true of *Imperio*, Griggs’ feeling about gender and sex politics as they relate to sovereignty and imperialism are not consistent from novel to novel. In fact, as I discuss in this chapter, his third novel, *Unfettered*, does not simply caution against sentimental attachments, but suggests instead that sentimental desire and affective attachments are the rewards for antiracist political diligence. To put it another way, Griggs seems to suggest in *Unfettered* that sentimental attachments and desires should not influence matters of the public sphere, nor is the public sphere intended to defend them, but that sentimental attachments and desires are luxuries and privileges, not predetermined rights.

Griggs’ position on domestic rights and nationalism resonate quite well with recent turns in queer U.S. politics. Over the last ten years or so, one of the most impactful trends in queer theory has been the rise of antihomonationalist discourse. “Homonationalism” is a term first

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69 Tess Chakkalkal also writes about women’s reading practices in Griggs’s work in her chapter “Reading in Sutton E. Griggs” from the collection *Jim Crow, Literature, and the Legacy of Sutton E. Griggs*. I discuss this essay more later in this chapter.
coined by Jasbir Puar in her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007). It describes a way in which Western nations’ increasing support for LGBTQ rights allows them to make the case for nationalist pride, exceptionalist thought, and imperialism. LGBTQ people, who only a short time ago were completely marginalized in U.S. society, have made rapid gains on the issue of marriage equality, finally winning the right to federal marriage benefits in 2015. What these federal marriage benefits connote is the equal recognition of same-gender partnership under the law. What is implied in the process is the equal citizenship or “Americanness” of LGBTQ people, further symbolized by the proliferation of American flags with rainbow stripes around the time of the Supreme Court decision. In gaining the right to marriage — the federal, legal recognition of their partnership — they gain the right to lend their partnership to the state, which, despite polar opinion on the morality of same-sex partnership, can use the cosmopolitan imagery of “equal love” to promote the U.S. as a stalwart defender of basic human rights. That exceptional nationalism, built on the fallacy that the U.S. national doctrine as it is practiced is primarily about equal rights for all, allows the U.S. to rationalize foreign interventions, corruption, and economic disparity; what LGBTQ U.S. citizens of all races get in return is largely superficial representation in the national order.

Only recently, in the same week that President Donald Trump issued executive orders effectively banning Muslims from seven countries entrance to the U.S., the White House also issued a statement saying that they would not be rolling back LGBTQ anti-discrimination protections as had been rumored: “The president is proud to have been the first ever G.O.P. nominee to mention the L.G.B.T.Q. community in his nomination acceptance speech, pledging then to protect the community from violence and oppression.” No doubt Trump and his supporters pretended, in the wake of the Pulse nightclub shooting of 2016, to care deeply about
protecting the LGBTQ community from violence in order to justify their rampant Islamophobia, hardly believable given that the Republican party has explicitly and tacitly supported the verbal and physical violence espoused by evangelical hate groups against LGBTQ people for decades. In addition the anti-Latinx proposal to build a border wall along the border between Mexico and the U.S. also suggests that although right wingers were willing to support Pulse shooting victims through tenuous support of LGBTQ rights, they would still support racist policies against them as queer Latinx people. Identitarian political pandering involves some rather strange bids for fealty — Trump and others believe that promising minimal support for LGBTQ rights would encourage Latinx queers to vote against their own interests in other respects, that their party fidelity is driven by a sole identity politic.

Although “homonationalism” is a precise and useful concept for talking about recent mainstream LGBTQ support for ethno-nationalism, we should make clear that the state issuance of domestic rights as a grab for party or national loyalty has a long history. In 1865, during the American Civil War, the Enlistment Act “declared the wife and children of any man who joined the Union army to be free as a matter of federal law” (Franke 41). This, however, put the country in new legal territory, since it had not been legal for slaves to marry. For the purposes of the law, African Americans co-habitating or who had engaged in plantation marriages were treated essentially as being in a common-law marriage. As a result many African Americans, upon the signing of the law, were automatically recognized as being in a legal partnership (Franke 43–44). Marriage, however, was hardly a great benefit to the freed women of color. Black women became dependent on enlisting black men to gain their freedoms, thus incentivizing marriage for them, but making them entirely dependent on men, the army, and the state for legal recognition
in the process (Franke 47–48). Marriage, then, was a poor substitute for universal abolition and equal rights and, worse, the act made nationalism and patriarchy prerequisites for citizenship.

Keeping this in mind, one might look at Griggs’ thoughts on marriage, fidelity, love, and the black citizen’s relationship to the state as informed by African Americans’ historical experiences with marriage and nationalism since the Civil War. When Griggs’ work turns toward Pan-African sentiment and racial solidarity, it turns critical of the Republican party, which only supports African Americans insofar as they can remain in power. Their feeble protection of the scant rights of African Americans in Griggs’ novels leads Griggs’ characters to believe that the basic building blocks of U.S. society — marriage, family, and nationalist feeling — are inadequate guarantors of their fidelity. When LGBTQ thinkers consider the history of sexual rights and their relationship to nationalism, we should consider that African Americans have had similar historical experiences with marriage; what those experiences tell us is that states often issue symbolic rights like marriage to consolidate nationalist sentiment in times of crisis. Forbearing the right to marry — which happens often in Griggs’ work — thus connotes antinormative partnership as an antiracist ethic. Not all antinormative partnerships are queer; for African Americans, taking a position against the pressure to marry suggests their desire to understand freedom, rights, and desire on their own terms, not according to wartime acts and political jockeying.

*Imperium in Imperio: A Novel of Sex and Separatism*

While scholarship on Griggs perhaps overprivileges his first novel, *Imperium in Imperio*, the gender and sex politics of the novel are so sensational that it is difficult not to acknowledge them. The brief reading that follows should help to set up and contextualize Griggs’ mutual
interest in imperialism and sex politics, as well as to note a progression of thought on sentimental attachment, desire, and fidelity in Griggs’ novels from *Imperium* to *Unfettered*.

*Imperium’s* plot is primarily a dual-bildungsroman structured by naturalist literary tendencies. It follows the lives of two childhood friends, Belton Piedmont and Bernard Belgrave, as they grow up under different degrees of institutional racism and with different sets of privileges and opportunity. Early in their lives, Belton and Bernard become friendly political rivals; Belton, the more conciliatory of the two, is also of less means. He attends the fictional Stowe University, a black southern college named for Harriet Beecher Stowe, while Bernard attends an ivy-league analogous school in the North. Belton’s life is much harder than Bernard’s, but both have similarly tragic relationships with women that inspire radical political actions.

