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ARTICLES

Reimagining Black Womanhood: Frances E. W. Harper's "New Negro Woman"

Ayesha Siddiqa[1]

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Abstract

Despite being considered a key text in African American literary history especially after its reevaluation in the 1980s, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper has generally been dismissed by critics for its aesthetic and political accommodationism, bourgeois didacticism, and alleged historical amnesia. Most of these critical evaluations focus exclusively on Iola's character. Situating *Iola Leroy* in its cultural and political context, this article rereads Iola's character in relation to other women characters to argue that Harper's text conceives a "New Negro Woman" as a counterpart of the New Negro man, long before the term became popularized. Even more, this "New Negro Woman" is shaped by African American racial heritage alongside postbellum racial uplift ideology contra the dominant "bourgeois" conceptions of the New Negro that "buried" the past in an attempt to "escape the recollection of enslavement" Gates, 1988, 139.

Keywords Iola Leroy · New Negro woman · African American history

Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted (1892) by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper is set in the Civil War and Reconstruction with flashbacks to the period preceding the war. The end of Reconstruction hit home the realization that the abolition of slavery had failed to eliminate racial prejudice that enforced segregation, disenfranchisement, and lynching. To demonstrate their equality to whites, black middle-class leaders and activists sought to subvert the stereotypical representation of blacks through educational, economic, political, and social uplift. *Iola Leroy* is symbolic of this quest of the "New Negro" for racial empowerment reflected in the author's concluding note that places "hope" in "the negro's rising brain" (1988, 282). This essay explores Harper's *Iola Leroy* as symbolic of the spirit of the "New Negro" woman as

✉ Ayesha Siddiqa
asiddiqa@qau.edu.pk

[1] Area Study Centre for Africa, North and South America, Quaid-I-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan

a counterpart of the "New Negro" man to reflect a distinct political agency for African American women. Revisiting the scholarship that focuses exclusively on Iola Leroy's character to render the novel an "aesthetic" and "political" failure (Foreman, 1997, 327), this article rereads Iola's character alongside other women characters to argue that Harper's text conceives a "New Negro Woman" long before the term became popularized; even more, this "New Negro Woman" is shaped by African American racial heritage contra the dominant "bourgeois" conceptions of the New Negro that "buried" the past in an attempt to "escape the recollection of enslavement" (Gates, 1988, 139).

The Trope of the New Negro

The figure of the "New Negro" did not emerge suddenly nor did it represent a totally "*New* Negro" (Ahmann, 1969, 1). The trope represents "the American Negro's symbolic transition from 'Old' to 'New' between Reconstruction and World War II." There was a shift from the cultural stereotype of the slave "devoid of all the characteristics that supposedly separated the lower forms of human life from the higher forms" to an educated, refined, and progressive "New Negro," symbolizing African American resolve to represent themselves anew (Gates & Jarrett, 2007, 1–3). While the "Old Negro" was "docile," "accommodating," and "noncritical of the status quo," the "New Negro" was "a militant, bourgeois," seeking "self-identity," "human dignity," and equality (Wilmoth, 1967, 9).

The term "New Negro" first appeared in a Cleveland Gazette editorial in 1895 to recognize the efforts of a group of black New Yorkers for the New York Civil Rights Law. This "class" was characterized by "education, refinement, and money" in stark contrast to its "enslaved and disenfranchised" prewar self (Gates, 1988, 137). In the same year, J. W. E. Bowen assigned the "New Negro" a race "consciousness" in its "assimilation" of a "new civilization" (1895). In 1901, Booker T. Washington, Fannie Barrier Williams, and N. B. Wood published *A New Negro for a New Century*, a 428-page compilation of 60 portraits, extracts from African American history, slave narratives, journalistic writing, biographical sketches, and African American military participation to displace the popular stereotypical imagery with a "progressive" New Negro, albeit by "smothering" the latter's "past" (Gates & Jarrett, 2007, 7–11). While Washington emphasized the significance of industrial education for the New Negro at the expense of egalitarian citizenship (1907), his accommodationist approach was censured by W. E. B. Du Bois who had a demonstrably elitist notion of racial uplift that emphasized the cultivation of a class of exceptional leaders, "the Talented Tenth," to lead the masses (1903).

The term "New Negro" continued to appear in various publications over the next two decades until it became popularized during the Harlem or the New Negro Renaissance (Gates & Jarrett, 2007, 140–144). A movement of cultural awakening, racial pride, economic independence, and democratic politics (Hutchinson, 2007, 1), Harlem Renaissance (1917–1928) was marked by a mass migration from the rural South to the industrial urban North, representing a shift "from medieval America to modern" and from "old" to "new" (Locke, 1997, 6). At its very core

was the struggle "to reconstruct the very idea of who and what a Negro was or could be" (Gates, 1988, 148). Prior to this, the trope of the New Negro represented a radical black socialist stance. However, the Harlem Renaissance displaced the "militancy" of this image with "an apolitical movement of the arts" led by Alain Locke (Gates & Jarrett, 2007, 13). Deconstructing the "historical fiction" of the Negro as a "formula rather than a human," Locke sought "a spiritual emancipation" from the myths of "aunties," "uncles," and "mammies" (Locke, 1997, 3–5) through "a cultural affirmation of Negro identity expressed in poetry, fiction, drama, and the fine arts" (Hutchinson, 2007, 3).

