2. Race Travel in Turn-of-the-Century African American Utopian Fiction

We believe in the Negro, in the majesty of his patient soul, in the brilliancy of the future that awaits him as a distinct branch of the human family. . . . Who knows but that he is being evolved as the special guide of the host of the dark millions across the water? (Griggs, Wisdom's Call 235-36)

It is surprising that despite the great scholarly interest in nineteenth-century African American literature that has characterized the past three decades, so little attention has been paid to African American contributions to the extraordinary outpouring of utopian fiction in the last two decades of the 1800s. Especially after the 1888 publication of Edward Bellamy’s bestselling *Looking Backward, 2000-1887*, the popularity and relevance of this genre were such that “even established and distinguished authors like William Dean Howells turned to stories of Utopia” (Hart 172).

And so did African American authors such as Frances E. W. Harper, Sutton E. Griggs, Pauline E. Hopkins, and Edward A. Johnson, although the eugenic tendencies, totalitarian overtones, and latent popularities of turn-of-the-century white utopias have directed scholars’ attention away from the significance of this genre for interpreting post-Reconstruction black fiction. On one hand, specialists of African American literature have eschewed the term utopian to describe such novels, even as they consistently use related terms such as “prophecy” (Bell 6; Fleming, “Sutton E. Griggs” 76), “fantastic” (Glover, “Sutton E. Griggs” 237; Watson 144), “visionary” (Elder 73), and “wildly unbelievable” (Ammons 84). On the other hand, among utopian scholars the assumption of the absence of a significant body of late nineteenth-century African American utopian texts can be regarded as a critical commonplace. In comparing African American works with better-known white American utopias such as Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, critics remark that “African-American literature has never had any significant utopian dimension” (Nichols and Henry 39) or that the African American utopian impulse as it emerges from the spirituals has not resulted in formal literary utopias (B. Williams 47). Others have explained that supposed absence or the “failure” (Reilly 62) of the African American utopias that have appeared in print by reference to the incredible oppressiveness of African American historical circumstances and the consequent difficulty of imagining a perfect future.

From this perspective, even in the African American utopian texts we do know, the imagination of the author remains “constrained” (Short 49) and stops short of articulating a “full-fledged” utopian vision (Reilly 62). That an oppressed people could be reduced to such a state of abjection as to lose the power to imagine a better future seems hard to believe. It is especially hard in the case of African Americans, a nation within the nation with a long history of political and cultural resistance and with a narrative tradition that has characterized itself on the subversive revision of popular literary modes. And because the utopian novel was popular at the turn of the century, it is also hard to believe that African American authors would not have engaged with this genre, notably because it had become an important playground for the racist, eugenicist, and segregationist discourse of white writers.

In this chapter I focus on the trope of basing to propose a pioneering taxonomy of turn-of-the-century African American utopian novels, making reference to Pauline E. Hopkins’s *Of One Blood* (1912–1920) and discussing more extensively Sutton E. Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio* (1892), Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892), and Edward A. Johnson’s lesser-known *Light Ahead for the Negro* (1904). I interpret these texts not as isolated, idiomatic, maybe “fantastic,” even if not totally realized (Ammons 84) attempts at experimentation but rather as literary appropriations of the conventions of an established genre that dates back to Thomas More’s *1516* *Utopia*. This generic contextualization foregrounds the originality and formal awareness that post-Reconstruction black writers demonstrated in crafting their novels. They articulated a tradition that belongs to utopia as a genre and is also distinctively African American. The recovery and reinterpretation of their neglected texts alters profoundly the literary critical approach to late-nineteenth-century utopias as a whole.

Toward a Taxonomy of Turn-of-the-Century African American Utopian Fiction

The utopian fiction is the undisputed reason of a militant optimism. (Skelton 197)

The uses of fiction to create “alternative worlds” (Peterson, “Capitalism” 561) were already clear to African American authors of the antebellum period, but
utopian fiction as a genre sanctioned the political import of imagining alternative societies. Grounded in a “play between a design that is not yet real and the reality which the design contests” (Fortunati 22), the imaginative creation of an ideal polity that is characteristic of utopias implies a detailed sociopolitical critique. This critique emerges by force of the contrast between the society in which the author and his or her first readers live and the alternative, supposedly better world described in the text. In their utopian novels, African American writers transformed a contemporary dystopian historical reality of racial violence, segregation, and disfranchisement into an “anticipatory” (Blok 310) vision of liberation and empowerment that acquired inspirational value by expanding the “horizon of expectations” (Blassingame 23) of the readers. Insofar as these novels were intended to bring about the desired social change, they can be described with Ernst Bloch’s “apparently paradoxical term of concrete utopia” (197), which indicates “the unfinished dream forward, the docta spes” (119), the “known hope” (120).

Characterized by rather “stereotypical” fictional conventions, as Robert C. Elliott notes, the “prescriptive pattern” of the utopian genre requires “a central character [who] embarks on a voyage, lands alone in a strange country, makes contact with the inhabitants, learns about the customs and institutions of their land, makes certain comparisons with Europe, returns home” (108). Operating “by example and demonstration” (Svinin 37), the utopian novel relies on dialogue to bridge the cognitive gap between the known present and the ideal world. And because “the utopia is designed to describe a unified society, not individual varieties of existence” (Frye 122), the detailed description of utopian life tends to deflect the author’s attention from the rounded portrayal of his or her characters. A similar “lack of interest in psychological realism” (Gates and McKay, The Norton Anthology 907) has been traditionally noted also with regard to the somewhat wooden quality of Griggs’s and Harper’s characters, but in the absence of a generic contextualization of their novels as utopias, it has often led to doubts about the authors’ abilities as fiction writers.

African American authors adopted but also adapted in important ways the prescriptive pattern of the utopian genre to their fictional needs. Less convinced of the liberatory potential of technological progress than their white counterparts, African American utopian writers focused on the process of individual and collective ideological change that would lead to utopia rather than on the accomplished perfection of utopia itself. Thus, African American utopias are characterized by a “radical this-worldliness” (Spillers, “Moving” 94) that emerges from the centrality of the tropes of passing and miscegenation as well as from the promise of what I call race travel as the distinctive literary device that structures these texts. Whereas in classic European and white American works the journey to utopias entails an “extraordinary dislocation of someone’s consciousness in time” or space (B. Franklin 364), African American texts propose instead an extraordinary dislocation of point of view. Their utopias are situated roughly in their own time and place, in a transitional limbo between an “old South” that is passing away and a “new South” that is “yet to be” (Griggs, Imperium 52). African American writers thus defamiliarize contemporary white-dominated reality by presenting American society from the displaced, marginalized perspective of segregated black Americans. It is indeed an eloquent comment on late-nineteenth-century politics of literary representation of blackness that the “distortion” of reality (Andrews et al., The Oxford Companion 689), the estrangement effect of race travel should stem from the unusually direct depiction of the life experiences and point of view of rebellious African American characters. These characters do not inhabit some future never never land but express their rebelliousness in the author’s present or, as in Iola’s case, recent past.