While courting Antoinette Nermal, Belton finds himself unable to get white collar work and also finds that if he takes manual labor as an educated man that his peers will lose respect for him. Under the auspices of wanting to know more about how white people perceive the black race, Belton cross-dresses as a black woman and takes a job as a nurse. He ends up discovering that these young white men seemed to have a poor opinion of the virtue of colored women. Time and again they tried to kiss Belton…. He thought that while he was a nurse, he would do what he could to exalt the character of the colored women. So, at every chance he got, he talked to the men who approached him of virtue and integrity. He soon got the name of being a “virtuous prude” and the white men decided to corrupt him at all hazards. Midnight carriage rides were offered and refused. Trips to distant cities were proposed but declined. Money was offered freely and lavishly but to no avail. Belton did not yield to them. He became the cynosure of all eyes. He seemed so hard to reach, that they began to doubt his sex. A number of them decided to satisfy themselves at all hazards. They resorted to the bold and daring plan of kidnapping and overpowering Belton. After that eventful night Belton did no more nursing. But fortunately they did not recognize who he was. (92-93; I.M.).

It is not only intriguing that Griggs, following perhaps in the tradition of the famous cross-dressing scene in William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*, would imagine such a fanciful scenario for
Belton, a sort of de facto anthropological experience amidst everything else at stake in this novel. This scene also acts as a clear analog to or literalization of the kind of exuberant interest race men had in the condition of women of color and the valorous defense of their characters. When Belton dresses as a woman of color, he is essentially taking to an extreme an act Chesnutt undertakes when he tries on the persona of Rena Walden only a year later in the interest of defending her from intense scrutiny. Griggs even goes so far as to write “Belton did not yield to them,” making it sound as though Belton himself were the one tempted with desire, as though he had a choice in the matter. In the oddest turn, it is strongly implied here that the white men succeed in raping Belton, thereby discovering his sex, but not his identity. Yet the text quickly shifts away from the implications of this, allowing Belton to move through the rest of the text as though this has never happened. This is the kind of sensational and darkly comic weirdness commonly found in Griggs’ novels, which is part of what makes them so intriguing as a queer archive.

The motivation for Belton’s eventual black nationalism comes when Antoinette has an apparently white child, implying her infidelity, though unclear with regard to whether she has been raped herself (later in the novel, Belton and Antoinette reconcile when Belton sees that the color of the child’s skin has darkened over time). The implication of this event, however, is that the perceived infidelity of Antoinette, her inability to remain pure and faithful for Belton, is what triggers Belton’s own infidelity to the state and, thus, his black separatist impulses. Yet by ultimately making Belton wrong about Antoinette, the novel does not endorse Belton’s separatism, but shows it to be a decision made of haste, out of absolutist ideas about race itself.

While Belton miraculously survives being shot, lynched, sold to a doctor as a cadaver, and nearly dissected, Bernard has a comparatively smooth go of things, that is until his life is
plunged into tumult by the suicide of his bride-to-be, Viola. In her letter to Bernard, Viola writes that she has been reading a book entitled *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination*, a real book published in 1868 by John H. Van Evrie, and has become convinced that

> “the intermingling of the races in sexual relationship was sapping the vitality of the Negro race and, in fact, was slowly but surely exterminating the race…. Thus, the white man was slowly exterminating us and our total extinction was but a short period of time distant…. I determined to spend my life fighting the evil. My first step was to solemnly pledge God to never marry a mulatto man. My next resolve was to part in every honorable way all courting couples of mulatto people that I could. My other and greatest task was to persuade the evil women of my race to cease their criminal conduct with white men and I went about pleading with them upon my knees to desist…. Ours would have been an ideal home. But it was not to be. I had to choose between you and my race…. Study the question of the intermingling of the races. If miscegenation is in reality destroying us, dedicate your soul to the work of separating the white and colored races. Do not let them intermingle. Erect moral barriers to separate them. If you fail in this, make the separation physical; lead our people forth from this accursed land. Do this and I shall not have died in vain.” (120)

With this command, Bernard dedicates himself to the task of racial separatism. However, as with Belton’s mistake in reading the skin of his child, Bernard is simply making the mistake of following Viola’s uncritical reading habits. Tess Chakkalakal observes that if Viola were to possess “a book like *Imperium in Imperio*” that it would “yield drastically different results from those that result from Viola’s accidental possession of *White Supremacy and Negro Subordination*” (*Jim Crow* 158). Bernard and Griggs value the intellectual woman, as Griggs shows again in giving so much wit and resolve to Morlene Dalton in *Unfettered*, but Griggs is also insistent, here, on the need for a racially conscious black literature.

> Given that both Bernard and Belton make decisions that court destruction and violence because of the actions of women lends *Imperium* an uncannily chivalric overtone — it is a novel about men who undertake poor decisions because of their fixation on valor and the character of women of color. Within the same novel, Griggs seems to contemplate the merits of fidelity to nation and race, but rather than settling squarely on his own vigilant brand of integrationism,
Griggs shows how the ideologies of fidelity and desire can be toxic to actual survival as a black citizen. In the end of the novel, the imperium’s leadership collapses and the structure falls apart as the ethics of interracialism among this black nation grow increasingly contentious. One member advocates full amalgamationism, which is resoundingly booed (150–51); Bernard suggests a full-scale race war for the purposes of “wreaking vengeance” on the white race (152), one he hopes to achieve by having blacks join the army *en masse* and then essentially commit a coup (168); and Belton argues, in a patriotic spirit, in favor of revealing the imperium to white America, asserting to them their love and appreciation of American liberty (“impress the Anglo-Saxon that he has a New Negro on his hands”), and then democratically taking control over the state government of Texas (163-64). Belton’s plan effectively would turn the imperium into a separatist party rather than a subversive revolutionary army. In either’s perspective, the other is committing an act of treason, Belton to the imperium and his race and Bernard to the United States and the Anglo-Saxon. However, both commit these acts of treason in the name of fidelity to their estranged and dead lovers. Needless to say, the chain of fidelities and betrayals being determined in Belton and Bernard’s relationships to movements, parties, nations, states, races, genders, and lovers is extraordinarily complicated; perhaps what we are supposed to garner from this more than an actual endorsement of any given course of action is that determining allegiances and wielding the force of desire as a black person in America is a difficult and personally taxing experience.

Because the bylaws of the imperium dictate that anyone threatening to reveal its existence will be executed, Belton ultimately is killed on Bernard’s command. Even the person who relays the manuscript to Griggs himself, the character Berl Trout, is executed. The violence

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70 Scholars like Claudia Tate would perhaps note here that each strategic military approach to black nationalism has a sexual and reproductive mirroring ethic.
is unyielding and, to restate, it is ultimately an effect of misplaced ideology about desire on both personal and political levels — that they are mutually determinative, that the nation ought to embody a consistent ideal about sexual desire, that the nation can utilize an ideal of sexual desire around which to cohere its operations, and that there is a privileged, absolute identitarian center upon which a person’s fidelities and desires should rest. By making Evrie’s book a primary source of this toxic ideology on desire and fidelity, Griggs even suggests that in a racially conscious, New Negro literature, a reevaluation of the value and worth of sexual and gender propriety would be in order, that an old, white supremacist framework must not be the only source of culture against which a black desire ethos reacts.

