



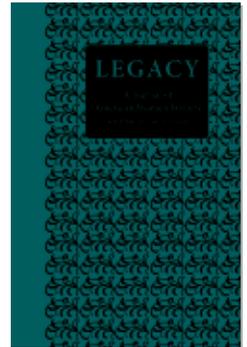
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Kirin Wachter-Grene

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Iola Leroy's "Long, Long Ago" Song

KIRIN WACHTER-GRENE

Art Institute of Chicago

Black literature has long been burdened with an evidentiary task: How should Black people and Black life be portrayed? This concern is born of a historical problem. The idea that “the command of written English virtually separated the African from the Afro-American, the slave from the ex-slave, titled property from fledgling human being” influenced the liberatory urgency of nineteenth-century African American writing emerging amidst and in the wake of American chattel slavery (Gates 4).¹

Black writers faced tremendous pressure. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes, “If blacks were to signify as full members of the Western human community, they would have to do so in their writings” (6). Literacy was both a technology and a commodity with which Black people’s humanity could be negotiated (11). As a result, Gates writes, “Few literary traditions have begun or been sustained by such a complex and ironic relation to their criticism: allegations of an absence led directly to a presence, *a literature often inextricably bound in a dialogue with its potentially harshest critics*” (26; emphasis added). Within the strategically necessary yet politically overdetermined confines of treating Black art as propaganda, “the critic became social reformer, and literature became an instrument for the social and ethical betterment of the black person” (30).²

As a white scholar and teacher of African American literature, I am invested in questioning this dynamic between the African American literary archive and its critics (including, of course, my own relationship to the work). The inextricable dialogue between Black art and its critics is a collectively uneasy relationship that proliferates. For instance, with notable exceptions, much scholarly attention to late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century African American literature focuses on anti-racist resistance on the one hand and respectability or assimilation on the other.³ Given how the historical pressures outlined have contoured Black art and its reception, this binary is understandable. How-

ever, as a result, little critical attention is given to a complex *something else* at work in such texts. This something else is a type of narrative excess that can be understood in many ways—as the unspeakable, spoken from the depths, as the text’s open secret, as the crack in the edifice of any narrative’s project.⁴ In his 1992 essay “On the Unspeakable,” Samuel R. Delany explains that the unspeakable can be understood in at least two ways.⁵ First, it can be comprehended as transgressive practices of relation, represented in language affiliated with abjection (66). Second, the unspeakable can be thought of as “a set of positive conventions governing what can be spoken of (or written about) in general . . . it comprises the endlessly specialized tropes . . . required to speak or write about various topics at various anomalous places in our complex social geography” (61–62). In this second definition, the unspeakable illuminates the generic conventions of the articulable, or, for my purposes here, the respectable. It makes the machinations of containment plainly visible.

Within this specific context of African American literature, excess can be thought of as that which eludes an author’s or critic’s attempts to contain the work as “an instrument for the social and ethical betterment of the black person” (Gates 30). Containment here means a process that simplifies, silences, and/or manipulates representations of race, sex, and gender—a flattening of the range of Black humanity. In Black letters, containment has historically functioned as a type of control that underwrites the project of literary propaganda.⁶ However, when Black literature is contained, a barrier to explorations of non-normative representations of race, sex, and gender that are not recuperable by conventional modes of racial or sexual knowing, such as respectability and/or resistance, emerges. I therefore wonder what is lost, elided, and/or misrecognized within Black literature produced and read in such politically overdetermined contexts.

This essay looks at one such moment of narrative excess in one of the first novels by an African American woman—Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, published in 1892. This excessive moment concerns a plantation song from “Long, long ago” sung by the protagonist’s mother, Marie, a manumitted slave married to her former master, Eugene (Harper 82). Disquiet triggers Eugene to ask Marie sing the song, which functions as a mutually seductive balm for them. The effects the “long ago” song produce for Marie might be read as what I call security through subjection, that is, the subjecting of oneself to what is commonly understood as oppression in exchange for emotional security, a sense of power, and/or a perverse type of pleasure that temporarily mitigates an anxious relationship to precarious freedom.

When considering security through subjection as an ambiguous conflation of comfort, power, and pleasure, one might think of Saidiya Hartman’s

reading of Harriet Jacobs's use of seduction in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Hartman reads seduction in this context as evocative of "both agency and subjection":

The question arises as to whether seduction can provide a way of acquiring power or remains the exclusive purchase of the dominant. . . . Can seduction also serve as a weapon of the weak or a vehicle for the articulation of needs and desires? Is it possible to consider the contested interaction of the captive female and white man/owner within this frame? Do points of resistance inhabit the enactment of willed surrender, *or is it a surrender of another order?* If the latter is the case, then the delineations of power are murky and uncertain. (103; emphasis added)

She questions whether seduction of the dominant by "the weak" or "captive female," as well as her enactment of willed surrender, might be tactics that, crucially, can be read in ways additional to "resistance" such as "a vehicle for the articulation of needs and desires." This question is radical given that seduction, or sexual interaction within the asymmetrical power dynamics of slavery, is generally read as capitulation to one's own oppression.⁷ This is why Hartman's questions here are central to my own in pursuing excessive racial and sexual representations. In particular, her consideration of the enactment of surrender "of another order" informs my reading of Harper's novel (Hartman 103).

The concept of security through subjection is historically and culturally specific. As was the case for most nineteenth-century women, Marie's freedom to negotiate society in specific ways and to access particular resources is precarious, dependent upon her matrimonial union. Her circumstances are complicated further, considering her marriage to her former enslaver is what keeps her and their children from the risk of returning to enslavement. Therefore, for Marie, I read security through subjection as a tactic she uses to maintain a sense of security in the face of a doubly precarious freedom. But more than this, the novel's excessive representation of the "long ago" song is, I argue, a tool Marie and Eugene evoke consensually as kinky play that relies on and reifies their asymmetrical power dynamic steeped in slavery's residue. This practice of relation troubles *Iola Leroy's* representation of respectability, its primary mode of containment, which includes, I argue, Iola's protofeminist and proto-Black Nationalist forms of resistance.

