
Introduction

Resistance and Legitimacy

In response to broader entanglements of misrepresentation and disregard, this book reads black women differently.¹ Detailing the story of nineteenth-century black authors' critical engagement with the fundamental disjunction between democratic promise and dispossession in the American nation-state, or what I term in the pages to follow the "liberal problematic," *Resistance Reimagined* departs from by-now-standardized depictions of resistance. Arguably, reimagining resistance, terrain too readily conceived as militant, vernacular, or masculine, can proffer fuller accounts of black humanity. Accordingly, this book unsettles evaluations of nineteenth-century African-American women's intellectual production—against the social action of a more tangibly formidable Sojourner Truth or Ida B. Wells, for instance—as bourgeois or accommodationist. Spotlighing literary critiques of liberalism, and the idiom of self-possession and volition by which the latter is reinforced, *Resistance Reimagined* positions black women's address of an insidious slippage between freedom and subjection as vital oppositional consciousness.

Indeed, despite research by Marilyn Richardson and Frances Smith Foster, Carla Peterson and Shirley Wilson Logan, John Ernest and Xiomara Santamarina, authors such as Harriet Wilson, Elizabeth Keckly, and Anna Julia Cooper (the subjects of the first three chapters of this book) seldom garner widespread recognition as incarnations of decisive black defiance. While distinct with respect to constraints of region

and class throughout the course of their lives, Wilson's, Keckly's, and Cooper's analogous marginalization signifies reductive, if common, wisdom attending nineteenth-century black women's literary expression. Associated less with the formation of epistemology, or with advanced, mainstream systems of thought, pre-twentieth-century discourse by black women continually elicits indictments of unimaginative simplicity. Aesthetic and generic categorizations, including (but not limited to) "moral," "evangelical," and "domestic," often circulate as epithets in this context, whereas a perceived dearth of political, racial, or intersectional concerns implies conservatism and assimilation. To this end, some insist on reading texts such as *Our Nig* (1859), *Behind the Scenes* (1868), and *A Voice from the South* (1892) through a trajectory of what Elizabeth Higginbotham refers to as the "politics of black respectability," presenting disproportionate emphasis on such writers' apparent complicity and collusion. Thus, in contrast to Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman, figures like Charlotte Forten and Mary Church Terrell continue to provoke charges of indifference or elitism, passivity or acquiescence, vis-à-vis existing regimes of power. Equating conventional literary styles such as sentimentality with a capitulation to whiteness, or with pandering to gain majority sympathy and approval, others presuppose the obsolescence of black women's writing from the antebellum period through the post-Reconstruction-era.

Apprehending this problem at the close of the nineteenth century, Anna Julia Cooper writes, "The thinker and the doer, the man who solves the problem by enriching his country with an invention worth thousands or by a thought inestimable and precious is given neither bread nor a stone. He is too often left to die in obscurity and neglect even if spared in his life the bitterness of fanatical jealousies and detraction" (136). In fact, a dichotomous relation between consciousness and activism, a privileging of radicalism and public forms of protest, and similarly circumscribing definitions of black struggle, haunt much resistance studies inquiry, past and present. The domain of resistive praxis subsequently takes on a proprietary cast, as an entity irretrievable beyond the bounds of outwardly incendiary transgression at the hands of embattled masses or of charismatic/celebrity male leadership via authorized avenues of dissent. This coincides with what Sianne Ngai identifies in *Ugly Feelings* as the "symbolic violence in the principle of commensurability itself," whereby "there is an underlying assumption that an appropriate emotional response to racist violence exists, and that the burden lies

on the racialized subject to produce that appropriate response legibly, unambiguously, and immediately" (188). A strictly gendered and classed construct, "resistance" pivots upon racialized connotations of representativeness and narrowly quantifiable standards of credibility. Yet, as I consider here, meaningful black refusal can be as imbricated in contexts of combat and insurrection as intricate matrices of hierarchy, submission, and theory.