Reimagining Fidelity in Unfettered

*Imperium in Imperio*, for all the sensational fun it has, is ultimately a downer, a cautionary tale about the toxic spread of white supremacist values and black people’s unknowing adherence to them. In his second novel, *Overshadowed*, the main character of Erma Wysong and her brother are similarly punished for their lack of deference to the regulation of black bodies. It was not until his third novel, *Unfettered*, that Griggs attempted something truly utopianist in spirit. Certainly, *Imperium in Imperio* is often cited as an early example of black speculative fiction, but it offers no vision of the future as a critique of the suffocating conditions of the present. At the end of the novel, nothing in effect has occurred on a visible political level — the imperium remained secret, consumed its own leadership, and then collapsed before it could do anything of worth. *Unfettered*, however, goes so far as to include its own several-pages long addendum “Dorlan’s Plan,” written in the voice of the character Dorlan Warthell which, perhaps

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uncompellingly, offers itself as a sincere and thoughtful manifesto that could solve the race problem. Further, the novel suggests that the dissensus and subsequent resolution between Dorlan and Morlene — a dissensus they must overcome by becoming unfettered by party politics — begets their biological success and, ultimately, the symbolic success of the black race’s ensured future. The idea that Dorlan, with Morlene’s help, could solve the race problem via the motivation of consummating their love is intensely romantic; moreover, it is also a dynamic by which Griggs can advocate his principles of collective efficiency, suggesting, in an ideology inspired by Darwinism, that futurity is the product of ideological heterogeneity. Finally, it is a novel in which Griggs can ruminate on the ethics of U.S. expansionism as it relates to the principles of racial solidarity and the protection of romantic love as an American ideology.

Much in the way so much of the trouble in *Imperium* starts in Anglo-Saxon ideology, *Unfettered* itself starts in the bedroom of Maurice “Maury” Dalton as we witness “The Death of an Anglo-Saxon” (9). With only a small word change, this chapter could become the death of the Anglo-Saxon, and the way in which it refers to Maury as such invites that kind of speculation. The significance of his death at the beginning of the novel is racial; it represents the dwindling influence of plantation romanticism and domestic organization. Aunt Catherine, Maury’s longtime lover, surrogate mother to his white children, and mother of his black daughter, Morlene, watches Maury die as the other black workers on the plantation sing an old Negro spiritual around his bed (10-13). Maury’s son Lemeul declares shortly after his death, “‘I shall have no negroes whatever about me’” (16). He casts off all the workers, including Aunt Catherine, who is so institutionalized by her long life on the plantation that she falls into despair. Lemeul’s action suggests the birth of a kind of New Anglo-Saxon, one which, trying to make
sense of racial relations in the postbellum period, finds all of the old intimacies between master and slave improper. Lemeul is no Thomas Nelson Page; he is himself a separatist.

Under the will, Morlene is “entitled to compensation” by the Dalton estate because she is his daughter; Catherine’s more vigorous fidelity to the Daltons, however, is dismissed entirely, even as she begs to remain on the plantation — in Lemeul’s ideology of fidelity and mutual responsibility, blood is the law, not sentiment. Although the novel clearly villanizes Lemeul, it does not entirely dispose of Lemeul’s critique of sentiment. As Morlene and Dorlan’s later “shedding of affections” will show, the novel calls into question the notion that feeling and sentiment, especially those related to the principles of fidelity, determine what is right. Though Griggs is kind and generous to the character of Aunt Catherine, she is ultimately someone who mistakes the performatives of love, affection, and dedication as promises of material comfort, love, and sovereignty.

Soon after Lemeul casts Catherine and the workers out, he hunts a black man named Harry Dalton to reignite a feud they had as children. When Lemeul shoots Harry, it causes a dynamic shift between the whites and blacks in the town: “what was originally a personal encounter between two individuals” ends up containing “the germs of a race war” (29). This incident, along with the later death of the character Beulah, provokes a black led separatism as many of the town’s population end up moving en masse to Richmond in protest. What really happens in the first thirty pages or so of this novel is the collapse of a domestic system of fidelity and love that, while intensely problematic, has given sense, logic, and order to the black community. What is left in its wake is biopower-driven chaos and violence. It is perhaps out of this turmoil that Morlene agrees to marry Harry Dalton, who is “dying of love” for her (41). Beulah convinces Morlene that she can “learn” to love Harry, that she can mold her desire
toward a perceived black survival and futurity in a determined way. Thus, she winds up
“Parentless, homeless, friendless, [and] doomed to a loveless marriage…. When a woman’s hand
is chained but her heart is free!” (45).

Dorlan, the novel’s hero, does not arrive in the novel until about seventy pages in,
exhibiting once again the unconventionality of Griggs’ plotting, but also allowing Morlene’s
character to breathe and develop on her own without a certain crowding from Dorlan. Dorlan is
not here to rescue her from her situation, like Frank Fowler does Rena Walden in Chesnutt’s
House Behind the Cedars; when we first are introduced to Dorlan, he is fighting his own battle
against forces that expect his desire and solidarity, though his are more overtly political. Dorlan
works as a speechwriter for Congressman Bloodworth, a white republican. When Dorlan begins
to express his dissatisfaction with the imperialistic expansionist views of the republicans, he
threatens to leave them for the democratic party. Bloodworth essentially argues in return that
Dorlan “owes” the republican party for his liberty with a kind of undying fidelity and others go
so far as to say that black voters can only ever be republicans, a simplistic, severely constraining,
and absolutist kind of identity politics that allows for no intersectionality or nuance in political
engagement. It does not even allow for a semblance of Pan-Africanism since it disallows
Dalton’s concern for the non-white populations of the Phillippines. Like in Imperium, one of the
central conflicts of Unfettered is that of competing fidelities to race, nation, gender, and partner,
yet whereas these conflicts result in unavoidable chaotic tragedy in Imperium, in Unfettered,
Dorlan and Morlene succeed in becoming “unfettered,” resolving their conflicting fidelities, thus
ensuring the survival of the race and rewarding them with the consummation of their personal
affinity for one another. This looks like a standard marriage plot in which a personal conflict
between potential lovers rests on the resolution of a social conflict and vice versa, but with an
added twist: Dorlan and Morlene must also become unfettered of their emotions for each other if they are to transcend the sometimes toxic force of intimacy, which, according to Griggs, can pervert rational thought. Moreover, it calls into question whether or not personal and political desire should have any deterministic relationship at all and, if so, how that relationship should be structured.

Dorlan and Morlene’s becoming unfettered does have something to do with romance, but their solution to becoming liberated certainly does not involve Morlene going full-Bovary and cheating on Harry; the way the political and romantic conflicts become much more labyrinthine alleviates both of them from entering into any kind of moral quandary, which is perhaps one of the least sophisticated or adventurous things about the novel. Bloodworth seeks revenge on Dorlan and convinces the gullible Harry to attempt assassination. Morlene finds out and is thus tested in one of the more ethically ambiguous ways in the novel: she must warn Dorlan of the attempt, which involves a fracturing of her relationship of personal trust with Harry. Even if this seems radical, though, Griggs takes great steps to absolve Morlene from any wrongdoing, making her warning a carefully contextualized and thought out one. First and foremost, Morlene and Dalton have previously shared a political disagreement, making Morlene’s actions essentially altruistic — she will not sacrifice Dorlan’s life to advance her own political views.