Concepts similar to what I am calling security through subjection appear in Black queer theory and literature that dares to complicate our comprehension of slavery as a system of complete and total subjugation by addressing what some writers see as its erotic power dynamics.⁸ In offering a queer reading of a paradigmatic Black feminist text, it is essential to establish that queer theory

and queer of color critique owe a debt to Black feminism. However, it is equally important to note Black feminist theory shares a tense relationship with this genealogy. Black feminist scholar Brittney Cooper suggests that much queer theory and queer of color critique treats Black feminism as a retrograde building block rather than recognizing it as theoretically generative and dynamic.⁹ As she argues, “antagonisms toward race and feminism . . . are endemic to queer theory” (“Love No Limit” 14)—that is, if queer theorists recognize the specific gendered, sexual, and raced experiences of Black women at all.¹⁰

As Cooper and others argue, Black feminist theory has always been generative and dynamic. Black feminist scholarship published after the emergence of queer of color critique in the early 2000s—notably the work of Jennifer Nash, Ariane Cruz, Mireille Miller-Young, Lamonda Horton-Stallings, and Amber Musser—is particularly useful in analyzing racial and sexual excess. Most instrumental to my reading here is Cruz’s *The Color of Kink*, a 2016 study informed by a queer theoretical genealogy that develops a “politics of perversion” to offer groundbreaking analysis of Black women’s “non-‘normative’ sexual desires and practices” within the context of asymmetrical power dynamics (Cruz 10). Such a politics recognizes “the subversive, transformative power of perversion as the alteration of something from its original course and the *kink*—the sexual deviance—that perversion evokes” (11). Taking up Hartman’s suggestion of “surrender of another order,” I think with Cruz’s “politics of perversion” to analyze *Iola Leroy*’s excess. If security through subjection is a “perverse” type of comfort or pleasure, “in what ways can perversion open up new modes of being in the world for black women while at the same time accounting for the historical bondage (literally and symbolically) associated with black women’s bodies?” (Cruz 10–11). My reading aims to center Black women’s radical sexual practices, an important intervention in expanding the cultural imaginary of, and recognition of, Black/female/queer lives.

Iola Leroy recounts the story of the eponymous protagonist, a young mixed-race woman raised believing she is white until she is sold into slavery when her wealthy white father dies. The novel primarily concerns itself with Iola’s decision, upon learning her ancestry, to live as a Black woman and dedicate herself to the improvement of Black society. Harper’s novel helped usher in the Woman’s Era (1890–1910), a time when Black women writers produced a tremendous body of work. This era coincided with the birth of what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham termed the “politics of respectability,” an ideology of racial uplift (“African American Women’s History” 272). Indeed, Harper wrote the novel, an undeniable “woman’s story, “to promote social change, [and] to aid in the uplifting of the race” (Carby 63).¹¹ And as one of the best-known and most respected African American activists and writers of her day, she “knew

her failure would be cited as evidence not only of her own declining abilities but also of the artistic inferiority of Afro-Americans in general” (Foster, Introduction xxxiii–xxxiv).

“Without question,” Deborah McDowell writes, Harper “lifted the pen in an act of political intervention” using the activist strategies of her day (49). Respectability politics were one of the most prominent forms of resistance used by middle-class African Americans in the Progressive Era, particularly among clubwomen of the Black Baptist Church.¹² Darlene Clark Hine argues that Black women engaged the politics of respectability by representing themselves as “super-moral,” not only for their own protection and uplift but also for justice and opportunity for all African Americans (920). In presenting themselves as such, these women, who thought of themselves as “sorely needed missionaries,” reconstructed and represented their sexuality through the “art of dissemblance,” meaning through silence, secrecy, and invisibility (Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* 186; Hine 915). Their motto was “Lifting as We Climb,” a phrase that resonates with the uplift ideology of race men Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, and one Harper seemed to play with in her novel’s subtitle (Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* 206). Many female African American public intellectuals—race women—and writers in addition to Harper, such as Mary Church Terrell, Pauline Hopkins, and Anna Julia Cooper, used the politics of respectability to stake a public claim in sexual and moral virtue in response to the vicious stereotypes of Black women as lascivious. Such stereotypes emanated from American chattel slavery and were continually pronounced within the classist, racist, sexist power structures of the post-Reconstruction era.¹³ Like much African American literature of the period, *Iola Leroy* was faced with the crucial political task of refuting such stereotypes through the generic conventions of respectability.¹⁴ “These works,” Claudia Tate writes, “reflect the viewpoint . . . that the acquisition of [Black women’s] full citizenship would result as much or more from demonstrating their adoption of the ‘genteel standard of Victorian sexual conduct’ as from protesting racial injustice” (4).

In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby analyzes how respectability was intimately tied to the Cult of True Womanhood (CTW), a Victorian ideology that stressed piety, purity, and domesticity. CTW actively worked to shore up gender, sexual, and racial norms, ensuring that “woman meant white” (Carby 34). Carby situates Harper’s work in dialogue with CTW to “comprehend and analyze the ways in which black women, as writers, addressed, used, transformed, and, on occasion, subverted the dominant ideological codes” (20–21).¹⁵ Carby argues that *Iola* works within these codes to abide by expectations of respectability *and* to articulate a strong protofeminist and proto-Black Nation-

alist stance. Carby thus reads racial uplift in the novel as Iola's self-sufficiency, self-containment, and independence.