The primacy and distinctiveness of race travel as structuring principle remains clear even in a formally traditional utopian novel such as Hopkins’s Of One Blood. The space travel that takes Reuel, the protagonist, to Africa and leads to his discovery of the hidden city of Ilhussar soon turns into race travel as the voluntary passer frees himself from the cultural hegemony of white America, develops greater pride in his black heritage, acquires the ability to read the signs of this powerful heritage even in the United States (in Mira’s visionary power, for instance), and ultimately arrives at a new understanding of the inextricable connections between blacks and whites. At the same time, Reuel’s movement in and out of utopia (i.e., between Africa and the United States) and the threat that European colonialism poses to the city of Telzann situate historically Hopkins’s utopian city and differentiate it from the traditional en- topia (noumenon) of utopian fiction.

The adventures of Southern belles who suddenly discover that their mothers were slaves (e.g., Iola Leroy), the secessionist plans of a secret African American government headed by a mulatto (e.g., Imperium in imperio), or the aforementioned revelation that an African ex-passer is the long-lost descendant of an ancient dynasty of Ethiopian rulers (e.g., Of One Blood) are instances of race travel. They foreground and defamiliarize the existence of parallel black and white worlds that are societally differentiated by race, class, gender, and caste. And as they defamiliarize contemporary society for both their black and white readers by foregrounding and revealing the power of blackness, respectively; they also insist that these ostensibly separate worlds
are inextricably linked at a more profound level. The marked body of the all-but-white mulatto provides a narrative frame for that link. The biblical notion “of one blood” is central to the turn-of-the-century African American utopian vision. “Know ye not that ye are parents and children?” asks Griggs in Imperium (45). And in Of One Blood, the most thorough articulation of this theme, Hopkins foregrounds the issue of intermingling as she describes the descendants of an ancient African civilization as “ranging in complexion from a creamy tint to purest ebony” (545). She moves beyond the pathological connotations miscegenation had in the United States and provides a utopian vision of peaceful cohabitation of people of different colors in the hidden city of Telassar.

Both on a formal and on a thematic level, the African American utopian texts under consideration are informed by the intersections between the tropes of miscegenation and passing. On one hand, miscegenation and passing are symptoms of a dystopian contemporary world where whiteness as normative utopia makes the rejection of blackness a tempting option. On the other, race travel operates on a fictional level as an ideological reversal of racial hierarchies that is eventually epitomized in the passers’ choice to forsake passing and belong to the African American community. In keeping with the authors’ awareness of the double audience they were addressing, turn-of-the-century African American utopias thus emerge both as a defensive tool to combat the discourses of segregation and white supremacy and as an aggressive fictional means of community building. In Jula Levoy, for instance, the protagonist’s choice in favor of the African American community turns blackness from a mark of inferiority into the emblem of heroism, both for the escapee and for all the unmistakably black characters that populate Harper’s novel. From this vantage point, African American utopian novels emerge as “resocialization” texts (Tate, Domestic Allegories 140) not only because they teach middle-class values. They also shape their fictional black communities out of a common historical condition of enslavement and segregation as well as out of the liberational consciousness of cultural distinctiveness and the inspirational vision of a brighter common future.

Sutton E. Griggs’s Imperium in Imperio

For one thing, Negro American consciousness is . . . a product of our memory, sustained and constantly reinforced by events, by our watchful waiting, and by our hopeful suspension of final judgement as to the meaning of our grievances. For another, most Negroes recognize themselves as themselves despite what others might believe them to be. Thus, although the sociologists tell us that thousands of light-skinned Negroes become white each year undetected, most Negroes can spot a paper-thin “white Negro” every time simply because those who masquerade mixed what others were forced to pick up along the way; discipline.” (Tate, Shadow and Act 114)

The celebration of the African American consciousness of cultural distinctiveness takes center stage in Griggs’s Imperium in Imperio (1899). Imperium is one of the few black utopias to have been recognized as such and one of the few nineteenth-century African American novels (together with Delany’s Blake) to have been consistently praised by critics for its modern-sounding, outspoken assertion of black power. Despite this exceptional status among nineteenth-century texts, it is by analyzing the aspects Imperium shares with other African American utopias (i.e., the focus on miscegenation and the use of race travel as structuring device) that it becomes possible to explain the puzzling quality that even admirers cannot help noticing in this text without invoking Griggs’s ideological ambivalence or supposed artistic ineptitude: In Imperium, the author’s defiant rhetoric remains unresolved in contrast with his ultimate neutralization of the rebellious organization he portrays.

Griggs’s novel follows the life and adventures of Belton Fieldmont and, less closely, Bernard Belgrave. The two protagonists eventually become leaders of a secret African American organization that is based in Waco, Texas. Founded in the early days of the American Republic, the “Imperium in Imperio” (“the empire within the empire”) has institutional and military powers parallel to those of the United States government and functions to protect the lives and property of “over seven million five hundred thousand” black Americans (Imperium 18). The novel reaches its climax when, in the face of widespread lynchings and the institutionalization of segregation, the Imperium leaders disagree on how they should defend the rights of black Americans. To Bernard’s proposal of an immediate, violent rebellion, Belton opposes a more gradual plan that includes the formation of an independent black state in Texas. Bernard manipulates the congress of the Imperium into approving his plan, and Belton is executed as a traitor. Eventually, Bernard’s war plans are exposed, and the Imperium is dismantled, but the novel ends with the fictional narrator reiterating the possibility of realizing at any time a new social order based on black self-determination, should America fail to live up to its egalitarian ideals.

The boldness of Griggs’s utopian plan emerges fully by foregrounding the historical context of violence and discrimination in which African Americans lived at the turn of the century. This intense racial dichotomization entered contemporary fiction not only in the obvious racism of Thomas Nelson Page’s or Thomas Dixon’s infamous novels but also in the ostensibly bloodless, “natural” erasure of racial differences that characterizes Bel-
lary's best-selling Looking Backward. Within this sociocultural context, Griggs's decision to title his novel Imperium in Imperio evokes and overturns the ideological paradigm of his time. The title is polysemic, and its melodic valence emerges from the interplay between the historical and literary references it evokes. On one hand, Griggs asserts African American agency by presenting his black empire in terms that would at once echo and subvert the logic of what used to be called "inviolable empire," the Ku Klux Klan, a notorious white supremacist organization very active after the Civil War. On the other hand, the phrase "imperium in imperio" comes from Bellamy's Looking Backward, 2000-2000. Protagonist Julian West comments that "womanhood seems to be organized as a sort of imperium in imperio in your system," but, as utopian host Dr. Leete hastens to clarify, it is an empire from which "there is not likely to be much danger to the nation" (143). In conspicuous contrast with Bellamy, Griggs capitalizes on the potential danger posed by the Imperium to reinsert blacks in utopia. He portrays them as important, albeit unrecognized historical agents whose activism in "solidifying the race for the momentous conflict of securing all the rights due them according to the will of the heavenly Father" goes "unnoticed and in fact unseen" by whites (Imperium 133-34).

Griggs thus explicitly places his own text within the contemporary tradition of utopian fiction, adopting and adapting thematic and formal conventions of the genre. In classic utopian style, for instance, Griggs presents the Imperium through the eyes of Bernard, who is being initiated into its mysteries and whose function as participant observer overwhelms the author's interest in his psychology. At the same time, Griggs describes the headquarters of the secret black government in ways that recall Thomas More's 1516 prototypical description of Utopia. He also provides characteristically detailed explanations of the sociopolitical inequalities of white America and of the institutions of the Imperium, which he defines as "well-nigh perfect in every part" and "present[ing] a form of government unexcelled by that of any other nation" (Imperium 199).