Dorlan and Morlene’s political disagreement, their erotic, flirtatious dissensus, is in fact fundamental to the novel’s politics of ideological heterogeneity as the solution to the race problem. The subject matter of their disagreement, too, is far from arbitrary. In their first conversation, Dorlan shares with Morlene his belief in the Emersonian principle that everyone shares a common, universal mind that goes beyond party divisions (85). But though Dorlan and Morlene’s minds may be one, that does not mean their opinions and beliefs are homogenous.
Dorlan is leaving the Republican party because he is against the Philippine-American War and Morlene is “‘an enthusiastic expansionist.’” Morlene explains her Hobbesian enthusiasm in a prescient rhetorical flourish with which we are quite familiar in American Civil Rights culture:

“I have a dream. I dream that wars and revolutions shall one day cease. The classification of mankind into groups called nations, affords a feeling of estrangement which destroys or modifies the thought of universal brotherhood, and gives rise to the needless bickerings which result in wars. I delight in any movement that sweeps away these pseudo-national boundaries. The more separate nations that are congealed under one head, the less is the area where conflicts are probable. When the tendency to consolidate finally merges all governments into one, Wars shall cease. Our territorial expansion is but the march of destiny toward the ultimate goal of all things. I am delighted to see our nation thus move forward, because we have such an elastic form of government, so responsive to the needs and sentiments of the people that bloody revolutions become unnecessary wherever our flag floats. Just think how much our expansion makes for universal peace by erasing the thought of separateness existing between people, and giving to the federated powers such an ideal form of government.” (87)

One could hardly be blamed for rolling their eyes at what seems now like a wrong-headed and naive belief in the goodness of American imperialism as somehow, paradoxically, a post-nationalist movement. Still, the novel invests a great deal of respect in Morlene’s intelligence, and Dorlan exhibits resounding patience with her views and entertains their validity. They never, in the novel, come to resolve their differences on the issue of expansionism, but they do not let it destroy their willingness to continue a dialogue about them. This is why their relationship works — it is about desire for difference, not sameness, and thus, though it may not look like it from a modern perspective, their desire for each other is queer relative to the kind of desire prescribed by the national interest. This resonates especially well with the connotation of the word “queer” as a political same-gender-loving identity, one in which desire does not transcend political forces, but in which desire is in fact saturated with or perhaps even inspired by politics.

Dorlan, by the way, allows that Morlene’s vision is indeed beautifully rendered and compelling, but counters with his own realism, telling her that the Republican party is only
interested in power and will not honor the commitment to equality in Morlene’s dream; it will subjugate the Filipino in the same way that it is subjugating the Negro in America: “‘It is my purpose to attempt to weld together the Negroes in the hope of defeating any man that will not unequivocally and openly declare in favor of the ultimate political equality of the Filipinos’” (90). State apparatuses like the Republican party regulate desire by manipulating sentiment and affection for those in power. Morlene and Dorlan come to agree that they cannot allow a party to regulate their desires either if they are to live up to their full potentials. Another way in which Griggs lets his characters out of moral quandaries is by allowing the Republicans to win the election; Dorlan’s advocacy against them, thus, does not result in the victory of the democrats (in the present, we think of these democrats as the party of Woodrow Wilson, the one under which Jim Crow and lynch culture increased tenfold). In fact, it does not even appear that this is what Dorlan seeks. He does not want to empower the democrats; he only wants to shift the political thinking of black people in America.

After Harry’s assassination attempt on Dorlan fails, the middle of the novel finds Dorlan and Morlene apart from one another, taking part in episodic trials. Dorlan recovers from his wounds and Morlene tends to Aunt Catherine in a hospital in Chicago. After Catherine dies, Morlene buries Catherine’s fingernails in the white cemetery with Maurice Dalton (Catherine has donated the rest of her body to science). Harry, meanwhile, contemplates suicide after driving away Morlene and courting the scorn of the republican party for his act of violence, but Griggs again finds a way to let him out of a moral quandary by allowing him to kill himself in a heroic fashion: he saves a family of white people from their death by jumping in front of their horse carriage and stopping the wild horses. Amidst the middle events of this novel, Griggs’ integrationist ethic peeks through. One could even surmise that Griggs regards integrationism —
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read broadly here as the coming together of people with wildly different backgrounds, experiences, and ideas — as the freest form of political and philosophical expression for all. Even though Griggs entertains militarism and nationalism with great respect in his novels and even sometimes advocates for elements of those tactics, Unfettered should put to rest any notion that he himself is a “revolutionary novelist,” a “militant black novelist,” or a “black nationalist.” Indeed, it is the “a” in any of those above constructions that Griggs novels seem to resent.

After Harry dies, Dorlan becomes free to pursue Morlene, but in doing so, the novel also highlights Dorlan’s consciously selfish decision to abandon his antiexpansionist cause: “‘I have a little problem of desired expansion on my own hands, and I fear the government will have to wag along without me the best way it can for a while,’ said Dorlan to himself. The ultimate status of Morlene Dalton was now of more importance to him than the ultimate status of the Filipinos” (159). Further, Dorlan’s affective strains and logic of fidelity are split once more by the arrival of Ulbah Kumi on the scene. Kumi tells Dorlan that he is the descendant of a lost African prince and entitled to a great deal of wealth as a result. Dorlan sees it as an opportunity to enlighten Africans and uplift them into civilization, showing perhaps that he and Morlene aren’t so very far apart where expansionism is concerned. It is in this final phase of the novel that Griggs attempts to resolve the conflict that goes unresolved in Imperium. Morlene, mirroring Viola’s passionate political perspective on the stakes of romantic relationships, tells Dorlan that “‘conditions in the South’” will not “‘warrant women of my way of thinking in becoming wives of men of your mould’” (172). She seems to believe, in fact, that marriage as a social institution fetters African-American minds; like Rena Walden, Morlene seems to see marriage as a bourgeois form of social control that simply serves to reify racial hierarchy:

“Mr. Warthell, to my mind it is the function of the wife to idealize the aims of the
husband, to quicken the energies that would flag, to be at once the incentive and perennial inspiration of his noble achievements, to point him to the stars and steady his hand as he carves his name upon the skies. In the South the Negro wife is robbed of this holy task. We are being taught in certain high quarters that self-repression is the Negro’s chiefest virtue. Our bodies are free — they no longer wear chains, but our spirits are yet in fetters. I have firmly resolved, Mr. Warthell, to accept no place by a husband’s side until I can say to his spirit, ‘Go forth to fill the earth with goodness and glory’.... Mr. Warthell, in you may slumber the genius of a Pericles, but a wife in the South dare not urge upon you to become a town constable or a justice of the peace. Talk about slavery! Ah! The chains that fetter the body are but as ropes of down when compared to those that fetter the mind, the spirit of man. And think ye I would enter your home simply to inspire that great soul of yours to restlessness and fruitless tuggings at its chains! In the day when a Negro has a man’s chance in the race of life, I will let my heart say to you, Mr. Warthell, all that it wishes to say.” (174)

Many activists and scholars in LGBTQ studies, including Katherine Franke, Michael Warner, and Lisa Duggan, would probably find Morlene’s argument against marriage familiar: marriage serves as a distraction from the political gains that must be made, not the apparatus through which the problems that face blacks globally might be solved. Marriage, like fidelity to party, instrumentalizes people as American citizens, sanctioning their relationships by the dictums and interests of the state. Their marriage to each other would act as a marriage to American nationalism.