Of course, scholars have long critiqued CTW and respectability politics as ineffectual and/or as historically misinterpreted or simplified.¹⁶ As Brittney Cooper argues, it is "untenable for scholars to continue to read Black women's literature solely or primarily through the corporeal frames offered to us by the culture of dissemblance or the politics of respectability" (*Beyond Respectability* 8).¹⁷ However, I would add it is *also* untenable to offer readings that subvert respectability politics but remain in the respectability/resistance binary, as I see Carby and others doing. When we argue that what looks like respectability was (or is), in fact, resistance, we contain the literature as both imbricated in and *producing* the historical political burden of which Gates speaks. Further, what looks like resistance often requires respectability to be legible. Within this logic, certain resisting bodies and/or methods of resistance (such as Iola and her strategies) are recognized, while other tactics of resistance (or the its lack) remain invisible or unspeakable.

To be clear, Carby's critique and others like it are important; they argue that what looks like acquiescence to respectability and/or assimilation was often subversive and complex. However, this critique (and similar readings by Barbara Christian, Claudia Tate, and Frances Smith Foster) remains contained by binary thinking in which Black women's literature either capitulates to or destabilizes respectability and/or assimilation. Regardless of how these readings understand this trend to be historically contingent and politically necessary, they delimit what we see. "If we fail to move beyond respectability," Cooper warns, "we will continue to miss critical parts of the story" (*Beyond Respectability* 8). Further, if we continue to imagine respectability's antithesis as always-legible resistance narratives, and/or if we continue to think Black art primarily in terms of antitheses, we are remiss. Therefore, I remain interested in the ways *Iola Leroy* evokes CTW ideology while allowing for an unspeakable excess that puts pressure on both respectability and resistance, producing "possibilities previously unconsidered" (Hartman 103).

Marie's actions, excessive to the racial and sexual respectability and resistance containing the text, can be read as the something else to which I allude. Marie arguably functions as Iola's foil.¹⁸ From the novel's beginning, intimate relations between white men and Black women are rendered a pathologically perverse "unholy allianc[e]" (Harper 76). Iola denies the white doctor Gresham's marriage proposal because while living in the North, "she had learned enough of the racial feeling to influence her decision in reference to [his] offer. . . . [S]he had never for a moment thought of giving or receiving love from one of that race who had been so lately associated in her mind with

horror, aversion, and disgust” (110). Later she marries Frank Latimer, who, like Iola, is mixed-race but identifies with his Black ancestry and is committed to racial uplift. Their relationship is based on their shared mission “to stand on the threshold of a new era and labor for those who had passed from the old oligarchy of slavery into the new commonwealth of freedom” (271). Of their righteous union, Tate explains, “their love is not characterized as impassioned pronouncements about their own mutual happiness” (as Eugene and Marie’s is) (170). Thus, compared to Iola and Frank’s, Harper represents Eugene and Marie’s marriage as an interracial transgression, bred from and fraught with the “old oligarchy of slavery.” Clearly, in marrying Eugene, Marie lacks the “racial feeling” (a phrase that connotes anti-racist resistance) that Iola embodies.

The novel establishes Eugene’s eccentricity from the start. His determination to marry his slave implicitly critiques the institution of slavery as lacking. When Eugene tells his cousin Alfred Lorraine about his courting plans, Lorraine replies, “Why, Eugene, it is impossible that you can have an idea of marrying one of your slaves. Why, man, she is your property, to have and to hold to all intents and purposes. Are you not satisfied with the power and possession the law gives you?” Eugene answers, “No. Although the law makes her helpless in my hands, to me her defenselessness is her best defense” (Harper 65). This exchange explores the sexual power dynamic inherent in the master/slave relationship and reveals how Eugene’s determination to marry Marie questions not only the limits of slavery’s power to grant an enslaver complete power over those he enslaves but also its absoluteness as a white supremacist power-granting and desire-fulfilling institution.

Even before its consummation, Marie and Eugene’s marriage is rendered pathologically perverse as it distorts heteronormative, racially conscious intimacy and the “peculiar institution” alike. McDowell claims, “All of the novel’s characters are trapped in an ideological schema that predetermines their identities” (40). Scholars like Christina Sharpe have argued that master/slave intimate relationships, even those consecrated in marriage, were “monstrous intimacies” given the sexual and racialized violence of slavery and its aftermath (3).¹⁹ *Iola Leroy* represents Marie and Eugene as reckless for seemingly defying such historical gravity. Enveloped in their love like “a joyous dream,” they remained “unconscious of the doom suspended over their heads” (Harper 76).

At times the novel suggests a critique of such recklessness. It invites us to read Eugene and Marie as both “unconscious” (that is, unaware/naive) and *unconscious*, lacking the “racial feeling” that would/should prompt recognition of their relationship as unequivocally oppressive. This critique appears in references to the “doomed” and “unholy” nature of their union and in its horrific decimation (Eugene dies of yellow fever and Marie and their children are

remitted to slavery). Reiterating in explicit and implicit manners this predetermined conclusion helps the novel wage a critique not only against interracial marriage steeped in postslavery remainders/reminders (as many argue, there is no *post* in this formulation) but also of the precarious freedom afforded.²⁰ Indeed, Marie's freedom fails to hold upon Eugene's death. But, I argue, her freedom is also precarious because it was not won through an anti-racist awakening as Lola's is. The novel posits Marie's freedom as not legitimate because, for the short time she enjoys it as Eugene's wife, it is not emancipatory. It neither challenges, alters, nor demolishes slavery's (or postslavery's) structure. Within *Lola Leroy's* narrative project, it is therefore untenable.