To be clear, the prevalence of relatively restrictive interpretations of African-American resistance, formally scholastic or lay in origin, does not denote complete abandonment. Landmark precursors, alongside an ever-expanding body of recovery work, complicate long-standing perspectives on the battles waged by a range of early black women thinkers. Investigating the subtleties of nineteenth-century black women's activism, these undertakings have drawn attention to the ways in which gender norms, exoticizing conditions of valor, and intra-racial conflict promote cherished icons of resistance at the expense of less-containable iterations of black literature, music, religion, and the erotic. The analysis advanced in this volume owes a debt to foundational works of this stripe, as it does to those considering literary critiques of power at the axes of gender, race, and class, and African-American public intellectuals' complex relationship to the uneven effects of liberal democracy. Scholars have also developed important studies tracing the function of contemporary neo-slave narrative in relation to prior black literary precedent (the subject of the fourth chapter of this book). As a result, interest in modes of witnessing and redress, as well as in surveying black agency, fostered by recent fictional turns to slave culture and antebellum racial politics, abounds. There could be no *Resistance Reimagined* without these formative critical endeavors.²

Consonant with a black feminist ethos of reclamation, then, this book examines nineteenth-century black women writers at times minimized as elitist, inauthentic, or otherwise inconsequential. In foregrounding these subjects as instigators of critical thought, the book expands perceptions of viable enactments of African-American resistance. Liberal ideology critique, an ever-nuanced enclave of contention, is one route among many by which black women historically intervened in reigning discourses of selfhood and universality. However, it is a site of enduring significance: it reflects persistent navigation of injunctions toward duty and intimacy buttressing the onset of Emancipation and sanctioning circuits of erasure in the wake of freedom. Hence, I offer not a complete

story here, but seek to highlight the incompleteness of broader narratives of nineteenth-century black resistance that do not account for theorization of the limits of dominant notions of privilege and progress shoring up the liberal problematic.

Omission of the contributions of black women authors as practitioners of knowledge formation, moreover, marks a dangerous de-intellectualizing gesture. Via a contestation of liberal norms, the thinkers gathered in this book interpret and modify defining precepts of property and personhood. They undermine fonts of individualism and free will. And they confront, in unique ways, evocations of reason and autonomy that propagate disproportionate grief and racial turmoil. Additionally, in response to the liberal status quo, Wilson, Keckly, Cooper, and modern writer Sherley Anne Williams implement a series of critical literary strategies, from sarcasm to aurality. They leverage materiality and enforced embodiment to unmake cultural myths of advancement. And they activate opacity to counter presumptions of coherence and civility. Summoning fraught distinctions between complicity and subversion, these women demonstrate the utility and the peril of inhabiting the realm of the human.

Still, my investment in exploring black women authors' interrogation of the collision of market values and benevolent prescriptive to which liberalism aspires ventures further. One of the text's larger goals is to enrich a collective sense of the pretextual gamut brooking racial prejudice and subordination in the U.S. Nineteenth-century African-American thinkers fortunate enough to pass written records onto succeeding generations display crucial discernment regarding the manifestation of power. They anticipate contemporary black literary pursuits by reminding readers to be as attuned to the nadir of anti-black terror as to the ruse of tolerance. Reading Wilson's, Keckly's, Cooper's, and Williams's creative production differently requires one to access their vigilance against antagonisms acute and spectacular, alongside those exceedingly sly.

Rather than uncritically echoing sentiments of the governing socio-political order, the subjects of this study make visible alternate modes of being. They reveal other potentialities—and determinants—for social change. They raise questions not only about the forms resistance takes but also about the forces resistance targets, about various modes of subjugation permissible under the cover of reform, responsibility, even pleasure. Imperatively, their texts inquire: How does liberal intention

condone and obscure violence? How do ethics of abstraction and rationality mediate processes of devaluation? How do protection and cultural mandates of self-help uphold order and control? Why must difference be theorized as a source of vision, not reducible to a tokenized otherness tethered to hegemonic whiteness? And how might opposition to conservative and ostensibly progressive nineteenth-century philosophies foster black empowerment? Configuring black women's intervention in the liberal problematic as legitimate resistance, *Resistance Reimagined* brings precisely such queries to the fore.