Although Dorlan suggests they go to Africa, Morlene sticks to her expansionist ideals, proclaiming Dorlan’s exodus as a separatism that willfully removes the Negro from Anglo-Saxon life, much like Aunt Catherine was forcefully removed from the Dalton Estate. In a cunning bit of characterization, Griggs has made Morlene’s motivations believable and her positions consistent — her experiences with Catherine have taught her that, for many, Garveyist separatism and exodus is not enough and merely gives people like Lemeul what they want. Further, it severs the promise of unfettered, integrationist thought and a heterogeneity of opinion — Morlene and Dalton have shared such promise personally and Morlene wants, too, to apply such promise to the race problem. Dorlan, then, accepts the ultimatum that he must solve the race
problem by espousing these values and only then will he deserve the love Morlene deprives him of.

In the end, Dorlan succeeds. Bloodworth attempts to assassinate him, but he is saved by Lemeul Dalton, who comes to a tentative epiphany about racial togetherness after white supremacist ideology results in the accidental death of his wife at the hands of Tony Marshall. It seems like ultimately some of the ideology about heterogeneity of opinion or Dorlan and Morlene’s mutual working out of the race problem is squandered by the ending. It starts to seem like what really matters is that the race get behind Dorlan and that Morlene co-sign his credibility as a leader of the race with her hand in marriage: “Morlene was so deeply conscious as to how much depended upon her verdict on Dorlan’s plan …. The suffering, restless Negroes were to be offered a panacea and she was their representative to accept or reject the proffered medicine” (202). In other words, the fate of the race depends more upon their marriage than their marriage depends upon the fate of the race. Within this last turn of the novel, though, is an imaginative and optimistic return to the topics of reading and literature as they were taken up in Imperium. We already know Morlene to be a demonstrated intellectual and we know Griggs considers her wit essential to the solution of the race problem, but it is as a reader, a receptive party, that she must prove herself. She becomes the arbiter of Dorlan’s work, and as much depends on Dorlan’s intellectualism as on Morlene’s ability to receive his message. Again, the fact that this is tied directly to their potential to marry and reproduce literalizes the fight for survival and futurity in the black race. Instead of just sex and reproduction and the restoration of Dorlan and Morlene into a recognizable family order consistent with the ideals of the nation, we have the writing and reading of the document, an action upon which the outcome is much less certain.
Unfettered ends with “Dorlan’s Plan,” the document that won Morlene’s hand. It is not especially compelling or original in how it proposes to solve the race problem, and mostly produces many of the principles already ventured in a vague way. The plan explicitly mentions, though, that feelings and emotions can be toxic, and suggests that black people shake themselves loose of feeling with regard to party affiliation (261). Morlene and Dorlan’s shaking themselves loose of feeling for each other to solve the race problem mirrors their resolve. This deprivation of doing what feels right checks Griggs’ sentimentalism, as Stephen Knadler has argued, yet paradoxically, it was his feeling for Morlene in the first place that has motivated him to solve the race problem; in a simplistic reading of the novel, one could argue that the moral here is pretty trite: “Love wins.” Yet given that love and affection between people, between subjects and their party, between citizens and the nation, and between races are all shown in this novel to be contentious and overlapping, as they were in Imperium, one must observe that Unfettered is a novel distrustful of simple expressions of feeling and the state apparatuses that confirm their worth. It sees Morlene and Dorlan’s relationship as worthwhile and fruitful, but it also structures it so that it must be worked out on its own terms. Unfettered begins with an Anglo-Saxon dying in his bed and the domestic order of the United States being turned upside down in the process. Unfettered takes this as an opportunity to investigate the political and personal worth of sentimentality on new terms and, in doing so, Griggs grasps the sentimental ideology about black and white intimacy in America and refigures it as more than merely an inborn desire, but a complex philosophical and political problem.

Coda: On Faith, Love, and Politics in the Modern Era

As I finish writing this chapter, Hillary Clinton has just officially accepted the democratic party’s nomination for president after a contentious struggle with supporters of Bernie Sanders.
Those who supported Sanders have largely been true believers, expressing their devotion to his sweet and genuine comportment, seen largely as evidence of his uncorruptability. They therefore see Sanders, also, as the ameliorative to party politics, which in our era have begun largely to act in an undemocratic way according to the political establishment’s interest in self-preservation. As money has increasingly infiltrated politics, these parties have become profitable machines that consolidate power, suppress dissensus, and spend great deals of money and time on crafting propaganda and pageantry that consolidates the bonds of affection of voters for the party. The great perceived victory of Sanders’ candidacy is that, as an outsider with an opinion heterogeneous to Clinton’s centrism, which was seen as the inevitable platform upon which the presidency can be won, Sanders has shifted the party left. This has tested people’s faith in the party, but the way they talk about Sanders and Clinton as though they were their dear friends and lovers maintains some of the sentimentalism Griggs warns against in *Unfettered*, sentimentalism used against us to dissimulate the fact that these are people who want power. Indeed, many of the people I know who express dissatisfaction with not only Clinton and the DNC, but with the entire two-party system, are queer, and especially queer people of color. After marriage equality became a reality in 2015, many of us felt a certain trepidation at expressing support and love for President Obama and the Supreme Court — the executive office has continued an interventionist foreign policy that adversely affects people of color in other countries and the Supreme Court passed Citizen’s United and repealed a significant part of the Voting Rights Act. Why did a decision that resulted in a fairer and more just treatment of citizens mean that we had to love our politicians? It has felt as though our support and the consolidation of power has been bought through the abuse of something that, to queers everywhere, is actually quite sacred, which has sustained us through many years of oppression and violence and death and invisibility: love.
Now when we see “Love Trumps Hate” or “Love Wins” splashed around on social media to rally people around politicians, we feel less enamored with the concept of love itself and more skeptical about what we are being sold and how we are being bought. In American politics, what does a marriage cost?