Hence, the "major target" of the movement was white America (Rampersad, 1997, xvi) as Locke emphasized a "collective effort" of "the more intelligent and representative elements of the two race groups" to create "a new democracy" in America and "build" the New Negro's "Americanism" (Locke, 1997, 9–12). An absence of radical socialism alongside an embodiment of the New Negro in the authors of the Harlem Renaissance reinforced Locke's "elitist vision" (Rampersad, 1997, xx-xix), reducing the trope to bourgeois intellectuals who used standard English and sought to elide the memory of slavery (Gates, 1988, 139): "So far as he is culturally articulate, we shall let the Negro speak for himself" (Locke, 1997, xxv). This framing of the New Negro as "ahistorical" and "'just like' every other American" (Gates & Jarrett, 2007, 14) "erased their racial selves, imitating those they least resembled" (Gates, 1988, 148). Thus, notwithstanding "an unprecedented emphasis upon black histories," "the New Negro's relation to the past of the Old Negro" in both pre- and post-Renaissance versions is controversial (Gates, 1988, 139). Although Harper's *Iola Leroy* has also been criticized for its "bourgeois intellectualism" (Christmann, 2000, 5), this essay argues, however, that the text builds an image of the New Negro Woman that is deeply tied to its racial past.

The New Negro Woman

Although the "New Negro" was a predominantly male construct, a parallel ideal of the New Negro Woman was implicit in the racial uplift discourse of contemporary black women. Indeed, the history of the New Negro Woman is intertwined with the histories of the New Negro and the New Woman. Standing at the "crossroads" of "the myth of the Negro" and "the myth of the woman" (White, 1999, 28), black women were neither represented fully in the New Negro movement nor the New Woman ideal of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although black male intellectuals occasionally spoke of black women, by and large, the latter struggled to gain claim to social and political enfranchisement sought for white women and black men. In fact, when Francis Grimke, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Alexander Crummell formed the prestigious American Negro Academy in 1897, they expressly restricted its membership to black men (Washington, 1987, 75). Likewise, black women's relationship to the radical feminist construct of the "New Woman," tied to the suffragist struggle of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), was complicated. NAWSA's estrangement from black women's "natural rights arguments in favor of xenophobic and racist ones" and its 1899 convention's

refusal to endorse a resolution by black suffragists to oppose Jim Crow cars deepened racial divide between the two, making room for the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896 that singled out the interests of black women (Patterson, 2008, 6–7).

The term "New Negro Woman" first appeared in Margaret Murray Washington's speech at *The First National Conference of Colored Women*, held in Boston in 1895. Demanding a "womanhood" equal to her "Caucasian sisters," Washington underscored a collective effort of black and white women as a "united whole" in the "great uplifting of our women" (2008, 55). Indeed, the idea of a "single" race frequently found expression in black women's writing: "Are we not all of one race?" queries Mrs. Washington (2008, 58) while Fannie Williams's "Club Movement Among Colored Women" "displace[s] racial heritage with an ideal of sexual bonding" (Gates, 1988, 139). Despite their shared interest in suffrage and civil rights however, white women strove for economic independence and individual self-fulfillment whereas black women placed "the New Negro Woman's authority" in "maternal rights and responsibilities," withheld in slavery (Patterson, 2008, 9). Thus, contra white women's distancing from the Cult of Domesticity, a "higher, nobler, and stronger" black womanhood was being located at "home" (Washington, 2008, 55). Indeed, countering white America's conception of black women as inferior, Washington distinguishes the "physically," "morally," and "financially" stable "class" of black women from "our inferiors" who must be "lifted up," "taught," and "sustained" for "a better wifehood and motherhood" (2008, 56–58). Thus, besides blurring the question of race in an attempt to forge a collective politics, this framing of the New Negro woman also created a bourgeois/underclass binary corresponding to the new and the old negro woman. As such, it emulated both the historical erasure and the "elitist vision" of the construct of the New Negro man.

