

Southern Trajectories in Early Black Feminist Speculative Fiction: Mary Etta Spencer's *The Resentment*

M. Giulia Fabi

University of Ferrara

ABSTRACT

The essay recovers an understudied African American woman writer, Mary Etta Spencer, and argues that her only known novel, *The Resentment* (1921), builds on a tradition of early Black feminist speculative fiction that belongs to the prehistory of Afrofuturism. The contextualization of *The Resentment* within the genre of speculative fiction reveals *Iola Leroy; Or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892) to be a particularly significant intertext of Spencer's novel. Spencer builds on *Iola Leroy* in order to articulate a vision of the New South that centers on Black progress and foregrounds the impact of African American women and men on the future of the entire nation. The essay offers a close critical reading of *The Resentment* that reveals how Spencer strategically deploys a male-centered cover story to introduce the more innovative and experimental features of her novel: the portrayal of her heroine as a new Black woman of the South, the expansion of gender roles, a more explicit discussion of sexuality, and the articulation of a collective utopian space for Black women. To do so, Spencer breaks new narrative ground through her heroine's participation in discourses of family planning and reproductive rights, challenging assumptions about African American women writers' reticence about issues of sexuality.

Keywords

Mary Etta Spencer, Frances E. W. Harper, Black feminism, speculative fiction, segregation, intertextuality

Mary Etta Spencer published her only known novel, *The Resentment*, in Philadelphia, through the AME Book Concern, in 1921. Despite its republication in 1996, in the canon-making G. K. Hall series of African American Women Writers, 1910-1940, no biographical information is currently available on Spencer, not even a place or a date of birth or death. Information about her life has eluded even determined investigative scholars like Ann Allen Shockley and P. Gabrielle Foreman. In her 1988 volume *Afro-American Women Writers 1746-1933*, Shockley acknowledges that “[t]he life history of Mary Etta Spencer remains to be researched” (387), and in her introduction to the 1996 reprint of *The Resentment* Foreman concurs that “[u]nfortunately, beyond her race, we know nothing about the life of Mary Etta Spencer” (xxxii). No biographical information on Spencer is provided even in the October 1929 issue of *Opportunity* where Spencer published her one known short story “Beyond the Years”.¹

Spencer is listed in several bibliographies, including Maxwell Whiteman's 1955 *A Century of Fiction by American Negroes*, Ora Williams' 1973 *American Black Women in the Arts and Social Sciences*, Theresa Gunnels Rush's 1975 *Black American Writers Past and Present*, Edward Margolies' 1979 *Afro-American Fiction, 1853-1976*, and Shockley's above-mentioned 1988 *Afro-American Women Writers*, as well as in Maryemma Graham's ongoing History of Black Writing Project. She is mentioned briefly in a few literary histories and critical volumes like Robert Bone's *The Negro Novel in America* (1955), Carole McAlpine Watson's *Prologue: The Novels of Black American Women* (1985), Elizabeth Ammons' *Conflicting Stories* (1991), Lisa Rado's *Rereading Modernism: New Directions in Feminist Criticism* (1994), and Lawrence R. Rodgers' *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel* (1997), but to my knowledge Foreman's introduction is the only sustained discussion of *The Resentment* to date.

In the process of reconstructing the history of African American women's writings, however, *The Resentment* deserves critical attention in its own right. Answering Foreman's call "to elucidate this text" so that "we can then throw [Robert] Bone's critique of Spencer, with his dismissal of Larsen and Fauset, on the critical trashheap of history" (xli), in this essay I argue that Spencer's understudied novel belongs to and builds on a tradition of "early Black feminist speculative fiction" that includes Frances E. W. Harper, Pauline E. Hopkins, and Lillian B. Horace (Fabi 2023, 325).

Analyzing the thematic and formal continuities that *The Resentment* shares with other works of feminist future fiction enables a deeper literary contextualization and appreciation of Spencer's narrative strategies, intertextual references, and critical interventions. On the one hand, Spencer follows the tradition of utopian writing as a "mix of conventions" in order to "construct convincing images of entire alternative cultures" (Roemer 2003, 28-29). Even though she is not writing a realist novel, she uses "the language of realism" (Foreman 1996, xxxvii) to lend verisimilitude and literary concreteness to her utopian vision of a new South and a new American nation. Reading *The Resentment* as a work of speculative fiction provides the interpretive means to reevaluate how, when Spencer does "violence to the material reality of racism," as Foreman has noticed (1996, xxxvi), she does so deliberately in order to articulate an alternate, counterfactual, more egalitarian reality that, by contrast, offers a critique of her present and an inspirational project for the future.