The Liberal Problematic

What I refer to throughout this book as the “liberal problematic” proposes that a bevy of contradiction, rather than certitudes of privilege or unity, underwrites what historically has been one of the central organizing provinces of politics and self-making in the U.S.: liberalism. Liberalism, as a practice and as an object of critique, takes many forms. As a mode of government, it ostensibly intervenes within and between states to curtail chaos. It locates self-determination as a product of discriminating repression, promoting education and the development of autonomous personhood. As economic domain, liberalism traditionally champions free enterprise. It affirms contract labor and the protection of private property. Simultaneously philosophical and cultural, liberalism also manifests in psychic, affective, and ethical terms.

Of especial relevance in this study are foundational tenets of liberalism that directly and indirectly facilitate disenfranchisement and racial otherness. According to David Theo Goldberg, and I quote at length:

Liberalism is committed to *individualism* for it takes as basic the moral, political, and legal claims of the individual over and against those of the collective. It seeks *foundations* in *universal* principles applicable to all human beings or rational agents in virtue of their humanity or rationality . . . It is concerned with broad identities which it insists unite persons on moral grounds, rather than with those identities which divide politically, culturally, geographically, or temporally. The philosophical basis of this broad human identity, of an essentially human nature, is taken to lie in a common rational core within each individual, in the (potential) capacity to be moved by Reason. In keeping with this commitment to the force of reason, liberalism presupposes that

all social arrangements may be ameliorated by rational *reform*. Moral, political, economic and cultural *progress* is to be brought about by and reflected in carefully planned institutional improvement. The mark of progress is measured for liberals by the extent to which institutional improvement serves to extend people's liberty, to open up or extend spaces for free expression. Finally, and . . . perhaps most significantly, liberalism takes itself to be committed to *equality*. (5; emphasis in original)

Thus, in a democratic state, appropriate citizen-subjects exhibit rational and moral agency. By excising possible idiosyncrasies of character, model personhood circulates as universally accessible to all. Indeed, the very terms of humanity emerge as organic and self-evident. With freedom as its aim, liberalism tenders a distinct, if variously executed, theory of political purpose and communal order. A prominent rubric of citizenship, replete with requisite comprehensiveness and inclusion, it articulates conditions of mobility and remedy in the context of emancipatory vision.

However, liberal conceptions of humanity likewise rely on generalization and preferentiality to the detriment of the less propertied, urbane, white, or male. Despite associated emphases on civility and objectivity, among other aspects, liberalism delimits fraternity and worth along strict boundaries of gender, race, and class in order to project endemic similarity and accord. "As modernity's definitive doctrine of self and society, of morality and politics," Goldberg confirms further, "liberalism serves to legitimate ideologically and to rationalize politico-economically prevailing sets of racialized conditions and racist exclusions" (1). In particular, Enlightenment-refined discourses such as coherence codify a concerted expulsion of blackness, endorsing rationality, literacy, and language over opacity, materiality, and embodiment at all costs. Influencing modes of relation and usurping spaces of subjectivity, liberalism functions as sociality and as socializing agent—an ethos both pervasive and perverse.

Liberal ideology critique as resistance, on the other hand, exploits the vagueness and instability of customary rights provisions. That is, populations regarded as excess may engage, even appropriate societal forms never meant for their use. In the space of *Resistance Reimagined*, such groups lay liberalism bare as a site of yearning, as an enticing illusion of

proportional humaneness and equity. In fact, “[T]he modern distinction between definitions of the human and those to whom such definitions do not extend is the condition of possibility for Western liberalism, and not its particular exception,” as Lisa Lowe observes (3). An embedded nexus of identity and policy formation, liberalism lures via prospects of rational teleology and expansive community as individual and state attainments.³ Nevertheless, as a number of nineteenth-century black thinkers reveal, normative political action and public discourse in this vein is too often conditional and contingent, dissimulating harrowing performances of tyranny and containment.