One of the great challenges of this project has been convincing others and myself that black uplift novels could be considered to be in some way “queer” while having almost no explicitly LGBTQ subject matter. Indeed, this has never really even been my goal, and it would be more accurate but just as crass to say that my project in fact races queer theory. My hypothesis has been that queerness, in the fundamentals of its emergence and again, now, after the marriage equality movement, is more about transgressive sex and a theory of sex politics than it is about LGBTQ bodies. When I read Griggs, a writer invisible to most and whose works are mostly recommended with reticence about their quality, I cannot help but feel excited about their promise in multiple regards. Griggs’ works, especially *Imperium* and *Unfettered* show a remarkable prescience about the bourgeois politics of containment that adheres to the institution of marriage and to the principle of fidelity. Observing this is an opportunity not only to think about the value of Griggs to modern cultural studies, but to think about how the values and ideas that the LGBTQ political movement advocate for are not necessarily new. This matters because, in an effort to make queerness legible in politics, it has been consolidated down to the hypervisible icon of the gay white male; racial minorities and otherwise sexually transgressive figures have been rendered invisible by this process. And given that so many of the problems Griggs notes still linger and disproportionately threaten sexually transgressive people of color, it behooves us to make our movement for the rights of the sexually transgressive a broad church with thorough citational practices. It is crucial that we know, in the interest of a coalition politics,
that LGBTQ people are not the only people to question the normative ethics of love and whom
those ethics serve. LGBTQ people are not the only people to call into question the emancipatory
promise of marriage. LGBTQ people are not the only ones who find that the consolidation of
their political identities for material benefit can be instrumentalized to nefarious purposes,
including imperialism. LGBTQ people are not the only people to have found their fidelities
caught between identitarian communities, thus necessitating that they seek a cosmopolitan third
way. And finally, LGBTQ people are not only white people and queer people can be and indeed
are black. LGBTQ people are at a juncture where they can embrace a Griggsian heterogeneity of
opinion, allow many into their folds instead of closing off the community through exclusive
taxonomies and limited cultural retention, call into question their fidelity to bourgeois political
apparatuses, and ask about the primacy and purity of love as a fundamental ideology of political
action. More than Chesnutt, whose work serves as a cautionary tale about the truncation and
instrumentalization of identity and desire, or Hopkins, whose work imagines the potential
political role that the sexually nonnormative could make, Griggs work speaks to our moment,
because it asks us to consider how we negotiate our relationships to the state and to what end.
Conclusion: Intersectional Scholarship and Political Stakes for the New Resistance

That's part of the dilemma of being an American Negro; that one is a little bit colored and a little bit white, and not only in physical terms but in the head and in the heart, and there are days -- this is one of them -- when you wonder what your role is in this country and what your future is in it. How, precisely, are you going to reconcile yourself to your situation here and how you are going to communicate to the vast, heedless, unthinking, cruel, white majority, that you are here?

—James Baldwin, interview with Dr. Kenneth Clark (1963)

I hate to say it, but each other’s all we got.
—Father John Misty, “Pure Comedy” (2017)

Last night I went to a protest in Manhattan hosted by the Council on American-Islamic Relations. The protest was held to counter the signing of executive actions by President Donald Trump calling for a border wall between Mexico and the United States and a temporary immigration ban targeting citizens — mostly refugees — from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. The protest followed a massive worldwide event four days earlier known as the “Women’s March.” At the CAIR protest there were only maybe a thousand of us, as opposed to the hundreds of thousands that had gathered over the weekend in New York. Hopes that the weekend’s joyous resistance march would lead to sustained activism — the kind that can get everyday folks out to a rally at 5:00 PM on a Wednesday — were not rewarded. But what the rally lacked in size it made up for in the precision of its demands and in the deep sense of coalition politics shared by all who were there. It seems blasé and sentimental to say — not that sentimentality is bad, per se — but it was a small comfort to look across Washington Square Park and see such a diverse swath of people (though many were young black and brown people) chanting resistance slogans and mutual-care affirmations for over two hours on a cold January night. At one point during the night, a speaker, whose name I cannot remember, called for united
opposition to these new ethnonationalist measures — specifically, unity between Muslim Americans, African Americans, Latinx Americans, and queer Americans. In closing she cited a phrase made popular by ACT UP, a group — primarily led by gay men at its emergence — which organizes political action calling attention to the HIV/AIDS crisis: “SILENCE = DEATH.”

Some might say that the phrase was “appropriated” for the event. But for me, a queer activist whose antiracist politics are a deeply held part of my queer identity, I prefer to think of them as strategically repurposed to allow for a continuity between our struggles, one we have to conjure out of thin air in service to our utopian politics, because in reality, gay white men like the ones who started ACT UP and Muslim-Americans may never have any kind of meaningful sociality or intimacy, especially as gay white men get fully welcomed into American normativity. When I heard the phrase, I felt at once moved and ashamed. Because what does the LGBTQ political movement have to offer to coalitions of resistance now? “Love Wins,” a pithy candy-wrapper statement borrowing from no activist traditions, tailor-made for quick and easy social media virtue signaling, a phrase that circulated only after LGBTQ people had barely secured, through the most patrician branch of government, an arbitrary and largely symbolic right.

Many saw the decision in Obergefell v. Hodges as evidence that the U.S. was entering a progressive new day with advocates of social justice being on “the right side of history.” Why then, at a juncture in which many, though not all, marginalized citizens felt the winds of change were on our side, do we suddenly find ourselves rapidly losing political power? Thinkpieces circulating across the internet for rapid clicking and consumption tell us that the left — figured as the Democratic Party, “coastal elites,” or the “liberal elite” — lost touch with working-class
white Americans living in the Rust Belt, voters who voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 but Trump in 2016; others combat this viewpoint by pointing out that the base support for Trump’s ethnonationalism-fueled victory comes from the wealthy, who poured their financial support, influence, and votes into the election. There is no smoking gun. But to my mind, as a leftist — and I am not alone in this — I feel our lack of power is at least partially about the mediocrity of political thought among the media pundits and Democratic politicians who largely represent the American left right now. There was no imagination, no fruitful dissensus, and no push toward grand, holistic action. Where there was the opportunity to craft a message and a plan that had broad influence and would at least attempt to address continued injustices like police violence, plutocracy, disenfranchisement, drone warfare (sometimes involving execution without due process), unconstitutional surveillance, transphobia, and crony capitalism, we found ourselves shoveling all our coal into the same furnace for a Democratic candidate whose positions, until just recently, had been much akin to the New Democrat platform of the mid-1990s. Asking citizens to pin their hopes and dreams on a candidate whose progressive politics seemed to be held without conviction and who, by all indications, loved power to a startling degree, depressed turnout and stultified political enthusiasm among the American left and left-sympathetic moderates. Compare this to a candidate who had a message — a terrifying one, which risked something and had real stakes — and the left never stood a chance. Say what you will about demagoguery and political rhetoric, but as media circulation diffuses, cutting through the noise has become essential. In place of thinkpieces and pithy Twitter takes about arcane or pedantic political issues, what we need is an activism that has artistry and craft, that can wrap what we want into neat packages for mass consumption, a platform that has stakes so it can garner attention.
What does this mean for politically-engaged scholarship? Ask Stanley Fish and he will tell you that professors should have shut up about Trump a long time ago, that their political opinions only serve as bubble-talk to their sympathizers and grist for the mill for conservative commentators (SR14). Ask Jonathan Chait — a Hillary Clinton booster who ironically claimed that the “Women’s March” was poorly named because it discouraged participation from men — and he’ll tell you that the politically correct thought police, particularly those from the far left, are the Achilles Heel of modern liberalism (22). Ask Atlantic columnist Conor Friedersdorf and he’ll tell you that the left, especially on college campuses, has become a bunch of oversensitive babies afraid to engage with any thought that causes them discomfort. This trend of new political journalism in which it is claimed that what used to be a priori assumptions — that institutions of higher learning stand for equal rights and treatment, sensitivity toward their students, support for social justice activism, and, above all, knowledge and the pursuit of truth — are now “political” or “divisive” just shows how our new mediocrity of thought and lack of political conviction is driven by both fear and opportunism. A paternalistic specter — the magical power or feeling to which the left and liberals are apparently beholden — seems to have us now in its grip; our new tactics in scholarship and pedagogy are not even to repackage or rethink the delivery of our message — which I think is absolutely necessary — but to stay quiet, period. People committed to a craven, valueless moderate ideology find themselves showered with adulation as the equivocating voices of reason. It’s hip to be square, or at least to have no jagged edges or ragged hems.