Given this unshakable weight bearing on their interracial intimacy, it seems we should understand Marie and Eugene as pathologized in perpetuity.²¹ Similar to McDowell, queer of color critic Darieck Scott explains that a subject's relationship to our shared history of slavery is "*not* fully a choice, since we are all of us . . . the unwilling, unasked inheritors" (167). But unlike McDowell, who claims we are trapped, Scott suggests we can "work *with* the material of history bequeathed to us" (167). How Marie and Eugene "work with the material of history" is what interests me here. Their marriage is fraught with thundering yet unspeakable racial and sexual questions that trouble the assessment that they are "trapped in an ideological schema that predetermines their identities." Not the least of these is the suggestion that this historically racialized and sexualized schema is their means to disidentify with its predetermined pathology and find pleasure within it.

Of course, Harper cloaks the intimate details of this relationship in the requisite conventional silences. For instance, to initiate their engagement Eugene asks Marie to cease calling him "Master" and call him by a name "nearer and dearer," presumably "husband," although the text keeps it a secret (he whispers it in her ear), making her "blus[h] painfully" (Harper 74). In her analysis of the novel, Barbara Christian reads their marriage as lawful, refusing to interpret it as "some illicit relationship between a white aristocrat and a black slave" (26). But it bears reminding that Eugene and Marie's relationship *is* complicated by the fact that it circulates around and revives itself through slavery tropes. Eugene falls in love with Marie as a result of her dutiful caretaking when she was his slave. It is never revealed to the reader when (or if) Marie falls in love with Eugene. All we are told is, upon his proposal, a "great joy was thrilling her heart" as she softly repeats, "Until death do us part" (Harper 74). Regardless of these ambiguities it is important to note that the novel represents their marriage as consensual; Eugene proposes and Marie accepts his proposal *after* her manumission. Read through a security-through-subjection lens, perhaps her joy is bred of the "wonderful change" Eugene confers upon her which turns

her from “a lonely slave girl” to the “wife of a wealthy planter,” the paternalistic care she experiences for the first time, and the sense of freedom such security brings (Harper 74).²² Further, if Black women were denied access to gender agency (read womanhood), as both slavery and CTW ideology worked to ensure, Marie can claim her gender only through marriage, through the “manly love” conferred upon her by her (former) master now paternalistic guardian (Harper 75).

But even these ambiguities cannot obscure what I read as this union’s perverse power dynamics.²³ Returning to Eugene’s response to his cousin Lorraine about why he purportedly does not rape Marie (“her defenselessness is her best defense”), we glimpse Eugene’s erotic desire for a different type of dominance. After all, as the North Carolina Supreme Court decided in *State v. Mann* in 1829, “The power of the master must be absolute to render the submission of the slave perfect,” and Eugene is not satisfied in his power as master (qtd. in Chakkalakal 34). Even though Marie, as his slave, is rendered “defenseless” under the law, for Eugene the structure of slavery blocks the full expression and realization of the master/slave dynamic. Eugene is not satisfied to treat his property as an abject thing. Perhaps Marie’s enslavement gave her an ironic power to make Eugene abhor himself. Slave women are “the victims,” Eugene remarks to Lorraine, “and we are the criminals” (Harper 70). Eugene is a deficient master, thus the master/slave dynamic between them cannot be realized. I would argue, in fact, that it is absent. The slave “must be subject to the master’s will in all things,” hence Eugene’s desire to marry Marie and don the title “husband,” a master of a different sort according to CTW ideology, which, along with piety, purity, and domesticity, stressed submission (Hartman 90).

To fulfill his erotic desire for her, Eugene needs to confer on Marie the right to refuse him; he needs to elevate her slightly through legal means (manumission, education, marriage). As his wife, Marie is not defenseless (she has gained her gender and therefore her personhood), and Eugene can control her sexually without feeling he is “cruel to debase a hapless victim” (Harper 70). Having achieved a new erotic supplement as husband (and, by extension, master) he is able to embrace his (sexual) power over her, perhaps for the first time. The power dynamic has flipped. Marie’s status as wife has given her a defense, and Eugene’s erotic needs are now met by breaking down her defenses.

Again, *Iola Leroy* clearly represents a critique of interracial relationships (one could read the above analysis simply as a confirmation of white, male dominance), thereby seeming to shore up the novel’s respectability/resistance project. However, in the midst of this critique a curious moment arises, hiding in plain sight, which complicates such an analysis. As we read in chapter 10,

“Shadows in the Home,” Marie is taken at first with the “wonderful change” Eugene confers upon her because it grants her freedom and turns her from “a lonely slave girl” to “the wife of a wealthy planter” (Harper 74). Yet she later experiences acute anxiety. In addition to her discomfort with her own precarious freedom, Marie is concerned that keeping their children’s ancestry secret from them will delay the transference of (what she assumes will be) intergenerational trauma. This uneasiness leads to what I read as a performance of security through subjection in excess of the novel’s conventional modes of racial and sexual knowing.

To stem their growing disquiet, Eugene asks Marie to sing the “Long, long ago” song he “delighted to hear” when she was his slave (82). Marie’s song is first introduced when Eugene recounts to his cousin how he fell in love. He tells Lorraine, “Marie had a voice of remarkable sweetness, although it lacked culture. Often when I was nervous and restless I would have her sing some of those weird and plaintive melodies which she had learned from the plantation negroes” (68–69). Anxiety triggers the song, and the song soothes its listeners. Eugene’s request, now made to his wife, is nostalgia for slavery’s past and reanimation of that past into the present. He pleads:

“Sing me the songs that to me were so dear,
Long, long ago.
Sing me the songs I delighted to hear,
Long, long ago.” (82)

Marie revives the song, although we still do not hear it. Interestingly, we *never* hear Marie’s song when she sings it to Eugene—we are never shown the lyrics in those moments. The “[l]ong, long ago” song, linguistically excessive in its redundancy, remains unspeakable when shared between them, precisely because it is a consensually rendered tool of subjection.