In adapting these conventions to his representation of black life, Griggs revises them profoundly. The intense and distinctive sense of estrangement elicited by Griggs's utopian novel derives not only from the discovery of a secret black government, literally a nation within the nation, but mostly from his vision of black power, which emerges from the race travels on which his protagonists embark. Far from proposing a dislocation in time or space, in his note "To the Public" Griggs's authorial persona supports the veracity and contemporaneity of his text. He declares to have personally known the late Ben Trout, the fictional narrator, and to have received directly from him the papers on which Imperium is based. Bellamy uses a similarly authenticating device in Looking Backward but presents it as a document from the year 2000. To anchor his fiction in contemporary reality he has to argue the short-term feasibility of his utopian plan in the postscript, which is dated 1888. The deployment of race travel, on the contrary, enables Griggs to present his vision of black power as a fact of the present, or rather of the very recent past, because the novel ends with the dismantling of the Imperium.

Griggs's insistence on the here and now of the Imperium results in an extraordinary dislocation of point of view that rearticulates the power relations between the races and turns a segregated American minority into a self-sufficient and secessionist nation within the nation. This is not simply a raised version of the "sex-role reversal" Daphne Patai analyzes in the context of women's utopias (96). By placing his utopia in his own time and place, Griggs has foresworn the possibility of a complete reversal of power. He dramatizes instead a process of individual and communal black empowerment that survives even the dismantling of the Imperium. It is precisely in the protagonist's ability to differentiate between power and empowerment that Griggs locates the means for realizing a new, utopian, and egalitarian social order. Griggs's distinction between power and empowerment structures the novel and provides a crucial interpretive key to the otherwise puzzling ending of Imperium and to the relationship between Belton and Bernard. The expectation of an important secret and the solemnity of grandeur; and suspense of the opening pages reverberate throughout the text. However, the author's actual depiction of the Imperium starts in chapter 15 and dominates only the last third of the novel. This last section follows utopian conventions most closely as the secret African American organization is shown and described to an outsider, Bernard, who is the privileged, albeit unacknowledgedmulatto son of a powerful white senator. Bernard's race travel to the utopia of Imperium sees his initiation into the spiritual and material life of the black half. He has always been marginal to that life. His mother, like many of her kept mistresses, has always been marginalized. In her fiction, antecedents, used to live in "isolation" (Imperium 81), and he enjoys all-but-white privileges thanks to the protecting influence of his white father. Griggs's description of Bernard draws on previous and foreshadows later African American depictions of the mulatto. Whereas his family background of segregation and female self-sacrifice recalls Clotel, his deep-seated adoration for the power of whites places Bernard on the continuum that links Webh's Clarence with Charles Chesnutt's John Waldo and James Weldon Johnson's Ex-Colored Man. Bernard's initiation into utopia is mediated by Belton, who can play utopian host because of the far more dangerous and painful race travel he has.
undertaken in the first fourteen chapters of the novel. Tracing the "small beginning" (2) of his race leader back to a poor cabin and an "ignorant" (3) but intelligent and caring mother, Griggs details the education and Bildung of a "new Negro, self-respecting, fearless, and determined in the assertion of his rights" (66), Belton is an exceptional man in the future who nevertheless happens to live and function in a society that has not only for Old Negroes. The Bildung of this New Negro moves along through a proliferation of anecdotes and episodes that in terms of quantity and extravagance fall clearly in the tradition of Brown's Chief. They also serve a similar function by introducing as wide as possible a variety of situations and contexts that present to the reader the absurd workings of blackness in a white-dominated society.

The transgressive extravagance of Griggs's description of Belton's Bildung emerges with particular force in two episodes that involve passing. In the first, Belton decides to cross-dress as a woman and work in a leading white family "to find out just what the white people were taking of the Negro" (132-33) and analyze the unprotected status of the black woman. As with George's "is short lived, in his case because it is too dangerous. Harassed by the young men of the family he works for, Belton turns down their sexual advances very forcefully. He is nevertheless "kidnapped and overpowered" (154) by them and subsequently leaves his job and returns home. This "very remarkable and novel" (133) first-hand investigation of prevailing negative stereotypes of African American women is immediately followed by another episode of extraneous passing. Belton's beloved and noble-minded wife, Antoinette, gives birth to a baby boy who, unlike his parents, looks white. Widowed with desperation, admitting that "his failure to properly support her [Antoinette] has tempted her to sin" (157), Belton leaves his family and embarks on a series of adventures that lead him to the Imperium. Initially estranged by the community, Griggs's blameless African American version of Hester Prynne eventually is vilified: her child "grows darker" (160) as he gets older, and Belton's pride as father and husband ultimately is restored, albeit a few weeks before his execution. In this second episode of passing, Griggs reverses the more traditional plot of stories such as Kate Chopin's "Desire's Body" by foregrounding the shock of the white child and by foregrounding what might be considered the first all-black black character in African American literature. Belton's dramatic Bildung epitomizes Griggs's reflection on masculinity, power, and the distinctiveness of black American culture. Belton's utopian qualities derive not only from his "preciousness" (15), superior intelligence, self-respect, and combative ness, but also from his almost superhuman ability to survive his obvious misplacement in a white-dominated world that is a

more primitive stage of development. Imperium thus emerges as a deliberate and significant revision of Bellamy's better-known utopia. At the end of Looking Backward, Bellamy describes protagonist Julian West's return to the nineteenth century as an unsurpassable nightmare that was a passing four years and from which there is no permanent waking up. Indeed, Belton's utopian qualities, which shed positive light on the extraordinary struggle of the "ordinary" African Americans who surround him, rest precisely in the strength he reveals in facing the ordeal of surviving that nightmare. And he survives whole, retaining a sense of humanity and justice that confirms his superior wisdom and transcends his own hard-won knowledge of the world he happens to live in. In Imperium, Belton's world ultimately emerges as upside-down. It is a world where (black) intelligence, courage, and self-respect are not only not rewarded but also continually met with cruelty, violence, discrimination. Rather than presenting them simply as an unavoidable reality, Griggs defamiliarizes his violent, segregationist times by describing them in a tone that betrays the same quality of wonder at unnecessary injustice that generally characterizes the utopian travelers' reflections on their preutopian past.

The sense of estrangement that dominates the first fourteen chapters of the novel derives precisely from the author's adoption of utopian conventions to describe Belton's race travel, a race travel that differs from those of other blacks such as Jone Leno and of privileged mulattoes such as Bernard. Belton's is the race travel of a (black) person who has to undergo the compulsory societ al training to become a specific kind of black (human), that is, a white person's stereotyped version of the obsequious, obedient, cowardly Negro. And from the point of view of his New Negro protagonist, a point of view that is normative within the novel, Griggs shows us in detail that the training is systematic and societally enforced. It implies making no job opportunities available to black graduates, threatening to Lynch outspoken black activists, and subduing resistance by opposing a mob to an individual. It is in light of his Bildung in a dystopian world and of his heroic resistance to it that one can interpret Belton's fast-paced journey through the United States of the late 1900s and the climactic series of misadventures that in chapter 12 make him survive a hanging and a dissecting board until he is finally catapulted into the utopian world of Imperium.