Iola Leroy and the New Negro Woman

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted*, on the contrary, constructs an image of the New Negro that departs from the ahistorical bourgeois models. However, being one of the earliest conceivers of the New Negro Woman, Harper is understandably one of the most convenient objects of critique. Since its publication, the novel has been subjected to rigorous critique.[1] Barbara Christian dubbed it a "heavily moralistic tale" of an "educated octoroon" that fails to represent "realistic experiences" of black women that Harper's nonfiction describes (1980, 4). Others have identified inherent contradictions in choosing a light-skinned character to relay black female experience (Lewis, 1984; Wilson, 1994). Deborah McDowell views Harper's choice of mulatto characters as "an unforgivable racial concession" to white American bourgeois ideology (1987, 284). The novel is also criticized for its utopian worldview contra post-Reconstruction violence, segregation, and disenfranchisement (Fabi, 2001). Finally, Harper's investment in the sentimental genre

[1] See Christian, Elder (1978), Jackson, Lewis, McDowell, and Wilson.

and the Cult of True Womanhood has been viewed as reflective of an assimilationist approach. Despite recent interest in issues of citizenship and education (Borgstrom, 2006; Cantiello, 2012; Jackson, 2003), most scholarship on the novel views Iola Leroy as the repository of Harper's conception of black womanhood. Situating *Iola Leroy* in its cultural and political context of the nineteenth century, this article re-reads Iola's character in relation to other women characters to argue that *Iola Leroy* builds Harper's notion of a multifaceted "New Negro Woman" informed both by African American oral tradition and postbellum ideology of racial uplift.

Harper's Choice of the Sentimental Genre

In a letter to William Still on February 20, 1871, Harper wrote: "I am standing with my race on the threshold of a new era" (1990b, 127). In her speech "Woman's Political Future" delivered on 20 May 1893, she declared: "If the fifteenth century discovered America to the Old World, the nineteenth is discovering woman to herself" (1894, 433). Harper's political as well as literary career was dedicated to a reconception of both the race and the woman questions. However, this "task" was "enormous": "to manipulate the image of the black was, in a sense, to manipulate reality. The Public Negro Self, therefore, was an entity to be crafted" (Gates & Jarrett, 2007, 11). And the task of re-imagining black woman was even more formidable given the latter's entanglement in a peculiar racial and sexual mythology.

Harper wrote *Iola Leroy* at the peak of her career "enjoy[ing] the devotion of a sizeable audience of men and women, black and white, in the United States, Canada, and England" (xxx). Indeed, her "gains were considered the gains of her race" (Foster, 1990a, xxxvii); therefore, she was conscious of the risks, both personal and public, involved in this enterprise. However, a lifelong of activism had also taught Harper that the mammoth task of racial uplift required the support of black and white women alike. Given her conviction that "we are all bound up together" (Harper, 1866), Harper consciously "appealed" to a "diverse" mixed-race audience (Foster, xxxviii). However, as opposed to eliding the race question, her work foregrounds it by calling out "indifferent" and "selfish" white women who "speak of rights" while ignoring "the wrongs" (Harper, 1866, 47).

Harper's implied readership, therefore, influenced her choice of genre and style. Critical objections to the use of the Sentimental Genre by Harriet Jacobs, Frances Harper, and even Pauline Hopkins, to relay black female experience as a capitulation to white standards tend to betray a similar prejudice directed against "domestic fiction" of the nineteenth century, which has now been reinterpreted for its potential for radical transformation of society (Baym, 1978; Tompkins, 1985). In reviewing early black women's fiction alongside more recent writing, McDowell creates a binary between contemporary black women novelists' "honesty and imagination" and Harper's "lack" thereof in "portray[ing] their people." She contrasts Harper's "self-conscious assurances to the reader" through her "'well-spoken' characters" with Alice Walker's "filtering" of everything through Celie's "own consciousness" and "voice" (1987, 287–9). However, whether the literary and social landscape allowing a certain narrative "voice" inflected with "honesty" and "imagination" was available

to Harper is worth deliberation. Indeed, given the supremacy of the sentimental genre, demanding a strictly "realist" or a "modernist" character is superimposing literary conventions that were either unavailable to Harper or that could not embody the racial uplift theme of the novel, centered around the trope of the New Negro charged with "utopia" and "rhetoric" typical of the nineteenth century.

Indeed, despite its "multitude of forms," "sentimentalism" was a "nearly universal discourse in the nineteenth century." Eighteenth and nineteenth century moral philosophers, evangelical and liberal religionists, and abolitionists thought it a most suitable identificatory mechanism for "affective appeals" "to motivate the public to relieve oppression and pain" (De Jong, 2013, 1–2). However, literary influence only partly explains Harper's choice. The Sentimental Genre was a literary framework for endorsing the Cult of True Womanhood; together they epitomized the value system that defined white womanhood. Black woman was situated outside this enclave: "a creature unworthy of the title woman," she was merely a "a thing, an animal" in "the eyes of the nineteenth century white public" (Hooks, 2014, 159). "Immoral" and "sexually aggressive" (Carby, 1987, xxv), black woman was "pictured as primitive, lustful, seductive, physically strong, domineering, unwomanly and dirty" (Mgadmi, 2009, 40). Black women's club movement was thus dedicated to not only uplifting the race by instilling "a better wifehood and motherhood" (Washington, 2008, 58), but also "bring[ing] to light the virtuous black woman." Harper's entire career is an epitome of this while *Iola Leroy* is a culmination of that. However, while most critics view Iola as the ultimate "construct of a black woman designed to refute the negative images generated by history and circumstance" (Kaiser, 1995, 101), this article (re) views Iola in relation to other women characters to unravel Harper's conception of the New Negro woman.