Again, security through subjection can be considered a tactic for mitigating an anxious relationship to precarious freedom. We know Marie was deeply anxious prior to Eugene’s request. We also know Eugene’s request was prompted by a similar anxiety. “Oh, Marie,” he cries a few pages earlier, “You make me feel that we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and have left undone those things which we ought to have done” (78). Here Eugene feels the weight of their transgressions, the “ideological schema” that threatens to trap them. Their intimacy is understood as pathologically perverse, made even further so by its refusal to understand itself as such. However, in expressing this anxiety only to then, moments later, request the plantation song suggests that

his and Marie's anxiety *and* pleasure are wrapped up in their "unholy alliance." The song both evokes this historical pathology and, in its consensual enactment, allows for a disidentification with that pathologizing narrative.

We know why Eugene makes his nostalgic request: it soothes him. But more importantly, we read the reassurance Marie experiences in singing them back to their origin story: "As Marie sang the anxiety faded from her face, a sense of *security* stole over her, and she sat among her loved ones a *happy* wife and mother. What if no one recognized her on that lonely plantation! Her world was, nevertheless, there. . . . [A]fter all, there is no place like home" (Harper 82, 87; emphasis added). Christian's argument that *Iola Leroy* refutes damaging stereotypes of Black women critiques the "myth of the plantation" that constructs slavery as a "benevolent institution": "The domestic metaphor that insisted that 'we are all one great big happy family, both black and white' implied that there was an irrevocable bond between the nature of the family, the nature of man and woman, and the concept of slavery" (10). Yet Marie gains her sense of equanimity through a performance that reinvigorates the master/slave dynamic within this domestic metaphor. What *was* an (absent) master/slave dynamic between these characters has now been configured as a "plantation romance" in which "a site of 'pain [is transformed] into pleasure'" (Sharpe 21). As Eugene's wife, continuing to live on the plantation in a slave-holding state, Marie can now lay "claim to the freedom to be free of all but the romantic residue of slavery" (Sharpe 17). But is such residue romantic? What makes Marie's security through subjection ambiguous is the fact that she is vehemently opposed in principle to "the peculiar institution." "To me," she states, "a contented slave is an abject creature" (Harper 79).

The novel establishes a contradiction between Marie's sentiment here and her action of singing the "long ago" song. By performing the song, she subjects herself to that very abjection intertwined within it, yet the enactment produces both "happiness" and "security" for her. Such a contradiction might suggest an easily and readily available Marie as possessing false consciousness. We might read the phrase "as she sang, a sense of security *stole* over her" as an indication of her succumbing to delusion as a protective measure. As I have established, the novel positions security through subjection as a foil to those, such as Iola and Frank Latimer, who pursue anti-racist resistance. The novel anticipates a reader pitying and likely judging Marie for capitulating to what is understood to be her own oppression. I am deeply invested in avoiding such a reading, because it denies desire, power, pleasure, consent, and agency (as complicated as these terms are within a slavery and postslavery context) and perpetuates the idea that subjection to asymmetrical power dynamics is unthinkable.²⁴

Rather, I read subjection to asymmetrical power dynamics as a representa-

tion of “queerness (figured here as a mode of complicit blackness)” (Cruz 4). It is a “working with” the material of history that Scott encourages; in *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*, he reimagines Black power through debasement. My turn to Scott’s work on abjection makes sense here if we consider that *Iola Leroy* was published during a time many consider the African American nadir.²⁵ For Scott, however, the power and pleasure inherent to such abjection is exclusively consigned to and for Black men. Scott explicitly refuses to engage Black female pleasure in relation to such forms of degradation. He suggests that acknowledging as much potentially demonstrates the defeats abjection produces and thereby endangers still necessary collective political struggles (Scott 20). Scott’s caution here reminds us that intersectional race, class, sex, and gender oppressions inform deeply damaging stereotypes of Black women that continue to circulate both materially and representationally. Such continual intersectional oppression likely accounts for why critical and representational explorations of transgressive Black sexuality are disproportionately configured along gendered lines. Furthermore, canonical studies of *Iola Leroy* that focus on how Harper was “us[ing] the novel as a form in refuting” the negative images of Black women that “defamed or diminished African Americans” foreclose such explorations (Christian 5; Foster, *Written by Herself* 183).

Arguably, however, Marie’s enactment of security through subjection suggests a type of power it affords her. We see her both controlling Eugene’s gender by conferring upon him the role of (absolute slave) master *and* activating her own feelings of security and happiness through such transformation. If that security produces pleasure for Marie, it would appear to be an ambiguous pleasure intertwined with the abjection of reassuming a position signifying slavery. To read security through subjection as a tool that produces pleasure for Marie is important in that “underlining the unwieldiness of sexuality—the entanglements of instrumentality and pleasure—and the crisis induced by this contradictory state of affairs . . . challenges conventional interpretations that deem issues of desire . . . irrelevant in the context of enslavement” (Hartman 102). As she thinks to herself, “[So] what if no one recognized her on that lonely plantation as Mrs. Eugene Leroy?” (Harper 82). It is here, in the “long ago” song’s evocation of master/slave relations, that she finds contentment.