Even the moment of respite Belton enjoys after he becomes one of the leaders of Imperium is short-lived. Bernard's election as president leads to a disagreement over the means to expand the influence of the organization. Through long digressions of sociopolitical analysis, which are characteri-
tic of utopian fiction, Griggs contrasts Belton's utopia of black empowerment with Bernard's dystopian thirst for power. Griggs relishes Bernard's rhetoric of violence but nevertheless indict his desire for uncompromising revolt and revenge against white oppression, as well as his irresponsible disregard for the dangers of 'interincine war' (245). The author scatters throughout the novel numerous hermeneutic clues to condemn the vengeful use of violence when not in self-defense (68, 76-77, 111, 241-42, 247). The violent tendencies of his leadership epitomize Bernard's lack of the self-discipline that Belton has painfully had to acquire in his life as a lower-class, visibly black person (265). Bernard's desire for revenge is also a symptom of his seduction by the power of whites. Although they reject him because of his mixed genealogy, he has enjoyed the privileges of whiteness through the secret support of his powerful white father, and Griggs provides several clear hermeneutic clues to interpret the incompleteness and ultimate failure of Bernard's race travel as the result of his being ideologically colonized by acquisitive white values. A case in point are the color-coded images Bernard uses to convince the Imperium members to "strike a blow for freedom": "If we die on the mountain-side, we shall be shrouded in sheets of whitest snow, and all generations of men yet to come upon the earth will have to gaze upward in order to see our whitened forms" (221).

In contrast with Bernard's suicidal war play, Belton proposes a solution that "suits a peaceful adjustment, yet it does not shirk war if war is forced (246)." Griggs presents this strategy, which contemplates a four-year trial period to educate whites and the eventual emigration of all blacks to Texas, as rooted in and consistent with the distinctive history and culture of African Americans. It is a utopian vision of empowerment that implies a complex notion of self-assertion and self-determination that moves beyond retributive and suicidal retaliation. If "transforming the individual" can be considered "the most difficult step on the road to utopia" (Roemer 58), Griggs presents us a New Negro who remembers the scars he has "received at the hands of the South" (259) but can still declare that the South "cannot drive truth from my bosom" (259) or drive the logic of survival from his quest for black self-determination.

Belton's superior humanity and vision of a truly better society explain his death and the dismantlement of Imperium not as symptomatic of Griggs's inability to sustain his own revolutionary vision but rather as the inspirational martyrdom of a Christlike figure. Belton confirms his stature as an African American leader by resigning himself without further fighting only to a black-inflicted death. His courage in accepting death affirms the values that informed his proposal for advancing the Imperium, including the importance of violent self-defense, if necessary. Similarly, Bel's pesto's patriotic betrayal of the Imperium is a seeming oxymoron that foregrounds the fictional narrator's Du Boisian "woman's" (Du Bois, The Souls 77) and the antagonistic subject positions of blacks and whites in American society. Bel's betrayal forebears the power fantasies of Bernard, "weathered in luxury, gratified as to every whim...deeming nothing impossible of achievement," a person who does not possess the "restraining" (262) control of Belton and who has embarked on a personal mission of suicidal revenge that would lead to "a universal growth," where even those who had not been killed "would be too badly wounded to cry out" (264).

It would be simplistic to interpret Griggs's novel simply as a dated plea to white America to change its ways or as just a literary tool to "force an acknowledgment of equality from the proud lips of the fierce...Anglo-Saxon" (Imperium 247). Imperium is certainly all that, as Griggs himself makes clear memoraneously. But Imperium is also a complex and very modern reflection on the pitfalls of nationalism, the complexities of lasting social change, and the dangers of being co-opted by the oppressor's ideology of power in the very process of fighting against it. Griggs succeeds in keeping his vision of black power alive as a utopia, as does Poe (Blish 159), exactly because he (like Delany in Blate) does not give fictional reality to the "awful carnage" (Imperium 43) and race suicide that would be necessary for its immediate realization. However, he gives fictional reality to the readiness "to buckle on our swords and go forth to win our freedom with the sword just as has been done by all other nations of men" (247), should other means fail. This spirit of self-determination and self-reliance, which gave birth to the Imperium in the first place, survives and is even kindled by Belton's death and the dismantlement of the organization. The possibility and explicit threat of constructing an even "more powerful" (266) organization are reiterated at the very end of the novel and sustain the utopian vision of unstoppable black empowerment and liberation Griggs projects.

Frances E. W. Harper's Lola Leroy

We stand then, it seems to me, in this last decade of the nineteenth century, just in the portals of a new and untried movement on a higher plane and in a grander strain than any the past has called forth. It does not require a prophet's eye to divine its trend and image its possibilities from the forces we see already at work around us nor is it hard to guess what shall be the status of women's work under the new regime. . . . She stands now at the gateway of this new era of American civilization. In her hands must be moulded the strength, the wit, the
Whereas Griggs’s masculinist bias is so pervasive and un-self-conscious as to add an unintended dimension to the entanglement a contemporary reader may feel when approaching *Imperium*, seven years earlier Frances E. W. Harper had foregrounded in *Jola Leroy* the impact of race and gender on the formal conventions, thematic concerns, and ideological content of utopian fiction. Reading *Jola Leroy* (1892) as a feminist utopian text foregrounds the “liberational discourses” (Tate, *Domestic Allegories* 123) underlying a novel that has traditionally been read as a melodramatic and non-experimental romance. Building on Tate’s distinction between the romantic cover story and its deeper significance as an allegory of political desires, I argue that in *Jola Leroy* the cover story itself is explicitly shaped by the “desire for an ideal polity” (Tate, *Domestic Allegories* 107) and by a complementary critique of contemporary racist practices. As a result, Harper’s novel is not only allegorical, in the sense that it points to a more radical hidden story, but truly utopian, because it is thematically and formally structured by Harper’s anticipatory vision and depiction of an alternative, better social system. Harper follows classic utopian models far less closely than Griggs or Hopkins, and her novel is more influenced by other genres such as the Bildungsroman and romantic fiction, which enable her to devote greater attention to psychological processes. However, *Jola Leroy* qualifies as a utopian text both because it is pervaded by a consistent strain of “utopianism” (Kusan, *Utopia 8*) and because Harper’s utopianism culminates in the articulation of the institutions and principles that will inform the new ideal social order she envisions.

Harper’s novel is structured around the literal and metaphorical race travels of the title character. Jola grows up as a privileged, proslavery Southern belle. After the death of her aristocratic white father, she learns that her mother was a mulatta slave, albeit so light skinned that she could pass for white. Her mother had never officially gained her freedom, and because in the antebellum South children inherited the mother’s condition, Jola discovers that she and her siblings, Harry and Gracie, are legally slaves. Whereas Gracie does not survive the shock of this revelation and dies prematurely, Jola, though “wild with agony” (*Jola Leroy* 103), lives and is sold as a slave. Soon thereafter, the Civil War breaks out and she is rescued by Northern troops. The rest of the novel, which represents the longest and most important part of *Jola Leroy*, follows the protagonist’s adventures after she decides to cast her lot with the black race.