On the other hand, I argue that the contextualization of *The Resentment* within a tradition of Black feminist speculative fiction reveals *Iola Leroy; Or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892) to be a particularly significant intertext of Spencer's novel. *Iola Leroy* "was probably the best-selling novel by an Afro-American woman writer prior to the twentieth century" (Foster 1988, xxvii), and Spencer published *The Resentment* in a city (Philadelphia) and through a denominational publisher (the AME Book Concern) with which Harper had had very close

and long-lasting ties. Harper was still living in Philadelphia at the time of her death in 1911. She had serialized three novels in the important African Methodist Episcopal periodical *Christian Recorder* (*Minnie's Sacrifice* in 1869, *Sowing and Reaping* in 1876-1877, and *Trial and Triumph* in 1888-1889) and she was writing essays for the *AME Church Review* in the late 1890s. Her novel *Iola Leroy* was published in Philadelphia, and so were many of her poetry collections until the early 1900s. In addition, her national relevance as a writer, orator, spokesperson, and vice-president of the National Association of Colored Women in 1897 make it all the more probable that her legacy was still very much alive a decade after her death when Spencer published her novel. According to Jean Fagan Yellin, who identifies continuities in themes, names, and locations, Harper's novel "may well have [been] influenced" by Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and "in turn [*Iola Leroy*] helped shape the writings of Zora Neale Hurston and other foremothers of black women writing today" (2009, xl).

Spencer's novel comes to new life when she is placed among the foremothers who carried on Harper's literary legacy. Both *The Resentment* and *Iola Leroy* feature two female role models with different personalities, degrees of outspokenness, careers, and narrative visibility: Spencer's Nett Miller and Margaret Kempt, and Harper's Iola Leroy and Lucille Delany. Spencer evokes key aesthetic and thematic features of *Iola Leroy*, such as the personal background of the principal female protagonists (both Nett and Iola are born in the South and educated in the North), the geographic locales (i.e., the migration from the South to Philadelphia), the physician as a central male figure (Spencer's Dr. Lionel and Harper's Drs. Gresham and Latimer), the focus on nursing, and the speculative utopian narrative economy of mutual support across gender and class that undergirds the expanded social role of Black women.

Apart from these continuities, there are strategic differences that highlight the complexity and originality of Spencer's work. Spencer situates *The Resentment* after slavery and eliminates the theme of passing that was central in *Iola Leroy*. Whereas the very title of Harper's novel proclaimed the centrality of the eponymous heroine, Spencer's title is more directly connected with the adventures of Silas Miller, Nett's brother, the male co-protagonist of *The Resentment*. However, at the same time that she seems to downplay the narrative visibility of her heroine, Spencer increases her social relevance and reverses the relative importance of Harper's female characters. Nett's portrayal draws more on the professional determination and outspokenness of Lucille Delany, Harper's secondary heroine, while Margaret Kempt, Spencer's secondary heroine, shares Iola's privileged background and eventual volunteer community work in the South.

Spencer builds on *Iola Leroy* in order to articulate a vision of the New South that centers on Black progress and foregrounds the impact of African American women and men

on the future of the entire nation. Her utopian project is dual, as it follows the *Bildung* of both of her protagonists, the siblings Silas and Nett. While Silas's story takes place mostly in the South and Nett's mostly in the North, Spencer's project of overcoming sectional divisions becomes clear from the multiple travels and inter-sectional marriages that are central to both plots. These two plots, and the related careers of the Miller siblings, are intertwined narratively in ways that mirror and exemplify the central aspect of Spencer's speculative vision, i.e., an ethos of mutual collaboration and support that promotes Black advancement and holds the potential to overcome systemic practices of race, gender, class, and age discrimination.

At a first reading, Silas's story of Black male entrepreneurial success à la Booker T. Washington in the agrarian South seems more prominent because it frames the novel, which starts and ends with a focus on him. However, a closer critical reading reveals Silas's career to be a strategic cover story, "a kind of camouflage [...] to conceal the dramatic focus of the plot" (Gilbert 1984, 491), that Spencer deploys to introduce the more innovative and experimental features of her novel: the portrayal of her heroine Nett as a new Black woman of the South, the expansion of gender roles, a more explicit discussion of sexuality, and the articulation of a collective utopian space for Black women. To do so, Spencer breaks new narrative ground through her heroine's participation in discourses of family planning and reproductive rights.

The cover story: Silas' Hats

Spencer, like Harper, introduces the plot centering on her heroine slowly. Just as the first four chapters of *Iola Leroy* are devoted to delineating the diversified community and the culture of resistance of the enslaved, in *The Resentment* the early chapters focus on the Miller family and especially on Silas. Silas's travels and successes are predicated on the economy of collaboration and mutual support across gender and class lines that is central to the utopian polity Spencer portrays. At the same time, Spencer foregrounds intra-racial self-help and interracial collaboration by inserting her male protagonist in a counterfactual southern context devoid of systematic anti-Black hostility and violence.