I am thankful that Chait, Fish, and Friedersdorf’s opinions and prohibitive discourse are largely ridiculed among my colleagues, but they concern me nonetheless. If we are to have a

72 I offer no specific citation since this is the subject of many of Friedersdorf’s articles.
robust political and public scholarship with stakes, what does it mean to contend with a newly popularized tactics of silence and equivocation? And in this case, what indeed can a black queer studies project focused on a scarcely-read sub-canon of African-American literature offer to a public intellectualism that has suddenly become allergic to even not-so-big ideas like the necessity of antiracism?

In the introduction of this project, I suggested that *Bricolage Propriety* was primarily about method, and more specifically, queer method. I thought by experimenting with a queer hermeneutics that dispensed with regular touchstones like homosexuality, gay men, and the twentieth century that I could improve it, modeling the queer antiracist critique I want in part on the actions of African American writers at the end of the nineteenth-century. I also wanted to draw attention back to this period because, even when I started this project, long before the rise of Trump, I saw upsetting similarities between our current moment and the Post-Reconstruction period; gay billionaire technocrats like Peter Thiel are our new industrialist robber barons; the Alt-Right is our New Anglo Saxon populism; state-sanctioned police violence is the new lynch law; and, as Michelle Alexander has compellingly argued, the prison industrial complex is the new slavery. Discouraged as we should be that we are still fighting battles that were not won or lost in the Civil Rights movement or after, a deep knowledge of history can act as a weapon when we encounter anyone willing to listen. If queers want to be a part of the new resistance against plutocracy, ethnonationalism, and racial violence, we must lend our knowledge and voices to the movement and consider with deep purpose our role and tactics in communicating to the unthinking white majority. This is an intellectual project; this is a project for queer theory.

In a very basic logical presumption, I have argued that because gender and sexuality was so central to African American culture and politics in early Jim Crow, that U.S. race politics
should be fundamental to modern conceptions of gender and sexuality and, thus, that gender and sexuality studies scholars should contend with race at every turn. Queer theorists were once moved by Freudianism’s notion that all drives and sociality were backlit by subconscious human desire, that sex was implicit in all sociality and culture. I argue, with a growing chorus of voices, that race is implicit in all sexuality, that sex and race — though figured discretely in politics — are inseparable in actual sociality and culture. But what concrete and specific political interventions do African American uplift novels make in this staid argument? Or to put it in a crasser parlance — one I’d hoped to avoid — what lessons does this archive teach us, being the “us” broadly figured as queer antiracists or other political activists?

When it came to post-election thinkpieces, the perspective I was most sympathetic to, even in my extreme exasperation with constant content dissemination, was that our politics have to be both loud and sophisticated. The problem here is the presumption that these two aesthetics are incompatible. Upon shifting to a pro-marriage-equality position in 2012, Vice President Joe Biden cited the television show *Will & Grace* as a kind of crossover culture that truly changed the hearts and minds of “everyday Americans.” Sitcom aesthetics washed queers clean and turned them into benign punchlines that, supposedly, even hardened evangelical homophobes couldn’t resist. The implicit message here is that social justice politics have to find a way to appeal to the lowest common denominator, which is my elitist way of saying “working class white Rust Belt voters.” I do not completely disagree, but the noxious side-effect of thought like this is that white affluent gay males like Will obtain a privileged iconicity in LGBTQ politics. So how do you encounter the problem of making something loud and sophisticated without leaving anyone behind?

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73 My use of this phrase is inspired by Robert Reid-Pharr’s essay “Clean: Death and Desire in Samuel R. Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*” (2011).
Du Bois, Chesnutt, Griggs, Harper, Hopkins, Washington, Wells, and many others faced this same problem at the emergence of formalized New Negro thought — how could they combat the widely-held assumption that African Americans were sexually and gender dysfunctional, and thus undeserving of rights, and fight for racial justice, and explore possibilities of free desire for the first time in their history? The answer: an African American literature that was agile, diverse, loud, and sophisticated. We can quibble about Chesnutt’s intentions in the valorous depiction of mixed-race womanhood, but what does The House Behind the Cedars ultimately put on offer? That intense scrutiny over the desire of African Americans would lead to their ultimate dissipation. Even as Chesnutt sought to propagate images of heroic blackness that seemed exclusionary in some ways, buried deep down in Cedars is a free-love, feminist ethic about politics, desire, and free movement. It looks like a tragic mulatta romance, but it carries within it a deep, dark critique of sexual politics’ personal ramifications, bestowed unequally on mixed-race women of color. Sexual politics have a personal cost and the realm of the political is violent and messy. But if we constantly keep a kind of reflexivity about our political aims, even through clumsy stabs at intimacy like Chesnutt’s with Rena Walden, we invite the possibility that the next iteration of our politics can be more inclusive, working on behalf of everyone, even as we fight for meager visibility in the day-to-day.

In the tableau presented here of African American literature between 1900–1905, we see great discontinuity and, thus, great possibility. From Hopkins we might learn that big dreams and fiction are important, even if they go unappreciated in their time. Through paraliterary forms like speculative fiction, Hopkins boldly bucked her white patronage while appropriating predominant racial scientific thought to spin her own yarns. Hopkins’ backers never wanted something like Of One Blood, but she wrote and published it anyway. Using a publication outlet that was widely
read among African Americans, she used her platform to proffer something provocative about black desire and racial lineage until she lost her privileges. Even in doing so, however, she borrowed liberally from the racial and racist imaginaries — even from genetic thought we now consider arbitrary and essentialist — to craft something that could speak to people in loud and dramatic ways. She used all tools at her disposal to make something impactful, imagining universes in which black sex, desire, and courtship — as building blocks of civilization — were beautiful and politically efficacious. If there is something of a continuity between her and Chesnutt’s work, it is that they both saw ways black sexuality, perceived as inherently transgressive, could be politically powerful in the earlygoing of the Jim Crow antiracist movement. They were not the first, because implicit in the abolitionists’ critique of slavery was that it destroyed the family units of black Americans, and was thus an evil. The right to free desire and subsequent domestic stability is part of that critique. But Chesnutt and Hopkins’ sexual desire and domestic organization looked nothing like the idealized domestic or even sentimental family units of mid-century writers’ works. Chesnutt immediately put his protagonist into moral peril by having her fall in love with a white man; Hopkins flirted with the incestuous implications of modern race politics and ended *Of One Blood* with black vengeance against the malicious, white supremacist ideology that would seek to repress or sublimate free black desire, figured in her edenic Ethiopia as a sexual and racial paradise where all black sexuality is normative and beautiful in its performativity.