Suddenly and dramatically Jola’s world is turned upside down. She used to be a person of property and becomes someone’s property; as a privileged white woman she was treated as a “lady,” but as a slave she is legally beyond the pale of honorable womanhood; whereas formerly blacks were the objects of her pity, blackness becomes a constitutive element of her identity. Jola’s condition undergoes a process of change that dramatizes the tensions between the representation of blacks as the objects of racial discrimination and the subjects of their own lives. This metanarrative reflection builds on Harper’s opening depiction of the “mystery of market speech,” the secret code of communication and resistance among slaves (*I*), and it becomes even more explicit at the end of the novel, where the obvious similarities between Jola’s and Harper’s comments on the interventionist use of writing emerge as homonymous clues similar to those Brown and Webb interpose in their novels.

As in the case of other utopian travelers who suffer psychologically from their change of context, Jola’s racial displacement is neither easy nor painless, although it does not prove fatal, as in her sister Gracie’s case. It is “a hard ordeal of suffering” that changes Jola’s personality, undermines her health, and exposes her to the risk of madness (*Jola Leroy* 195, 206, 205–6, 274). It is an ordeal that Harper has Jola recount over and over again (*Jola Leroy* 97–108, 113–15, 142, 223) to avoid the easy linearity of the traditional “riches-to-rags” and “rags-to-riches” plots (*Babes 35*). However, this ordeal also starts Jola on her journey from passing to utopia. As Jola travels beyond the privileges of whiteness into the reality of chattel slavery first and segregation later, she has to “learn to see anew” (*Roemer 60*), and it is not surprising that even in a novel as centered on dialogue as *Jola Leroy* conversations often are excuses for the long, didactic explanations that are so characteristic of utopian fiction.

In Harper’s novel the emphasis on learning is more than a fictional strategy that enables the author to critique her society while envisioning a new one. Rather, it is a process that creates the very possibility of a utopian vision of social change. After having experienced some of the indignities perpetrated by her ex-peers on slaves, and more specifically on female slaves, Jola acquires a different consciousness both of the violence and injustice that underlie her old (white) world of privilege and of the more humane values of her new (black) world. This consciousness is gendered and politicized as Jola reevaluates the disjunction caused by slavery between (black) female virtue and standard notions of (white) female propriety: “I was sold from State to State as an article of merchandise. I had outrages heaped upon me...
of traditional narrative expectations of heterosexual bliss. Whereas Louis voices very openly his forebodings about the difficulties of Reconstruction in terms that predict the institutionalization of segregation a few years later, the author realizes such forebodings in the plot as Minnie loses her life for the cause she has embraced. Within the economy of the novel, Minnie’s untimely death emerges as the celebration of a heroine whose martyrdom acquires mythic status and becomes part of the community’s lore a few hours after her death.

Minnie’s tragic end lends new and important insight into the utopian features of the happy ending of *Iola Leroy* and into the voluntaristic qualities of the “optimism” that Harper is supposed to have “so readily expressed” in her turn-of-the-century fiction (Tate, *Domestic Allegories* 161). It is by stubbornly and “passionately pursuing the formula of happy endings” (Spillers, *Introduction xxvii*) that in the latter novel Harper tries to bridge the gap (imposed by contemporary racist social practices and re-presented in her novels) between the long-term goal of utopian social change and the short-term need to endure oppressive conditions. In *Iola Leroy*, the brief final portrayal of romantic happiness coexists with an explicit, sustained critique of the “savage elements in our civilization” (*Iola Leroy* 159) and of the discriminatory practices Harper indict in *Minnie’s Sacrifice*. Having portrayed in detail the gender and race limitations imposed on her characters, Harper deploys brutally romantic conventions to enable her protagonists to overcome, if only temporarily, the societal obstacles that stand in the way of their self-realization. Invested with the function of saving the heroines from the relentless demands of necessity by opening a space beyond contemporary social realities, the romantic happy ending emerges as self-consciously utopian.

The closing marriages signal the eventual success of self-reliant practices of survival and self-empowerment and emerge metaphorically as an insipidational microcosm where social change is successfully realized. The marital happy ending makes the reader experience a veritable utopian moment. A taste of the long-term ideal society is already contained in the ideally egalitarian heterosexual relationship between heroines who have succeeded in achieving an independent sense of self and enlightened heroes of the future who have moved beyond the restricted patriarchal notions of their age, including “comphlexional prejudices” (*Iola Leroy* 238). Although the romantic aspect remains the most prominent and the most commented upon, Harper’s feminist utopia does not simply propose a more perfect or idealized version of traditional ideals of women’s self-realization through marriage. Rather, Harper explicitly redefines and expands women’s role in ways that rearticulate the representational politics of blackness and result in a detailed project for the utopian restructuring
of American society and the American South in particular. Harper's consistent focus on Iola's point of view and on her singular privilege to choose her racial affiliation enables the author to foreground explicitly both the distinctiveness of black culture and the possibility of female heroism.

Although Iola remains largely marginal to the internal dynamics of the slave community (which are described in the first four chapters, whereas the heroine is mentioned for the first time in chapter 5), the representation of post-emancipation black culture is largely connected with Iola's pilgrinizations, with her courage and decision-making power. On one hand, Harper emphasizes Iola's duty to choose to be either black or white because there is no societal middle ground between the races. On the other, by portraying Iola's preference for blackness and her subsequent experiences as a member of the African American community, Harper succeeds in moving beyond the tragic mulatta trope that was so popular among contemporary white writers. She reconstructs black cultural distinctiveness on different grounds, foregrounding the specific history of African Americans, the culture of resistance that resulted from the experience of slavery, their true religious faith, and the group solidarity and self-help philosophy that continue to characterize the black community in the post-slavery period.

Iola's repeated and explicit statements of preference for the more humanistic values of black culture and her choice of belonging to the African American community succeed in transforming the narrative significance of blackness. From a visible, ostensibly unambiguous signifier of inferiority and oppression, blackness becomes a cultural form of social change, a grand social mission to construct a new, more egalitarian civilization. Harper represents Iola's shift to a black subject position as paradigmatic of the ideological change that has to occur if utopia is to be realized. It is a process of acquiring a knowledge of the black community and black history that goes beyond the derogatory or condescending stereotypes Iola grew up with and never had any interest in problematizing before the revelation of her own mixed ancestry. In turn, Iola's acquisition of knowledge gives greater fictional visibility and relevance to the black communities she encounters. For the heroine these communities acquire a vitality and complexity that contrast sharply with her initial views on the ineluctable tragedy of black life (Iola Leroy 91). Iola's choice of blackness thus opens up the possibility of literary heroism and of a new fictional role beyond contemporary stereotypes to the many unmistakably black characters who surround her. Those characters cannot choose their racial affiliation because of their unambiguous skin color, but they can proudly decide to devote their lives to the advancement of their race.