Reimagining the Tragic Mulatto

We are introduced to Iola Leroy through a fellow slave, Tom Anderson, who wants to "git her away" from her owner: "a mighty putty young gal" with "putty blue eyes, an' jis' ez white ez anybody," Iola has been sold "all ober de kentry" but "dey can't lead nor dribe her" (Harper, 1988, 38).[2] Tom's idealization of Iola's physical "beauty" against his lack of self-worth as "an ugly chap" (42) demonstrates that "complexional prejudices are not confined to white people" (278). Given that blacks "have been so long taught that they are nothing and nobody" (44), they have internalized the dominant ideals. Thus, although the text repeatedly uses terms like "beautiful," "putty," "white," and "lovely" to describe Iola, most of these descriptions are focalized through other characters. While Iola's portrayal as "a trembling dove" is focalized through Tom, its reinforcement comes from Dr. Gresham who is surprised that "[a] woman as white as she is a slave" (58) and the Confederate General: "Could it be possible that this young and beautiful girl had been a chattel,

[2] All subsequent textual citations are indicated by page numbers only.

with no power to protect herself from the highest insults that lawless brutality could inflict upon innocent and defenseless womanhood?" (39).

While these descriptions address color prejudice among both blacks and whites, using a near-white woman also serves as an identificatory mechanism for Harper's white readership that allows her to critique the latter's prejudices. "Born and raised in the midst of slavery," Iola "had not the least idea of its barbarous selfishness"; although she "feels sorry" for the girl dismissed from school for being colored, she also believes that "Slavery can't be wrong, for my father is a slave-holder, and my mother is as good to our servants as she can be" (97). Jackson argues that "the advantages of a western education allow the title-character to transform from a white pro-slavery advocate to a black community leader" (2003, 554). However, a western education alone cannot effect this consciousness. Unaware of her racial heritage, Iola defends slavery; it is only after she is "forced to pass through it" that she comes to "hate it, root and branch" (149). Iola's transformative journey from "a white woman" to "a chattel" thus performs the dual function of creating an identificatory relationship with her white readership while also commenting on their inability to understand slavery with a decontextualized education.

This identificatory relation is further reinforced through Iola's portrayal as a true woman. Significantly, as "a member of a wealthy and aristocratic family" and "proud of its lineage," Dr. Gresham "saw realized his ideal of the woman" in Iola, which made "all the manhood and chivalry of his nature r[i]se in her behalf" (58–59). However, Harper revises the tragic mulatto trope through a juxtaposition of Iola and her mother. Mary Leroy also embodies true "womanhood" for Eugene Leroy who "pities" her "defenselessness" and "rescues" her (65) through a relationship whose tenuousness continually haunts Mary. However, while the mulatto draws sympathy for being "an ill-fated white" (Lewis, 1984, 314), Iola, unlike her mother, is a "heroic" New Negro woman, who defies being rescued by a white man at the cost of her race pride and mission of public service.

While critics have noted black women novelists' "revisionist mission" aimed at countering the myth of black female sexuality, some have dubbed Harper's alternative image a "countermyth" (McDowell, 1987, 284). However, I argue that Harper creates a character that is sober, not somber. Although Dr. Gresham "had never been associated in her mind with either love or marriage," his proposal still brings "a tell-tale flush ... to her check" (109) and she finds her "heart" "unconsciously … entwining around him" (110). However, despite being, "lonely and heart-stricken," Iola rejects "the offer of love, home, happiness, and social position"—a refusal that is a corrective to Mary's trust in Eugene Leroy's promise and is strengthened by Iola's resolve to find her mother. Significantly, Dr. Gresham's proposal sets off a conversation about racial uplift. While he wonders "what has all this to do with our marriage" (116), for Iola the personal is inseparably tied up with the race question. That her "self-respect" would not allow her "to enter [his] home under a veil of concealment" (117) reinforces her resolve to correct the mistakes of the past. While Dr. Gresham naively asks what can "hinder her from "having my mother to be your mother," the echo of Iola's dying sister's words, "stand by mamma!" (118), signify her pledge to maternal history. Thus, contra Dr. Gresham's desire to rescue Iola, it is Iola, the New Negro woman, who becomes a savior of her mother.

There is an apparently minor but extraordinary detail that we learn about Dr. Gresham before his second proposal to Iola: "In the early part of the war I lost my arm by a stray shot, and my armless sleeve is one of the mementos of battle I shall carry with me through life." Significantly, his very next sentence poses a question to Iola: "would you permit me to ask you... if I can be of the least service to you? If so, I would be pleased to render you any service in my power" (144). Although symbolic of his services to "the nation," Dr. Gresham's severed arm also signifies his unsuitability to be Iola's partner in racial uplift. While his second proposal brings back the "deep flush on Iola's face," the conversation, once again, veers off into "the Negro problem." Their "paths must diverge" for Iola cannot "forsak[e] her race" by "liv[ing] under a shadow of concealment" (233–5). While Dr. Gresham thinks that Iola will be "disillusioned" when "the novelty wears off," remembered for her "failings" and not "services," for Iola "[w]hat matters is if they do forget the singer, so they don't forget the song" (234).