Crucially, a politics of perversion allows us to comprehend that Marie is not “contented with her degradation” because she does not experience her enactment of security through subjection as necessarily degrading (Harper 70). Such a reading requires critics to take seriously the notion that subjection does not unequivocally equate to degradation. McDowell’s argument that Black women writers such as Harper “stripped the characters they created of *all* sexual desire”

(38) leaves no room to recognize security through subjection as “a surrender of another order” for fulfilling “needs and desires” and “possibilities previously unconsidered” (Hartman 103). As Mollena Williams-Haas, a well-known Black female BDSM practitioner and educator, has argued, the *perversion* of Black female subjection is not an embrace of oppression, but rather an erotics of relation that relies upon what is dominantly read as oppression.²⁶

Thus, while not necessarily romantic, I do read slavery’s residue within Eugene and Marie’s particular “plantation romance” as erotically charged. Even after Marie is manumitted, educated, and wed to Eugene, they consensually reanimate an asymmetrical power dynamic by evoking the supposedly more clearly delineated subject positions of master and slave. A politics of perversion allows a reading of this reanimation as their kink if we recall that perversion in this context means “the alteration of something from its original course” (Cruz 11). Marie’s song, and the security through subjection it provides, is a form of role-playing that allows them to veer off an assimilationist course and to disidentify with the “bourgeois-sentimental, emotional reactions to historical events” they *should* feel (and do, at times, hence their anxiety). Instead, the possibilities opened by erotic, historical role play allow them to find “pleasure in understanding how the present is a continuation of the past” (Freeman 144; Musser 169).

The novel’s subtitle, “Shadows Uplifted,” alludes to Iola’s emancipatory strategies that cast off slavery’s residue. However, in reading excess we might think of the “shadows” in the home of chapter 10’s title as unspeakable, kinky “relational ethics” that incorporate the past into the present (Ernest 186).²⁷ Marie and Eugene’s marriage is not staged within *Iola Leroy* as merely a critique of interracial relationships that shores up the novel’s respectability/resistance project. Rather, the fulfillment of Marie and Eugene’s mutual pleasure *requires* that they pass through marriage so they can then role-play as master/slave. Such a reading is not a stretch. After all, BDSM is fundamentally an erotic exploration of power dynamics, and there is no greater power dynamic than that between master and slave. Critics, most notably Cruz, Musser, Lewis Call, and Biman Basu, have explored the overlaps between BDSM and the historical master/slave dynamic in Black literature and visual arts. BDSM “eroticises the class relations which are a fundamental part of chattel slavery,” and BDSM power dynamics inform slave narratives and neo-slave narratives (Call 144; Basu 32). The practice by Black women in the BDSM community such as Mollena Williams-Haas of “race play”—a kink that “uses . . . role playing, scenes (for example, the antebellum slave auction), tools, and props that stage and eroticize racial difference and histories of racialized exploitation”—invites a reading of this dynamic and its function in Harper’s novel (Cruz 50).²⁸

The “long ago” song is the device that allows its participants to negotiate their relation to one another and to history by controlling how they play with that material bequeathed to them. As a kinky tool, the “long ago” song collapses present time into “racial time,” Michael Hanchard’s term for temporal negation that projects belonging into the future. Marie and Eugene’s “queer cultivation of perversions” allows them to establish alternate “practices of belonging” within this temporal transformation (Cruz 13). In this consensual practice they are “tortured always in the past, bound up already to the anxiety of the future, and yet enjoying the guilty pleasure of this temporal excess in the moment” (McCleese 360).²⁹ Witnessing Marie and Eugene evoke the “long ago” song in the space of their domestic, their wedded intimacy invites the question: “What is that fine line between a representation of a contemporary space that is consensual and a representation of historical spaces or historical traumas that were non-consensual . . . ?” (crystal am nelson qtd. in Cruz 7). We surmise that racial time’s projection allows one to play with their relation to a multitude of temporalities and states of being simultaneously in the scene of race play.

The masochist’s pleasure is always deferred.³⁰ Both Eugene’s and Marie’s desire to return to the site of slavery—one they deem, respectively, as “abject” and “cruel”—can be read as masochistic. Marie’s evocation of racial time could be understood as both an expression of anxiety about perpetual unfreedom and a pleasurable construct.³¹ The song’s reliance on Marie and Eugene’s gendered and racialized asymmetrical power dynamic invokes a racial time that makes “the normally invisible constructions of racial belonging” visible (Weiss 189–90). By embracing and controlling their kinky subjugation to their historical inheritance as it threatens to darken the home, Marie and Eugene cast off the shadows of marginalization, challenging the novel’s profeminist, proto-Black Nationalist methods of resistance that rely on those same shadows for their oppositional thrust.

It is in their role-playing that “deliberately use[s] the *shadows of slavery* [to] engage antebellum sexual politics—aesthetically, rhetorically, and symbolically—in the delivery and/or receiving of sexual pleasure” that Eugene and Marie are able to approximate a state that did not exist when they *were* master and slave (Cruz 32; emphasis added). They both need Marie to be an actor, to have a role, so she is not defenseless. They need to construct a situation in which Marie performs agency in order to grant power to Eugene and to provide herself security through subjection. Their race play reveals the song as Marie’s tool of seduction. The sentence’s syntax renders Marie passive: “As [she] sang, the anxiety faded from her face, *a sense of security stole over her*,” like a vestment donned upon her. In kink, power dynamics are fluid. Marie’s passivity holds power. Indeed, BDSM “is a rigorously corporeal regime, but it is of course also

a mental exercise, and, perhaps most importantly, an imaginative enterprise. It is at the level of affect . . . that [BDSM] would produce and imagine a new body and its relation to other bodies” (Basu 4). It is Marie who possesses the song that invokes racial time, effectively taking them back to a place of anticipation where they are dependent on one another for fulfillment of needs not yet obtained and not yet denied: power, pleasure, freedom, security. Play-acting subjection temporarily mitigates the real subjection haunting Marie’s precarious freedom.