Race Travel in African American Utopian Fiction

The chorus of visibly black and often dialect-speaking characters comprises the utopian guides who accompany Iola the race traveler into the new world of blackness. They open the novel with comments on the impending Civil War, and Iola's situation at a time when the newly enfranchised hero is conspicuously absent from the scene. They gain further prominence in their postbellum dialogues with her as they emerge as the repositories of a cultural and historical knowledge that Iola does not possess but wants to learn and share. On a narrative level the difference between them and Iola is marked most obviously by language. The contrast between dialect and standard English functions as a literary marker of the differences between blacks that are determined not only by education but also by age and its implications (i.e., the number of years one has spent in slavery and the amount of black cultural knowledge one possesses). As already noted in the case of The Garies, in Iola Leroy the contrast between standard English and black dialect is further complicated by the various registers adopted by different characters as well as by instances of strategic bilingualism. For instance, Iola's uncle Robert speaks standard English because he was the "favorite slave" of a mistress who "had fondled him as a pet animal, and even taught him to read," as the reader is told in the very first page of the novel (97). However, Robert also knows dialect (136) and the secret codes of communication among the slaves. Robert's standard English is more informal than Iola's, whose participation in conversations with witty but illiterate ex-slaves such as Aunt Linda remains well-meaning but remarkably wooden until the end, in recognition that as a latecomer into the African American community she does not yet possess enough black cultural knowledge to master a variety of linguistic registers with ease. The professionally successful Lucille Delany, who does not "show the least hint of blood admixture" (199), also speaks standard English, and in ways that can be less stiff than Iola's. Harper describes but does not really show her ability to "baster" (234), which Iola does not. Lucille Linley's English is a little more familiar and more of the dialect-speaking characters, undermining traditional readings that see the acquisition of standard English in itself as progress.

The novelty and complexity of Harper's black characters emerge with great force by comparison with a nineteenth-century text that is often cited as a precursor of Iola Leroy: William Dean Howells's An Imperative Duty (1889). An Imperative Duty resembles Iola Leroy for its focus on an unwriting female passer, but otherwise the authors' representations of passing and blackness differ remarkably and significantly. Howells is courageous and "undeniably progressive" (Wachsmann, "Writing" 790) in his treatment of a controversial issue such as miscegenation because he attempts to undermine through irony
prevalent contemporary notions of the tragic mulatto and atavism. Nevertheless, howell's potentially disruptive deconstruction of race into such sociocultural components as class, education, and beauty is mostly finalized to minimizing the controversial quality of the closing interracial union. He demonstrates that qualitatively (because she is educated and upper-class and looks white) and quantitatively (because she is only one-sixteenth black) his heroine, Rhoda, is not really, or at least not very, black. To the extent that howell's strategy to undermine the racist stereotype of the tragic mulatta is to question the degree of Rhoda's blackness, his deconstruction of race leaves untouched both negative and condescendingly positive notions of blackness that compare "the remote tint of her [Rhoda's] servile and savage origin" to the "grace of a limb, the occult, indefinable loveliness of a deformity" (Impressive Duty 133). Rhoda, unlike Iola, never undergoes a process of learning. Her conviction that the revelation of her mixed ancestry has "murdered" (Impressive Duty 68) her remains unshaken throughout the novel, nor does it seem to be questioned by her husband-to-be, Dr. Olney, or by the narrator. In An Impressive Duty whiteness remains the normative utopia and passing the best of all possible endings.

As Howell's dissection of race to ensure a happier ending for his heroine leaves intact traditional stereotypes of visibly black African Americans who are supposedly blessed by "natural gayety and lightness of heart" (91), it is not surprising that for Rhoda blacks continue to be interchangeable because they are unknown entities who possess either "no discernible features" (93) or "sad, epiphanic visages" (93). Rhoda's prejudiced conviction of the absence of a visible black community has a strong impact on the level of characterization in that it dramatically flattens the heroine. Inserted within a pathological framework of "dullness" (132), "hypochondria of the soul" (144), and shrill nerves, Rhoda's remarkably short-lived desire to "go down there and help (the freed blacks)" (142) can be dismissed easily as a "whimsical suggestion" (165) or an "aimless act of self-sacrifice" (149). The cancellation of black culture that comes to coincide with the elimination of female autonomy, decision making, and Rhoda's self-determination is reduced to the confession of her secret to Olney, who is already privy to it anyway (Impressive Duty 153).

It is by contrast this novel, which some contemporary reviewers already considered excessively liberal ("More Novels" 154), that the thematic and formal novelty of Harper's fiction becomes more evident. In her process of growth, Iola moves beyond Rhoda's "hysterical weakness" (Impressive Duty 138) toward heroic decision making, and likewise Harper's novel moves beyond the pitfalls of senseless self-sacrifice and beyond Howell's re-

...
"new Negro" (Giggs, Imperium 62) woman: "She... is more than handsome, she is lovely; more than witty, she is wise; more than brilliant, she is excellent" (196). As a successful professional woman "of unmixed blood" (196), Lucille is a harbinger and a promoter of the utopian social system Harper envisions. Through her "school to train future wives and mothers" (196), Lucille is the spokesperson for a rational reordering of society that, in keeping with nineteenth-century feminist notions, starts from the private sphere and expands to "social housekeeping" (Hewitt 300). In portraying Lucille's own successful determination to continue her professional life even after marriage, Harper bridges the gap between private and public sphere, giving fictional reality to a utopian enlargement of woman's sphere that goes beyond the separate but supposedly equal status of female laborers in contemporary Edward Bellamy describes in Looking Backward.

Yet in Harper's final vision of utopian bliss, the references to the postmarriage life of the happy couples remain tellingly brief. Harper defies the tendency to closure that Angelika Ramm describes as "the particular paradox" of the utopian genre, in that the "transformative potential [of utopias] is undermined by the apparatus of their self-containment" (96). The ending of Lola LeRoy stubbornly retains a dual valence. On one hand, it emerges as an inspirational and voluntaristic moment of imaginatively enforced respite where the author, her created heroines, and her audience entertain the anticipatory vision of a successful struggle for social change. On the other, in her novel Harper takes us only "on the threshold of a new era" (Lola LeRoy 271), an era that Harper and her first readers knew had not been realized. It is through the open-endedness of her utopia—in-the-making that Harper effectively injects a sense of estrangement into the extratextual reality of the audience, in the attempt to pass on the tension to fulfill the "concrete" utopian vision she projects (Bloch 107).

To ensure that the consciousness-raising message of her utopian novel would not be swept away by the readers' fulfilled romantic expectations, Harper, like other utopian authors who want "to anchor [their] fiction in reality" (Elliott 112), does Lola LeRoy with direct fictional statements that function as hermeneutic tools to interpret the novel: "From threads of fact and fiction I have woven a story whose mission will not be in vain if it awakens in the hearts of our countrymen a stronger sense of justice and a more Christian humanity in behalf of those whom the fortunes of war have, bewildered, ignorant and poor, upon the threshold of a new era" (Lola LeRoy 282). Distrusting the ability of her white companions to appreciate the visionary import of her story of "uplifted shadows" and wanting to inspire her black readers to "use every power God has given them" (282), Harper clarifies that her own text participates in the project of social change she thematizes in her protagonists' lives and provides metanarrative comments that unequivocally spell out the intended social function of her feminist utopian romance.