These "depths" and "aspirations" of her soul, signified in the African American oral tradition of "song," that Dr. Gresham could neither "fathom" nor "mingle" with are what mark her relationship with Dr. Latimer. As New Negroes, both refuse to pass as white and forsake personal advancement for a life of racial uplift: "Kindred hopes and tastes had knit their hearts; grand and noble purposes were lighting up their lives; and they esteemed it a blessed privilege to stand on the threshold of a new era" (271). However, the novel's seeming "reliance" on these "nearly white character[s] as an example of black self-uplift" (Jackson, 2003, 558), has garnered extensive criticism. Yet, while most light-skinned characters are bourgeois exceptionals, not all dark-skinned characters are illiterate or unreflective.

Racial Pride and Passing

Lucille Delany, one of the dark-skinned race leaders, is tellingly named after the historical figure of Lucy Ann Delany, writer, activist, and ex-slave. Lucille is introduced to us through Iola and her brother, Harry: "She is more than handsome, she is lovely; more than witty, she is wise; more than brilliant, she is excellent" (198). Focalized through Harry, Lucille's "combination of earnestness and youthfulness" stands in contrast to Iola's introduction as "beautiful," "putty," and "lovely looking" from the perspective of the self-deprecating Tom, the white General, and Dr. Gresham. Harper pointedly mentions that neither Lucille's "hair nor complexion show the least hint of blood admixture," which "is a living argument for the capability which is in the race" (199). Although Lucille's character has been dubbed a mere "deviat[ion]" by some (Lewis, 1984, 320), there are multiple textual occasions that situate Lucille in a position superior to Iola. Lucille's "suavity and dignity" owe to her college education that Iola lacks, and it is the school that Lucille sets up to train "future wives and mothers" that provides a position for Iola. Focalized through Iola, Lucille is introduced to Dr. Latimer as "my ideal woman. She is grand, brave, intellectual, and religious" (242). It is, indeed, Lucille who signifies "hope for the future of our race" and "the blessed possibilities which lie within us" (200).

Lucille's positioning in relation to Iola reinforces Harper's strategic use of a light-skinned character as an identificatory mechanism. Even more, it allows Harper to comment on her own experience with "light-skinned" women. In "We Are All Bound Up Together," Harper notes that "if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothings and selfishness, it is the white women of America" (Harper, 1866, 48). An alternative relationship is conceptualized by pairing a near-white woman and one of "unmixed blood" with "no foolish rivalries and jealousies between them": "Their lives were too full of zeal and earnestness for them to waste in selfishness their power to be moral and spiritual forces" (200). As "one of the grandest women in America," Iola's "ideal," and Marie's "hope" for the "race" (244), Lucille Delaney is already the New Negro woman that Iola is set to emulate at the end of the novel: "I am going to teach in the Sunday-school, help in the church, hold mothers' meetings to help these boys and girls to grow up to be good men and women" (276).

Lucille's counterpart is Reverend Carmicle. When Dr. Gresham asks Robert to bring along "any colored man who is a strong champion of equal rights," Iola recommends Reverend Carmicle, who "had no white blood in his veins" (227), to represent the race in a discourse on the "solution" to "the negro problem" (220). Indeed, the novel repeatedly addresses color prejudice among both blacks and whites through the act of passing. Despite his ability to pass as white, Robert chooses to join a colored company, dismissing his "chances of promotion." Although Captain Sybil finds it "a burning shame," for Robert does not "look" or "talk like them," Robert believes it is not "any worse to have held me in slavery than the blackest man in the South" (44). Likewise, when Harry learns about his racial heritage, he is forced to choose between "memories of a wonderful past" and "the proud world's social scorn" (126). Because "love was stronger than pride," Harry joins "a colored regiment" (126), dismissing his advantages "as a white man" (218–219). Similarly, Iola declares that "[t]he best blood in my veins is African blood" (208) and deems it "treason not only to the race, but to humanity, to have you ignoring your kindred and masquerading as a white" (202). Finally, Dr. Latimer turns down his grandmother's offer to pass as white to choose the race he "belongs to" (263). While critics view this refusal to pass as white as "the author's statement against miscegenation" (Lewis, 1984, 320), I read it as a declaration of race pride instead. Reconstruction's failure was rooted in the South's unwillingness to accept blacks, symbolized in Dr. Latrobe's exit from Dr. Latimer's company as well as the narrative frame after learning about the latter's racial heritage. Indeed, the novel's expulsion of Dr. Latrobe is a comment against anti-miscegenation while the mixed-race characters' refusal to pass as white is a statement against assimilationist ideologies.