Toni Morrison, in addressing the “Africanist presence” in American literature, argues that “American Africanism makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom” (6, 7). The unspeakable “Africanist presence” in Marie and Eugene’s dynamic, which I read as race play, is conflated with heteronormative domesticity. Crucially, it haunts, complicates, and ultimately fulfills their relationship in that specific CTW ideologically inflected space. It can be understood as the heretical excess working within and against *Iola Leroy’s* politically overdetermined project that fulfills a range of needs and desires.

I offer here one final, possible reading of the “long ago” song. One might argue that Marie’s performance of the song as a race-play scene staged in the heteronormative domestic sphere strips her of her gender and personhood and in so doing directly critiques CTW ideology. After all, one person’s subjection is a critique of a different form of subjection, or as Mary Boykin Chesnut famously claimed in her critique of nineteenth-century domesticity, “There is no slave, after all, like a wife” (59). Reanimating the master and slave relation as a supplementary component in the (respectable) domestic sphere estranges and denatures the authority of the latter. In critiquing this ideology in this specific manner, Marie’s performance critiques legible resistance strategies that do not account for non-normative ways of racial and sexual knowing. Recall Hartman’s question: “Do points of resistance inhabit the enactment of willed surrender, or is it a surrender of another order? If the latter is the case, then the delineations of power are murky and uncertain” (103). In her “surrender of another order” Marie is not merely the foil to Iola. Rather, her actions offer an alternative, another way to seek power and pleasure in histories of oppression, another way to seek freedom (even if it is freedom from precarious freedom), another way to represent Black humanity. John Ernest argues, “Harper reminds us that history is not a static or monolithic concept” (206). In *Iola Leroy*, she shows us that history is not “a definitive structure containing clear conceptual oppositions, but rather a dynamic and diverse process filtered through the vari-

ably conditioned minds of individuals who cannot” (and, I would argue, do not wish to) “escape their roles as historical agents” (206). Continuing, he suggests that *Iola Leroy* offers a method of working with history where “each individual stands as a particular configuration of various cultural influences, including not only those influences one would claim, but also those that threaten one’s most fundamental sense of identity. One can hear this history best by *listening to individual voices giving particular form to the complex relations not only of the world around but also and especially of that within*” (206–7; emphasis added). Marie and Eugene’s kinky dynamic, held in Marie’s song, is the crack in the edifice of the novel’s project. This illicit desire, to use the “long ago” song to play in the residue of slavery, is the text’s open secret, hiding in plain sight, “capable of stressing nearly every boundary required for the order of ‘civilized society’ to hold” (Musser 163).

At the very least, this moment’s mere existence in the text invites us to consider what other excessive, heretical representations are discernible in moments of staged desire and domestic intimacy throughout the Black literary canon. The possibility of pleasure bred from and steeped in such historical trauma remains the unspeakable and is something few critics attend to. Yet Cruz, Scott, myself, and others in the coalescing network of Black feminist and queer theorists analyzing such excess in Black literary and visual representation persist despite this hesitancy. Many of us do so in the name of exploring what, in our collective critical foreclosures, we have ceased to recognize or acknowledge in African American cultural productions.³² In *Once You Go Black*, Robert Reid-Pharr suggests that “[t]he image of master embracing slave is reiterated as often and as forcefully as it is precisely because it speaks just as readily to the matter of interracial longing and sexual desire as it does to the question of economic and social repression. . . . [O]nce one acknowledges the erotic component of this . . . it becomes infinitely more difficult to delineate how, when, why, and where power makes itself known” (167). In light of the scene of excess that I analyze here, I suggest we reconfigure Reid-Pharr’s statement to continue to consider what is made possible in the image of the female (former) slave embracing the master. In so doing, we confront critical claims that denounce “the old threadbare lie about interracial desire” (Foreman 86). Such claims act as a form of containment, keeping Black women seeking and owning pleasure in trauma beyond the reach of what should and/or can be explored.

That being said, my approach and motivations are things I continually have to contend with. To discuss pleasure, particularly the pleasure to be found in such racialized power dynamics, remains a fraught topic for anyone, much less a white critic of African American literature, to engage. It remains an unspeakable one given our collective, continuous history of racist, sexist violence and

the ways literary criticism contributes to such structures. This historical weight makes it difficult for critics to seek pleasure in archives of pain. And yet, as Mae Gwendolyn Henderson argues, we need to disrupt, reread, and rewrite the conventional and canonical stories (and the genres that convey them) of Black women (30). This is what it means to work with the (literary) history we have inherited.

Security, subjection, abjection, pleasure, power, and desire: these are different concepts, but in the Black literature of the nadir they overlap in difficult, complex, and compelling ways that remain underexplored. The mere presence of racial and sexual excess in a novel seemingly so politically overdetermined as *Iola Leroy* suggests we need to consider how nineteenth-century African American texts work within and, at times, counterintuitively against ideologies of respectability and dominant forms of resistance. Attending to such moments allows us to build a more dynamic queer intellectual genealogy that recognizes the innovations of Black women writers and critics who have, for centuries, attempted to awaken our minds to “possibilities previously unconsidered.” African American literature is rife with excessive representations that challenge us to critically consider what we do not read and acknowledge, and why. We still seek methodologies with which to engage them.

NOTES

1. “That the presence of a written literature could assume such large proportions in several Western cultures from the Enlightenment to this century is only as curious as the fact that blacks themselves . . . felt the need to speak the matter silent, to end the argument by producing literature” (Gates 26).

2. In considering Black art as propaganda, one thinks of Du Bois’s “Criteria of Negro Art,” which famously states, “thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists” (296).