Edward A. Johnson's Light Ahead for the Negro (1904) and the Politics of Racial Indeterminacy

In his 1988 annotated bibliography of British and American utopian fiction, Lyman T. Sargent briefly describes Light Ahead for the Negro as "one hundred years from now a segregated South as euphoria" (13). Although it is not clear whether he recognizes Johnson as a black author, Sargent's brief summary is emblematic of the interpretive difficulties of Johnson's work. Edward A. Johnson's lesser-known and largely neglected utopian novel, Light Ahead for the Negro (1904), sheds important light on the distinctiveness of the African American utopian tradition mostly because of its anomalous status within it. As we have seen, the African American utopian novels that deploy race travel as structuring device feature a diversified chorus of black characters and foreground explicitly the epistemological and experiential impact of being black in the United States. In those novels passing, or rather its reification, is a crucial component of race travel because it dramatizes with great immediacy the differences between a normative white and a subaltern black subject position.

Unlike the writers already discussed in this chapter, however, Johnson does not deploy race travel. He presents a new and more enlightened attitude toward African Americans as a measure of the social change that has taken place in his utopian society of the twenty-first century, but his novel is not structured around the dramatic dislocation of point of view that is characteristic of race travel. Instead of thematizing and foregrounding passing in his fiction, Johnson engages in it by choosing to tell his story from the point of view of a racially indeterminate protagonist. As Johnson surely knew, and as Barbara Christian notes, in a societal context of normative whiteness a racially indeterminate character would "generally [be] translated as white" (Introduction xvi). Readers may also surmise that Johnson's protagonist is not or at least does not look black because his utopian hosts talk to him about "Negroes" in a way that reveals their conviction that he is white (or is an undetected passer?).
Johnson's choice of racial indeterminacy was far from unique at the turn of the century. Amelia E. Johnson, Paul L. Dunbar, and Emma D. Kelley, for instance, deploy racially indeterminate characters in the hope of reaching and influencing a wider, mixed audience. E. A. Johnson has a similar purpose in mind, as becomes clear from his "Preface" to Light Ahead for the Negro. In a context of sharp racial polarization and of scarce interest, as Chesnut laments, "for books in which the principal characters are colored people, or written with a striking sympathy with that race as contrasted to the white race" (qtd. in Andrews, Literary Career 127), Johnson explicitly addresses his only utopian novel to a white audience, and more specifically "to the thousands of sympathetic and well-wishing friends of the Negro race" (v). He constructs a narrative that passes for white, insofar as it presents itself as a novel on the race issue written by an enlightened white time traveler.

By contrast with the novels by Amelia E. Johnson and Emma D. Kelley, the race issue is explicitly addressed in and dominates Light Ahead for the Negro. In the very first pages of the novel the protagonist and first-person narrator, Gilbert Twitchell, describes his father as "an abolitionist before the war and afterward an ardent supporter of missionary efforts in the South" (1). Twitchell himself, after completing his degree at Yale in 1906, decides to go south to work as a teacher in a "Negro school" (2) and help "to fit them [the Negroes] for the new citizenship that had developed as a result of the war" (1). At the beginning of the novel Twitchell tells us of how, before going South to start teaching, he boarded a friend's airship for a brief vacation and of how its engine exploded in midair. Twitchell gets lost in the atmosphere, survives in suspended animation, and wakes up 100 years later, in 2006, in a strange room. He then spends the greatest part of this short novel describing the contrast between his past and new society and courting Irene, the niece of his utopian boast, Dr. Newell. The marital happy ending ensures his integration in utopia.

When compared with contemporaneous African American utopias by Hopkins, Griggs, and Harper, Johnson's novel provides very clear insight into the different degrees of formalism and thematic subtleties that pertain to thematized versus thematized passing. In the absence of the dramatic foregrounding of a marginalized black subject position that is characteristic of race travel, Johnson's narrative passing results in his greater formal adherence to the conventions of the utopian genre. The novel is structured around the protagonist's time travel, by his dialogues with his utopian hosts, and by his characteristically lengthy digressions on the differences between the utopian present and the preutopian past, especially with regard to the status of African Americans. On a thematic level Johnson's novel seems to confirm the aforementioned lamentations on the limited imagination of African American utopian authors. In Light Ahead for the Negro, in fact, segregation has not been eliminated completely, a fact that makes the author's vision of the future appear disappointingly mild. Johnson's text also seems to exemplify the accommodationist aspects of successful passing. When it is not thematized, passing leads to invisibility, to absorption and disappearance into normative whiteness, and to rhetorical inefficacy. Even if one interprets Johnson's choice of engaging in narrative passing as a strategy to reach a larger white audience by circumventing the dichotomized race discourse and audiences of his time, the fact remains that the price of his choice was a dramatic decrease in the oppositional force of his text, a decrease that emerges clearly by contrast with contemporary African American utopias.

Only by exposing Johnson's narrative passing and by contextualizing Light Ahead for the Negro within its author's lifelong commitment to advancing his race does it become possible to appreciate the interventionist aims and the significance of Johnson's literary project. Although this contextualization does not necessarily increase its effectiveness for twenty-first-century readers, it does enable us to interpret Light Ahead for the Negro in ways other than as an aberration in the career of an otherwise militant spokesperson for black culture and black rights. Johnson's life reveals the utopian impulse and commitment to a better future that also inform his utopian novel. Born a slave in 1860 in North Carolina, after Emancipation Johnson received a formal education and eventually graduated from Atlanta University. He began his career as high school teacher and principal in North Carolina. While teaching he studied law, and in 1907, because of the harsh racial discrimination he faced in the South, he moved to New York, where he practiced law and entered politics. In 1947 he became the first African American elected to the New York State legislature, where he promoted civil rights legislation banning discrimination in public accommodations, hospitals, and employment. He died in 1943 at age eighty-three. Throughout his long life Johnson was also active in preserving and promoting black history and culture. His published nonfiction works are imbued with the same strain of utopianism that inspired the full-fledged utopian vision he articulated in Light Ahead for the Negro. In 1903, for instance, he published A School History of the Negro Race in America from 1639 to 1866, which became popular as a school text in North Carolina and Virginia and went through several editions. Johnson wrote it at the risk of his own teaching position, to overcome what he describes in the Preface as "the sin of omission... on the part of white authors, most of whom seem to have written exclusively for white children, and studiously left out the many credit..."
able deeds of the Negro" (iii). A School History of the Negro Race ends on a hopeful note, spelling out the promise of a better day. "Time is yet to bring forth better things for the race. Let there be patience, and an honest, persistent endeavor to do the very best in everything, and ere long we shall 'reap if we sowed not'" (190).

A similar faith in the possibility of bringing about social change characterizes his later volume, Adam vs. Ape-Man and Ethiopia, which he published in 1930, in the midst of the Depression, at the venerable age of seventy-one. In this scholarly work, which draws on archaeology, scientific theories of evolution, and classical texts to establish the historical importance of ancient African civilizations for the creation of Western culture, Johnson recuperates the central elements of the utopian vision he articulated some thirty years earlier in Light Ahead for the Negro. In the introduction Johnson reiterates his lifelong conviction that "The golden rule, whatsoever you would that man should do unto you, do ye even so unto them," seems to be the highest criterion of human conduct coupled with the legal maxim "sic utere tue ut alterum non laedas," meaning we should so use our own as not to injure others" (vi, 2).