From the Old to the New Negro: African American History and Oral Tradition

While Lucille and Carmicle are already the New Negroes whose Northern education and experience have "adapted" them "to the work of the new era which had dawned upon the South" (201), in their refusal to pass as white, Iola, Harry, and Dr. Latimer

undergo a rite of passage to embark on the same journey. However, whether light- or dark-skinned, Harper's alleged valorization of bourgeois race leaders has invited extensive criticism. McDowell argues that Harper creates two distinct "speech styles" for the "educated mulattoes" and the "illiterate and visibly black servants" with the former mediating and legitimating the latter "in white terms" (1987, 86). Harper's assignment of "standard" speech to race leaders is understandable given the primacy of the trope of literacy to racial uplift as well as the novel's aim to counter nineteenth-century representation of blacks "as either evil or as the ludicrous targets for supposedly harmless laughter" (Elkins, 1990, 45). However, her uneducated characters and former slaves are also re-presented as intelligent, enterprising, and progressive. Indeed, I argue that it is the dialect speakers that mediate and legitimate the standard speakers through the text's recurrent return to the past.

The very first chapter that introduces us to Tom Anderson and Robert Johnson alongside fellow slaves deconstructs McDowell's binary. While Tom is a "servant" of an affluent planter, Robert is his mistress's "favorite slave" (7), who "taught him to read" like "a pet animal" is taught "amusing tricks" (16). Robert's literacy and color notwithstanding, the narrator portrays him alongside fellow slaves as intelligent and inventive. The text begins with their "unusual interest" in "the state of the produce market" (8); "looking furtively around," they inquire each other about it: "Surely there was nothing in the primeness of the butter or the freshness of the eggs to change careless looking faces into such expressions of gratification" (8). The "shrewd" slaves had "invented a phraseology" to exchange "news" from the battlefield in "the most unsuspected manner." This alternative language veiled "an undercurrent of thought which escaped the cognizance of their masters" (9) and allowed the slaves to masquerade their ignorance of the political context. Unlike Robert, Aunt Linda "can't read de newspapers," however, her "Missus' face is newspaper nuff" (9); reading this text accurately, she tricks her mistress into misreading hers. When the mistress is mourning Confederate loss, Linda is "orful sorry" only to "break loose" when the mistress is gone (11). Similarly, "it's a good circus" to see Jinny's "long face" when "Miss is frettin' and fumin' 'bout dem Yankees" and "den to see dat face wen missus' back is turned" (11–12). Likewise, when Jake goes to get "the letters," he gains "a heap" of "news" "'bout de war" while feigning lack of "sense" just as Tom pretends sleeping to eavesdrop on his master's conversation with the generals. These acts of subterfuge not only defy dominant culture's characterization of slaves as infantile, they also render the former imperceptive given their inability to read black trickstery. In acknowledging the shrewdness of these trickster figures, the narrator celebrates African American oral tradition of signifyin(g) that allows them authority through alternative literacy.

These slaves are juxtaposed to "Uncle Daniel, a dear old father, with a look of saintly patience on his face" (16), reminiscent of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom. While both Robert and Tom want to join the Union Army as soon as "dem linkum soldiers gits in sight," Uncle Daniel is not only unwilling to go himself, he also advises Robert against it citing his "good owner" (17). Despite having lost their only child to slavery, Uncle Daniel and Aunt Katie's "saintly and calm" faces share a "child-like faith" (27). Believing freedom "won't do me much good," Uncle Daniel wants to keep his "word" to his master instead. In a sentimental narrative lasting

an entire chapter, he relates an emotional account of his bond with Master Robert who entrusted him "to take keer of my wife an' chillen, ji' like yer used to take keer of me wn yer called me your little boy," which "jis' got to me, an' I couldn't help cryin'" (25). This narrative is, however, repeatedly disrupted by Robert and Tom's protestations while the chapter ends with them joining the Union army, "leaving Uncle Daniel faithful to his trust" (31).

Aunt Linda, however, stands in sharp contrast to Uncle Daniel who kept his promise to Master Robert in return for a "nice little cabin down there wid green shutters" where "he libs jis' as snug as a bug in a rug" (158). A play on Uncle Tom's Cabin, Uncle Daniel's "cabin" is the reward for the compliant, long-suffering servant's loyalty to his master—a small, segregated dwelling removed from the mainstream white world where he lives like a "bug" (151). On the contrary, Aunt Linda foreshadows Baby Suggs's desire to feel the spirit of freedom: "Wen freedom com'd I jist lit out ob Miss Johnson's kitchen soon as I could. I wanted ter re'lize I war free, an' I couldn't, tell I got out er de sight and soun' ob ole Miss" (154). Indeed, it is Aunt Linda who leads the journey to the communal prayer meeting while Uncle Daniel retires to his cabin. At the end of the novel, he is relegated to a cottage, silent and unnecessary for a politics of resistance.