And in the work of Sutton E. Griggs, we see an even more explicit extension of the idea that post-racial utopia is entirely contingent upon unfettered desire and feeling and vice versa. Characters in nearly all of his novels suffer from degrees of false consciousness wherein they try to constrain racial, gender, and sexual performance to align with their loyalties to states, parties,
and movements; but Griggs, one might argue, ultimately believes that “love wins.” This love, however, has to be a form of intellectual action and free movement, not a strategic conformity to normative ideas of relationality. Further, like in Hopkins, love and marriage, as a healthy and constructive pursuit, must be coupled with unswerving devotion to human emancipation. “Love” without a recommitment of oneself to racial justice is selfish love. Again, if the rationale of marriage equality as a central tenet of modern LGBTQ politics is, in part, to revise normative ideas of domesticity and partnership — to even improve upon them by widening definitions of productive partnership, family organization, and citizenship — then why not consider racial justice a part of that equation? And why not look to the long history of thinkers who already saw marriage and partnership as issues inextricable from problematic state definitions of citizenship? If queer activists were to approach state-incentivized marriage and partnership in the way Griggs did — with the caveat that privileges afforded to couples should not be taken advantage of without concurrent challenges to oppressive state ideology — they could develop a sophisticated understanding of revisionary marriage ideology that would be much more about inclusion and justice than personal freedom. That is to say that African American authors of the Nadir like Griggs did not seem to approach questions about domestic partnership from a liberalist perspective, but from a communitarian one. At this juncture in which liberalist ideology shapes our understanding of why, when, and how to pursue identitarian-framed rights, we might consider how previous gender and sex politics movements did not consider the pursuit of freedom as being about access to personal privileges; rather, it was about holistic societal change. This is an intersectional ethics of queer social change.

If there are any discontents of intersectional critique in modern politics, particularly given their rapid absorption into the mainstream, it is that it can reinstate what are perceived as the
solipsistic and static discontents of liberal identity politics, that just underneath the actualization of true identitarian freedom of self-expression are individualistic motivations based on traditional ideas of sovereignty and the human. The rationale for intersectional critique should not be to create new political territories of isolation; as Robert Reid-Pharr warned during the emergence of intersectional queer critique, “I am concerned that, as we demonstrate the hybridity and multiplicity within our various selves, as we seriously problematize the practice of identity politics, we do not also suggest workable alternatives” (“Heterotopia” 354). New intersectional figurations of identity may produce more accurate political encampments, but it still becomes easy to discretely figure the identities we are so passionate about as the ends themselves rather than instructive positionalities.  

Scholarly method informed by and for the purpose of activism can change this. Though I have not mentioned it throughout this project, one guiding philosophical star that informs my approach to resistance has been French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of “being singular plural” or “being with.” I am a materialist thinker and a historicist and it would seem that the somewhat “new-age” tendencies of Nancy would be off-putting to an old Marxist like me. Yet, as a kind of poetic augmentation of certain Marxist critical traditions — what people might call the “New Materialism” — I have found it inspiring in terms of thinking of political action as an intellectual project. Nancy attempts to address one of the primary discontents of classical Marxism: Marx’s rather metaphysical belief that individuals are a basic building block of society and that labor is the primary medium through which we experience the world and relationality with one another. As much as Marx is seen as breaking from idealist Enlightenment traditions,

74 See Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages* for a more sustained critique of intersectional identitarianism.

75 For the most thorough example of New Materialist thought, see Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Economy of Things* (2010).
he never fully gets away from the notion that individualism and sovereignty belong to the realm of nature. Nancy instead figures an ontology that proceeds from the notion of an originary “with,” a notion that all meaning and being are essentially shared. Singularity is the affirmation of the origin via the “touch” of meaning — in other words, things are distinct in their individuality and they are plural meaning in touch (6). Representation and grammars are the conduits of navigating an originary withness and simultaneous apartness from which we recognize that withness. The spectacularization of our being singular, to Nancy, simply calls attention to our fundamental plurality.76

What I value about this thinking, above all else, is that it pushes us to think of identity as spectacular action and theater, while not dispensing with material sociality and the realm of the real. But if we push ourselves to consider material, fleshy utopias where we are unafraid of our sympathetic and antagonistic intimacies, we make identitarian critique less about an arms race to authority and authenticity and more about the spirit of liberation. This is not a flighty thought, but one that truly considers how deviation from the road-map of individual and state-issued sovereignty — even if it is constrained — and towards the promise of mutual cooperative action could lead us to better left coalition activism.

But even as I cite Nancy, I think of another guiding star, Barbara Christian, who in her classic essay “The Race for Theory” (1987) famously noted that postmodern and poststructuralist thought worked through a citational strategy rooted in western white humanism without consideration for the experiences or thought of racial others. With racial political action in intense upheaval at the end of the nineteenth century, African Americans did their own thinking

76 Though he was never able to publish on it before his untimely death, José Muñoz was also influenced by Nancy’s thought; in fact, Nancy wrote an ode to Muñoz for a 2015 special issue of Social Text.
about philosophies of activism that, while certainly involving ideas of identity and propriety, did not begin or end with them as self-justifying logics. The ethics of reproduction, as this project has explored, was a central subject for Nadir literature. In the end, though, African Americans were not afraid of intimacy and reproduction in the early Jim Crow era; they were concerned, instead, about the policing of intimacy and reproduction. Of course, reproduction was not just a literal thing in this literature, but a representation of political futurity. As such, any discussion of reproduction and gender and sexual performance in this work doubles as a philosophy of political action.  

For me, in *Bricolage Propriety*, this has served as a reminder that intellectual activism involves being unafraid of intimacy, of ecstatic belonging, of impolite being, of rude representation, of interdisciplinary wandering, of promiscuous reading, and of experimental formation. Intellectual activism also involves a degree of generosity toward what is perceived as normative, stale, assimilative, inauthentic, esoteric, or wrongheaded; the *bricoleur* uses it all. In practical terms, this has played out here as a drastic dislocation of queerness and an engagement with the idea of the dominant or the normative; I have attempted to widen the bricolage genealogy of queer antiracism so that, in building the queer antiracism of tomorrow, we have the widest and most materially-oriented tools at our disposal. We may never leave the realm of Enlightenment conceptions of individual sovereignty, but in the act of spectacularizing our strivings, we create art — an art of intellectual activism — in which we open a space for resistance and survival.

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77 Again, see Claudia Tate’s *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*.  
78 I borrow the term “promiscuous reading” from a colleague, Professor Kandice Chuh.
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