In the conclusion, however, which he significantly titled "Looking Ahead," Johnson notes, "Just what the American civilization will bring out in the next hundred or thousand years is difficult to predict, but civilization has existed longer than America, then vanished as mist before the merciless rays of the sun" (287). Threatening America, in Griggs-like fashion, with the possibility of fall and destruction if it falls prey to "injustice and greed" (287), Johnson concludes his last published volume with an exhortation: "America claims to be a Christian nation; it can vindicate this claim only by just and tolerant treatment of the various groups within her borders" (284).

Johnson's lifework sheds important light on his novel, which he must have planned as a feasible utopia, an inspirational vision of a realizable and not too distant future. Keeping in mind his intended white audience and the attending "distrust of the reader" (185, "Distrust" 186), one is not surprised to realize that the potential feasibility of Johnson's proposal rests precisely on its incomplete novelty. In describing the twenty-first century, Johnson does not express much faith or interest in the liberatory potential of technological progress in itself. He focuses instead on a collective ideological transformation whereby "many changes considered well nigh impossible one hundred years ago have taken place in almost all phases of the so-called Negro problem" (21).

The most basic ideological transformation is from racial antagonism to racial cooperation, a change that, as Dr. Newell explains, initially resulted "more from a sense of necessity than of justice to the Negro" (71). This trans-

formation becomes the foundation of what could be called a civil rights utopia of affirmative action. It is a utopia based on the recognition, as the female protagonist puts it, that the "chances [of African Americans] have not been as favourable as ours" (16) and that positive efforts should be made to assist those who are "worthy" and "competent" "to fill many places that they otherwise could not" (17). The surprised hero finds out that in the year 2006 "Negroes in the South [were] allowed the use of the books, and . . . were encouraged to read by various prizes" (16), and it becomes easier for a twenty-first-century reader to share his surprise when one thinks that many years after the publication of Light Ahead for the Negro, in his 1935 autobiographical volume Black Boy, Richard Wright recounted that he still had to lie to get books out of a Southern library. From an economic point of view, this newly cooperative attitude sees the government parcel out the cotton lands "to young Negroes at a small price, accompanied with means and assistance for the production of the crop" (96). This belated fulfillment of the post-Emancipation promise of forty acres and a mule is finally described in 2006 as "an act of the highest statesmanship" (96).

Whereas Bellamy, with whom Johnson has been unfavourably compared (Reilly 66-68), pushes the race issue out of the picture to imagine a perfect future, Johnson reinserts blacks in utopia by presenting the solution of the "so-called Negro problem" (54) as the epitome of utopian social change. He goes through every possible aspect of it and emphasizes how the new attitude toward the issue of race was accompanied by a more general "triumph of reason over partisanship and demagoguery" (103). This change benefited all races and invested all other aspects of the social and political life of the nation because "the American people had resolved . . . to have the government run according to the original design of its founders, upon the principle of the greatest good to the greatest number" (103-4). The extent of the "wonderful transformation" (108) that has taken place in the South of the twenty-first century can be gauged by the fact that blacks stand "on the same footing legally as other people" (109) and that affirmative action programs are systematically bridging the socioeconomic gap that centuries of slavery and segregation created between blacks and whites.

Far from being the result of a stifled life and a stifled imagination, Johnson's utopian vision of a "better" rather than a "best" life (Reilly 65) can be reinterpreted as a coherent proposal for social change that relies on a plan that is feasible exactly because it is incomplete. The deliberate quality of this incompleteness is openly admitted in the novel, as Dr. Newell describes his own world as a utopia in progress: "The end is not yet, the day of our glory is not reached and will not be until the principles of the Golden Rule have be-
come an actuality in this land" (103). Johnson's South is not a utopia of segregation but rather an anemia where civil equality is being systematically nullified. The author does not describe a fixed state of perfection but rather the utopia of a collective desire and commitment to strive toward social justice.

Foregrounding the politics of racial indeterminacy and exposing Johnson's narrative passing brings to light his use of narrative strategies characteristic of African American fiction and especially the formal choices he makes to negotiate his distrust of an intended white readership that he knew to be complicitous with segregation. The long, central chapter of Light Ahead for the Negro, which comprises more than half the novel, is titled "Now and Then" and provides a detailed description of the differences between the utopian present of civil equality and the past of segregation. This chapter presents an intermingling of fiction and nonfiction that cannot be explained solely by reference to the utopian writer's preoccupation with the "imaginative reality" (Elliott 104) of his novel. Rather, such intermingling emerges also as a strategy to anticipate the skepticism of potentially hostile readers through documentary evidence and can be traced back to the first African American novel.10

Johnson's longest chapter is a patchwork of different fictional "historical" documents from the preutopian past, loosely tied together by conversations between the time traveler and his utopian host. For instance, the idée in favor of black voting rights is quoted from one of Dr. Newell's history books (82) that summarizes the opinions of various turn-of-the-century leaders. This strategy may not be so new in utopian novels, but Johnson, like his antecedent Brown, self-consciously substantiates the authenticity of these "documents" by providing numerous footnotes where he quotes extensively and verbatim from a variety of nonfictional historical (without quotation marks) sources such as newspaper articles, published letters by such figures as Booker T. Washington (44), and other historical novels such as Albion Tourgée's 1885 A Fool's Errand (53). He articulates a doubly oblique, carefully documented critique of turn-of-the-century white supremacist arguments.

Toward the end of the novel, after having established by such documentary means both the utopian quality of the year 2000 and the irrational, prejudiced, unjust views prevalent a century before, Johnson introduces the trope of passing in surreptitious and rectilinear ways so as not to draw too much attention to it or to the ambiguous ruselessness of his first-person narrator. In chapter 7 Johnson touches briefly on one of the most controversial and taboo issues at the turn of the century: miscegenation and the continuing practice of sexual harassment perpetrated by white men on black women. He does so by selling a "real" story that evokes and blandly revises the most popular protagonist of nineteenth-century white sentimental fiction: the tragic mulatto. His utopian version of the typical triangle of white husband, white wife, and black mistress may have been intended as paradigmatic of how the new spirit of social cooperation has come to influence the private sphere of sexuality and the family. As it is told by one of his characters, this story of miscegenation does not escape the conventions of traditional, white-authored tragic mulatta fictions, despite Johnson's attempt to give it a happier ending. The cheated octogenarian who does not know that her supposed husband already has a white wife, falls characteristically and conveniently out of the picture by dying. Supposedly, she dies happily, "never knowing but that she was the true wife of her deceived" (115). "Her children, Johnson writes, were adopted by the Guilfoords as their own, grew up and entered society under the Guilford name and no-one today will charge them with their father's sin." (115).

By comparison with the other utopian novels discussed in this chapter, Johnson's puzzling portrayal of miscegenation, though clearly intended as a happy overcoming of race prejudice and the one-drop rule, reveals with great clarity the limitations of the author's strategy of narrative passing. The ending of this brief story strongly resembles that of Howell's An Imperative Duty because it does not destabilize the racial hierarchies that make passing the happiest possible ending. No ironic or parodic intent seems to be at work here, and this episode emerges as a most obvious indication of the dramatic containment of oppositional force that results from Johnson's decision to engage in, instead of thematizing, narrative passing. For a sustained parodic treatment of the representational politics of passing and a dissertation of passing as normative utopia, one has to turn to another first-person narrator, James Weldon Johnson's Ex-Colored Man.