Rewriting the Black Mammy

Aunt Linda, on the contrary, emerges as a strong maternal figure that is the anchor of the community both before and after the War. Indeed, in portraying Aunt Linda as a strong-willed, hardworking, and committed woman, Harper subverts the black mammy stereotype. Appearing at each important moment in the text, Aunt Linda asserts her political, religious, and cultural views alongside the bourgeois characters. Her "vision" at the very outset of the novel about the future of "cullud folks" not only heralds the text's "vision" of "freedom" (12), it also signifies the text's investment in African American folklore. As a driver of community resistance, the prayer-meetings that Aunt Linda organizes both before and after the war where slaves "meet by stealth" to "mingle their prayers and tears" (13) are, indeed, a precursor to the postwar Conversazione of the Talented Tenth.

Significantly, thus, Aunt Linda's literacy is a recurring motif in the text. The very first chapter foregrounds her ability to "read" "faces" as opposed to "the papers." There was a time Aunt Linda "wanted to learn how to read" but, if "caught … wid a book," her mistress would "whip" her "fingers" (22). Notwithstanding this, Aunt Linda engages in a dynamic discussion with Robert and Iola about religion, preaching, temperance, housing, election, and voting (161–162). While Iola is "amused and interested at the quaintness of her speech," she is also impressed by "the shrewdness of her intellect" (175). The difference between their standard and her dialect does not translate into a difference in their political ideology or acumen: while Iola believes that "the greatest need of the race is noble, earnest men, and true women," Aunt Linda "wants" someone "who'll larn dese people how to bring up dere chillen, to keep our gals straight, an' our boys from runnin' in de saloons an' gamblin' dens" (161). Being an example of self-uplift, Aunt Linda manages to secure "a nice place," despite restrictions on buying land, with the money she made selling "pies and cakes

to soldiers" during the war alongside her husband's "wages and bountymoney." While her husband does not "want to let on his wife nowed more dan he did," he is nevertheless "proud" of her (155). Significantly, right after she recounts her entrepreneurial skills, Robert inquires if "by this time [Aunt Linda] knows how to read and write" (156), to which she responds in the negative citing her preoccupation with "get[ting] a libin'." While Robert thinks reading would be a "comfort" in sick or lonely times, Aunt Linda believes she "could hab prayin' and singin'" instead. Thus, while literacy is significant for the New Negro men and women, the Old Negro's tradition of songs and hymns, the text reminds us, is equally instrumental in the journey of self-determination and racial uplift.

This departs from the dominant conceptions of the New Negro whose bourgeois self is disconnected from the past in his attempt "to escape the recollection of enslavement" (Gates, 1988, 139). Building on racial heritage of the Old Negro, Harper's New Negro reconnects with the past to find strength in it. The text recurrently returns to "times past" (188) that all major characters want to reclaim. Iola turns down Dr. Gresham's proposal twice because she has "pledged" her "life" to the "resolve" of finding her mother that "sustains[s]" her in "fearful trial" (118). And "the earnest purpose of Robert's life" is "[t]o bind anew the ties which slavery had broken" (148). While Iola and Robert converge through the maternal song, an entire chapter is dedicated to their return to the South and reunion with fellow slaves to "gather together the remnants" of a "scattered family" (148). Indeed, the chapter that begins with "searching for lost ones" is dedicated to the "homely enjoyment" of the evening with Aunt Linda and a celebration of her community engagement and resistance (173). Thus, while Harper believes that "the negro belongs to a young race and looks hopefully towards the future" (244), she also underscores the politics of memory and history: "Instead of forgetting the past, I would have [our people] hold in everlasting remembrance our great deliverance" (250–51).

Besides, while African American bourgeoisie do form part of Harper's New Negro given the postbellum racial uplift ideology, Harper's New Negro does not have to be "culturally articulate" to be able to "speak for himself" (Locke, 1997, xvi). Despite their lack of literacy, her characters engage in self-(re-)presentations as means to community building. Thinking no one "ain't too ole ter do right," Aunt Linda is critical of the "triflin' niggers down yere who'll sell der votes for almost nuffin" (176); Jinnie warns her husband that if he voted "ter put me back inter slavery, you take yore rags an' go"; and Aunt Polly "sen[ds] sailin' outer doors" the meat and flour Uncle Job receives for his vote. While Iola and Robert blame the whites for making "an ignorant colored man to sell his vote," Aunt Linda insists on black self-uplift: "I wants my people wote right, an' to think somethin' ob demselves" (179). Thus, assigning her women characters a critical race consciousness, Harper conceives a New Negro Woman that disrupts the stereotypical nineteenth-century representations of black women as Jezebels or Mammies.