3. For exceptions to this binary see, for instance, Reid-Pharr, *Conjugal Union*; McCaskill and Gebhard; Chakkalakal; Warren; and Smethurst. For this binary as it appears specifically in Francis Harper scholarship, refer to Washington; Bruce; Tate; Foster, *Written by Herself*; McDowell; and Christian. For instance, McDowell claims: “That . . . Frances E. W. Harper, and [her] contemporaries, despite their best intentions and political motivations, could both fight and reproduce dominant racialist ideologies around color cannot be denied” (56). And Christian reads *Iola Leroy*’s anti-racist task of refuting Black female stereotypes and its assimilationist representations of uplift into “standards of middle-class American virtue and thrift” (27).

4. For more on textual “open secrets” see François.

5. See Wachter-Grene.

6. Jarrett observes: “Ever since the late nineteenth century, the problem of African American literature divided the American literati into two groups that are in extreme ideological disagreement. The first group, de facto deans of literary movements, wielded enough authority to dictate the critical and commercial conditions for African American literature. . . . Howell’s minstrel realism, Locke’s New Negro modernism, Wright’s New Negro radicalism, and Baraka’s so-called Black Aesthetic shackled the creative decisions and objectives of many black authors” (1).

7. Hartman argues that “‘using’ seduction. . . is fraught with perils precisely because there is no secure or autonomous exteriority from which the enslaved can operate or to which they can retreat. The double-edged nature of this gaming with power threatens to intensify constraints, rend the body, or result in inevitable losses since within this domain the chances of safeguarding gains are already foreclosed. Therefore, how does one act without exacerbating the constraints of captivity or the violation of surrender?” (102–3).

8. See, for instance, Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man*, and Scott, both of which explore the erotic and powerful potential of racial degradation. See also Fisher; Delany’s Return to Nevèrÿon series, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, and *The Mad Man*; and Butler.

9. Critiquing Roderick Ferguson and José Esteban Muñoz, both of whom are central to queer of color theory, Cooper writes: “In Ferguson’s formulation of ‘queer of color critique,’ women of color feminisms—and in particular Black lesbian feminism—become the building block of a new mode of critical analysis rather than a critical site from which questions of materialism and capital, questions about nationalisms and state formation, questions about poststructuralism, and questions about non-normative sexual and gender formation can be interrogated” (“Love No Limit” 13).

10. Holland and Cohen argue that queer theorists, in focusing almost solely on sexuality, have not only overlooked race but have “whitewashed” both the field of queer theory and the figure of the homosexual. See also Hammonds for a similar critique.

11. Further, if we consider Gates’s discussion of the stakes of literature for Black Americans, Harper was successful. Foster claims that “*Iola Leroy* . . . did firmly establish the novel as a viable genre in African American literature” (*A Brighter Coming Day* 4).

12. See Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*.

13. For a history of the development of Black female sexual stereotypes see Nash; White; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* and *Black Sexual Politics*; Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History” and *Righteous Discontent*; hooks; and Gilman.

14. McDowell claims that Harper “is creating an exemplary type [of character] who is always part of some larger framework. That larger framework is moral and social in *Iola Leroy*, and every aspect of the text, especially character, must be carefully selected to serve its purpose” (40).

15. Tate claims that in “Harper’s historical perspective, the domestic did not exist apart from the political” (171).

16. In addition to Carby's own analysis, refer to Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*; Lee; Jenkins; and Morris.

17. See Cooper's study for a thorough analysis of the crucial theoretical and intellectual interventions of nineteenth-century Black female public figures beyond, as the title suggests, respectability politics.

18. See, for instance, Foster's analysis of Marie as "the tragic mulatto stereotype": "Marie . . . was the embodiment of True Womanhood and thus too passive and accommodating. . . . Iola, on the other hand, was as beautiful, as educated, as compassionate, and as refined as her mother. But she possessed something more. She had the insight to perceive the moral weakness of the white man who loved her and the courage to resist the comfortable life he could offer" (*Written by Herself* 184).

19. Sharpe, for instance, analyzes "a fundamental familiar violence, of multiple subjections, the tolerance for and the necessity of them within the spaces and the forms of intimacy that I am calling monstrous" (2). See Chakkalal for an interesting read of the master/slave marriage in Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends*: "Webb's fiction offers a peculiar instance of a legal marriage between a slave and master but does little to resolve the moral problem of sexual relations between masters and slaves" (57).

20. For instance, Sharpe intended for *Monstrous Intimacies* "to intervene in and to position us to see and think anew what it means to be a (black) post-slavery subject positioned within everyday intimate brutalities who is said to have survived or to be surviving the past of slavery, that is not yet past, bearing something like freedom" (26).

21. For more on the pathological weight attached to postslavery subjects, particularly Black women, see Spillers; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* and *Black Sexual Politics*; Christian; Sharpe; and Musser.

22. William Wells Brown, author of the first published African American novel, *Clotel*, was referring to slave mistresses and not manumitted wives but suggests as much in a derogatory manner, writing that "indeed, the greater portion of the colored women, in the days of slavery, had no greater aspiration than that of becoming the finely dressed mistress of some white man" (160).

23. Again, I am thinking here with Cruz's "politics of perversion" (10).

24. For in-depth analyses of these complications refer to Hartman; Cruz; Musser; and Scott.

25. See Logan.

26. Refer to Musser's discussion of (172–78). In addition to Musser's and Cruz's crucial work, see also Nash and Miller-Young for such necessary interventionist readings of Black female sexuality.

27. Ernest writes: "Shadow can also refer to relational ethics, as when Harper writes about the shadow of the home" (186).

28. See also Williams-Haas and Johnson, both of whom testify to their choice, as Black women, to serve their masters/mistresses, and to the fulfillment it brings them.

29. See McCleese for a discussion of “excessive temporality” in Delany’s work.
30. See Freeman and Musser.
31. Notably, Freeman refers to sadomasochism as an “erotic time machine” (138).
32. In addition to Cruz and Scott, see also Basu; Miller-Young; Nash; and Stockton.

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