Arguing for the reconfiguration of prevailing ideologies of selfhood and consent as a significant, if underexamined, legacy of black feminist knowledge production, the concept of the liberal problematic forwarded in *Resistance Reimagined* underscores the semblant nature of sovereignty for many African-Americans in the nineteenth century and beyond. Without contravening what liberal custom might yet become, the liberal problematic situates democracy as an idealization, both of electoral standards and capitalist prerogative. Further, it signals a naturalization of mainstream, procedural iterations of equivalence. Contending with the liberal problematic, then, materializes the threat of purely nominal autonomy. Grappling with its paradoxes opens up possibilities for evaluating the effects, ideological and otherwise, of differential entitlement, especially for those left most vulnerable in its wake.

Importantly, black activists’ disruptions of liberalism unmask logics of refusal underlying dominant notions of public culture and governmental practice—even when such efforts are partial, fleeting, or never fully outside the bounds of appeals for human recognition.⁴ Traversing conventional disciplinary boundaries, African-American women often devised cogent analyses, ever mindful of precisely how prevailing ethics of individualism and rationality constrain black movement. That is, in a historical moment for which the slave narrative still frequently circulates as predominant signifier, figures such as Maria W. Stewart and Frances E.W. Harper leveraged genres from prose to memoir, fiction to poetry, to consider the ways in which politics of abstraction and decorum structure how black communities build relationships and encounter others.

Thus, the cadre of black scholars and theorists gathered in these pages crystallizes the duress of inhabiting Western jurisprudence, specifically for those perceived to embody, if not to epitomize, the limits of

citizenship. Nineteenth-century black women writers, in particular, convey critical awareness about what it means to occupy the breach between the capacity and corporeal experience of liberty, between declarations of goodwill and routines of ruin. In this breach, I submit, resides knowledge of the productivity of difference. In this breach dwell tumults of black joy astride knowing instantiations of black anger. Lived realities of degraded labor, of stunning impoverishment and exploitation, populate this sphere, while tenuousness and uncertainty abound. It also houses perceptions of motherhood by way of sexual violation. The sound and spirit of a range of black material presences echo throughout. Suicide, too, limns the breach.

In representing this fissure, nineteenth-century black women writers contradict broader cultural propensities for binary, fixed logic. Their narrative acts of sarcasm, witnessing, and self-commodification undermine avowedly transcendental systems of value and exceptionalism. As liberal doctrine permeates literary and religious performance, black women attest to the hazards of engrained constructs of privacy and progress. Beyond this, Wilson, Keckly, Cooper, and Williams refract accepted discourses of virtue and intentionality according to specificities of gender and age. Seemingly commonsense notions of intimacy and empathy similarly give way under the weight of black women's textual manipulation of the opaque. Expectations of unequivocal volition yield to stirring renderings of black silence.

In drawing attention to the liberal problematic, I offer, these women contribute to a vital reservoir of African-American resistance, one with complex reverberations in our contemporary moment. As asymmetrical hierarchies of power are both retrenched and made invisible in the twenty-first century, it becomes even more necessary to probe how prior conventions of exclusion issuing from processes of sovereignty and individual rights are reconstituted in the present. Undoubtedly, oppression must be extricated from abiding frameworks of reasonableness. Violence must be unyoked from historic precedents of sentiment and economic determinism that obscure erasure. Coercion must be severed from protocol enacted in the name of emancipation. Returning to the past in this way enriches notions of the diverse means by which black people have (and will continue) to assert perspective and place in the world. Returning to the past in this way acknowledges a necessary multiplicity of black presence.