Communal Prayers and the Conversazione

Critics have tended to focus on the Conversazione as the epitome of Harper's elitist vision of racial uplift. I want to bring attention to the "prayer meetings" before and after the war that equally supplement her politics. Despite restrictions on "meetings without the surveillance of a white man," the slaves "contrived" to hold gatherings (13) where "a few dusky figures met by stealth" (15). Dubbed as "sin-killin' an' debil-dribin'" exercises, the "prayer-meetings" were a blend of religious and political conference whereby slaves "mingle[d] their prayers and tears, and lay plans for escaping to the Union Army" (13). Believing that "folks is took up with makin' money an' politics" to the detriment of "de same good 'ligion we had den," Aunt Linda wants to recreate the past through prayer meetings after the war. Marked by "clear, sweet tones," "rock[ing] to and fro," "chorus of moans," "paroxysm of joy," "songs of rejoicing and shouts of praise," "mournful memories," and "tears of tender sympathy" (180–183), these prayer meetings mingle the painful memories of slavery with the spiritual ecstasy of freedom. In gathering for the second, the company passes the site of their last "secret" meeting (175) where "they knelt down and mingled their prayers together, as they had done in bygone days"; however, this time without the "shadows" of "lonely" and "silent" swamps (189). The fact that the second prayer-meeting takes place after the war and is attended by both Iola and Robert signifies its import to the text's New Negro vision.

The Conversazione, by contrast, is "a select company of earnest men and women deeply interested in the welfare of the race" (246) who discourse on "the negro problem" from multiple perspectives, almost all of which have already been conversed about in Iola and Robert's reunion with Aunt Linda and the fellow ex-slaves. Signifying "hope for the future" (256), the conversazione urges "the best heart and brain to work in unison for justice and righteousness" (247). Even so, its deliberation on "the moral progress of the race" is informed by the history of "slavery" (254–5); its discussion on the role of the Talented Tenth by the "need for counsel" from the "old" (258). While the conversazione is marked by feminist voices of the New Negro women, Iola Leroy and Lucille Delaney, its desire to "unite the enthusiasm of youth with the experience of age" also embraces the Old Negro women, Marie Leroy and Mrs. Watson (251). While she is unable to attend in person, Mrs. Watson's poem "Rallying Cry," accompanied by her message that "although she is no longer young, she feels that in the conflict for the right there's room for young as well as old" (251), is "voiced," notably, through Lucille who signifies "the future" of the race (200).

Indeed, through the course of the Conversazione, "the spirit" of the old infuses the "soul" of the new (151) as Iola and Lucille's voices are mingled with those of Mary Leroy and Mrs. Watson. While Reverend Eustace believes that the "great need of the race is enlightened mothers," Lucille echoes Aunt Linda in reminding him of the need of "enlightened fathers, too": we must "teach our boys to be manly and self-respecting and our girls to be useful and self-reliant" (253). Likewise, despite being confronted with "a homeless race to be gathered into homes, and a legally unmarried race to be taught the sacredness of the marriage relation," Marie Leroy believes that both "purity in women and uprightness in men" are needed for "true

strength" contra the Cult's exclusive focus on "true women" (253–4). Iola goes a step further in emphasizing that "every woman ought to know how to earn her own living" through "some skill or art," for "there would be less unhappy marriages if labor were more honored among women" (210). Thus, despite the seeming bourgeois intellectualism of the conversazione, it is neither exclusive to men nor undermines the experience of the old. Rather, it warns against "forgetting the past," for future "glory" of the race is contingent on an "everlasting remembrance" of its past (250–1). As such, while the conversazione concludes with Marie Leroy's conviction that such "meetings would be so helpful to our young people," it is inflected by Robert's tribute to the "hopes and fears" articulated in the secret prayer-meetings of the past (260–261).

Conclusion

Indeed, the text's "Conclusion" itself returns to Aunt Linda and the South (particularly Iola's maternal hometown) instead of ending with Conversazione or Iola and Dr. Latimer's union. While Iola is urged to write "a book to inspire men and women with a deeper sense of justice and humanity" (262), the possibility of her writing "a soul-inspiring story" (264) is soon followed by another reference to Aunt Linda's refusal to "learn to read" (276). This is an active reminder of the value of African American oral tradition for the racial uplift of the New Negro further reinforced by Aunt Linda's renewed "vision." While the text began with her "vision" about "freedom" (12), it ends with her "vision" about racial uplift: "I seed it in a vision dat somebody fair war comin' to help us…and larn our gals some sense" (275–276). This return to the past with a revised vision is to "lift" the "shadows" from their lives replacing them with "peace" (281).

Thus, while *Iola Leroy* "represents the transition from the antebellum period to the Harlem Renaissance and links Afro-American fiction to women's fiction" (Foster, 1990a, xxxvii), its vision of the New Negro revises both the antebellum and the Harlem Renaissance tropes. Contra scholarship's focus on Iola Leroy's character as the repository of Harper's conception of black womanhood, this essay has re-read Iola's character alongside other women characters to argue that *Iola Leroy* builds Harper's notion of a multifaceted "New Negro Woman" informed both by African American oral tradition and postbellum ideology of racial uplift. Given the constraints of her cultural and political context, Harper borrows from the Cult values indispensable to refuting racial stereotypes and realizing social and cultural enfranchisement of black women; however, she also rejects its curbed domesticity, choosing instead a public life of service for black women. Despite being shaped by the racial uplift ideology that foregrounded the role of literacy and black intellectualism, Harper's New Negro woman nevertheless departs from the "ahistorical" bourgeois models in being deeply invested in African American racial heritage.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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