

Foreman, P. Gabrielle. *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2009. xiv, 255 pp. Cloth \$75.00. Paper \$25.00.

Readers of P. Gabrielle Foreman's *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* might do well to read its coda first. In it, Foreman describes visiting the graves of both Harriet Wilson, author of *Our Nig* (1859) and the subject of *Activist Sentiments*' second chapter, and Amelia Johnson, author of *Clarence and Corrine* (1890) and the subject of chapter five. The visit to Wilson's grave seems to have been powerful enough; Foreman conjectures that she may have been the first person in more than a century to pay her respects there. The search for Johnson's grave seems to have been even more moving, however, for the cemetery in which Johnson was interred in 1922 was dug up during the 1940s, the result of "a land-grab coup by white business and city leaders." The remains of its dead were then "spread out like fertilizer" on a Maryland farm field. "I cried silently standing at that grave, Black efforts and lives welling up in the face of such stunning disregard" (174).

Knowing that such experiences shaped the writing of *Activist Sentiments* should enhance appreciation of Foreman's method, which is fundamentally speculative. She wonders what it must have been like to have encountered the writings of Wilson, Johnson, Harriet Jacobs, Frances E.W. Harper, and Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins not with disregard but with deep respect. In less than a half century, after all, black women writers "moved from near rhetorical invisibility and isolation to prolific literary productivity and connectedness," with such figures as Johnson and Harper serving as public reform figures as well as publishing multiple books (2). For many readers, the literary achievements of these women seemed monumental, and *Activist Sentiments* documents the positive receptions they once received, especially in the black press.

As a reception study, however, *Activist Sentiments* also aims to recover how texts may actually have been experienced. Pursuing what might be termed a historicized phenomenology of reading, Foreman imagines communities of readers ("receptive" and "culturally literate readers," she terms them) whose knowledge and political commitments may have allowed them to see more in texts than would have "resistant readers," or those less open to a text's interpretive possibilities (13, 21, 40). This method is especially persuasive when Foreman uncovers allusions to historical figures that a text's better-informed readers might have caught. Both Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) and Kelley-Hawkins' *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1895), for example, include characters based on the former slave-turned-photojournalist Victoria Earle Matthews ("Victoria Earle," she is called in Harper's novel, "Vera Earle" in Kelley-Hawkins'). *Iola Leroy* makes additional oblique reference to figures ranging from Ida B. Wells and George and Lewis Latimer to Martin Delany. Knowledgeable audiences would have recognized these references, Foreman speculates, and thus would have apprehended levels of complexity that less cognizant readers could have appreciated.

Such readings Foreman terms "histotextual," a coinage that "name[s] how culturally and socially literate audiences share not only epistemologies and literary sensibilities, but also specific historical references upon which one level of interpretation depends" (10). Equally impressive are those readings *Activist Sentiments* conducts that draw less upon a text's allusiveness and more on its ambiguity. When a text about race can be read in more than one way, Foreman suggests, one learns a great deal about readers based on the choices they make—whether they confuse assumptions for likelihoods or whether they remain open to uncertainty. In the chapters on Wilson and Johnson, for example, Foreman reads light-skinned female figures involved in seduction plots with white men as potentially white themselves—readings that

challenge the assumption that a morally compromised woman in a racially ambiguous situation must be mulatta. The chapter on Jacobs reads her as having been raped by Dr. Flint and her first child as potentially his—a reading that highlights “the multiple codes of silence and self-preservation demanded of Black women both North and South” (31). The chapter on Kelley-Hawkins notes how her *Four Girls at Cottage City* has been understood as both black- and white-authored, thanks to a photograph of Kelley-Hawkins that effectively passes in both directions. Such texts “unsettl[e] not only traditional representational paradigms but also . . . readers’ own interpretive comfort,” as Foreman says specifically of *Our Nig* (72). Inviting readers to confront their own assumptions about black women—but knowing full well that many readers will not even recognize the invitation—the writers Foreman discusses thus seem no less challenging than Charles Chesnutt, Mark Twain, or Herman Melville, whose racial provocations have attracted a great deal more scholarly notice.

In one way, these women's writings may be considered even more provocative. The salient concept of *Activist Sentiments* is “simultextuality,” a way of reading black women’s texts with an eye toward how they coordinate multiple discourses and narrative modes simultaneously: “In reworking the tropes and terms of respectability, purity, and sexual vulnerability . . . these texts often produce multivalent meanings that, rather than being subtextually buried beneath a principally reformist message of affective and emotional connection, are . . . simultextually available at the primary level of narrative interpretation” (6). Whereas Chesnutt’s conjure tales or Melville’s *Benito Cereno* beg to be read subtextually—hidden beneath their surfaces lie deeper meanings available to the canny reader—Jacobs and Harper reward simultextual reading. They make possible multiple meanings, none of which overrides or cancels the others, and that multiplicity creates opportunities once again for readerly self-confrontation. For example, a reader might ask, Why do I choose to read Jacobs as having or having not been raped? Why do I perceive—or fail to perceive—the potential for a sexual relationship between the former slave Robert Johnson and his mistress Miss Nancy in *Iola Leroy*? What assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality encourage us to incline toward one reading or another?

Activist Sentiments is thus revolutionary. While ambiguity, irony, and paradox have long been the defining features of texts included in any American literary canon, Foreman reveals how black women’s writings of the late nineteenth century deploy these very concepts in specific ways that have yet to be fully recognized, let alone appreciated. Moreover, Foreman's method leads one to speculate whether simultextuality, as a critical tool, can be applied to texts by other writers, male as well as white. Is there evidence in the historical record that texts were actually read histotextually by in-the-know audiences? Although these questions are beyond the scope of Foreman’s project, they represent exactly the sort of question *Activist Sentiments* inspires. Foreman has written an important book, one that may change not only *what* we read as students of American literature but also *how*.

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