The novel starts when Silas, "a little colored boy" living in Maryland, is hired out to work for Mr. Baxter, "a wealthy white Southern farmer" who calls him a "good-for-nothing 'nigger'" thereby triggering the "resentment" of the novel's title (Spencer 1921, 7)²:

He [Silas] looked at his dark, brown-skinned hands and wondered why God made some white and others black. Stamping his foot upon the ground, he said, "But there is one thing certain, I shall not always be called a 'nigger', I am going to be a business man, and men will take their hats off—well, we'll take our hats off to each other.'" (10)

However, the story quickly shifts from resentment to hope when Silas encounters Mr. Walker, “an alert, progressive” (11) self-made man who has become “one of the richest ranchmen in the West” (7) but has not forgotten his humble origins. On their first meeting, after noticing that it was too heavy for young Silas, Mr. Walker carries his own luggage and does “what few colored boys of the South had seen a white man do. He took the little brown hands into his soft, white ones with their glittering diamonds, shook them and asked, ‘What is your name?’” (12). Inspired by listening in on Mr. Walker’s tale of how he had “battled his way from a penniless country boy to position and wealth,” Silas decides to become “a ‘hog ranchman’” (23). This ambition transforms him into “a new Silas” (23), a determined, hard-working capitalist-in-the-making who cultivates his language and polite manners, first of all with his parents and siblings.

The “new” Silas’s determination and enterprising spirit soon convert also Mr. Baxter. Spencer’s speculative economy is at work when Silas’s impatient insistence on a fair purchase of a litter of six little pigs from his employer meets with the latter’s admiration, rather than annoyance:

In the house, Mr. Baxter and Silas sat down to a table and made out the necessary papers. This incident brought the little black boy and the white man nearer together than any other thing had.

From that day, though Silas was still a Negro boy, Mr. Baxter began to see him from a different view-point [sic]. He was ready to give him as much encouragement as had done the great Westerner, but in a different way, because it would take more than a few days to make this Southern-born man see that this child, created by the same God as he, had the same right to opportunities and privileges as the white man [...].” (28-29)

Like several other white farmers in the novel, Mr. Baxter does not offer much help, but at least does not oppose Silas’s Black entrepreneurship. As an integral part of the utopian thrust of her novel, Spencer chooses to avoid discussing systematic racist opposition to Black advancement and proposes a new southern culture characterized by mutual respect among Black and white farmers, a solidarity based on hard work, entrepreneurship, and sharing resources in times of distress. Unlike Harper, who articulates her vision of an alternative and more egalitarian “near-future” (Tal 2002, 65) polity after critiquing explicitly the racist and segregationist practices Lola encounters both in the South and in the North, Spencer does not foreground southern white racism in confrontational terms. However, she does refer to its entrenchment, as when Silas asks Mr. Baxter for a raise:

He [Silas] did not care to work for Mr. Baxter again unless he consented to give him more money. This, Mr. Baxter did not see as being necessary and Mrs. Baxter added that his kind had worked for her father for nothing. (36)

As the Silas plot unfolds, white figures are increasingly relegated to the background. Spencer emphasizes the importance of a cohesive, if internally diversified, African American

community and advances a vision of cross-gender, cross-class, cross-generational, and cross-sectional Black unity. After moving from Maryland to Philadelphia, where he works to save money to enlarge his own hog farm, Silas returns to his southern hometown where he makes his fortune, becoming “‘The Hog King’ of the States” (141). In Philadelphia, Silas is initially ridiculed and marginalized as a “‘Green-horn,’ from down in the sticks” (55), but he also meets Margaret Kempt, the daughter of “the most prominent and prosperous colored lawyer” in the city (63). In describing how both father and daughter admire Silas’s determination to become a self-made man and support him, Spencer builds on real-life patterns of interaction between Black Philadelphians and Southern migrants. In his analysis of the often tense “reactions of established black Philadelphians to black migrants and the development of the city’s modern ghettos,” Robert Gregg notes that “[r]elations between old and new Philadelphians frequently transcended such resentment, [...] and the idealism of ministers and church members counteracted the tendency toward divisiveness” (1993, 42).

After Silas’ return to Maryland his business prospers, and Margaret, who “had completed her course at the business school and was working in her father’s office” (105), accepts his offer to go South “to help him superintend the work in the office during the week” of the first nationally important sale of his hogs (143). Spencer describes Margaret as a gifted professional:

A few days later, Margaret Kempt sat in Silas Miller’s office, and worked with lightning speed on the typewriter. Everyone marvelled at the rapidity of speed she possessed. Letter after letter was read and answered. She placed everything in order, making it easier for the men to get the orders filled. She had done business for her father but nothing like this. (144)

However, in keeping with the masculinist focus of Silas’ cover story, Spencer balances Margaret’s strong professional profile with more traditionally feminine and unthreatening attributes, like deference to her soon-to-be husband:

Margaret listened attentively; she was always interested in anything that Silas said or did. “I am going to let father and mother have the place where we are now,” said Silas. “Shall we drive around to see the new place?”
“O, yes,” answered Margaret, clapping her hands in childish glee.” (147)

Silas’s is indeed a Horatio Alger story set in the South. As Foreman has argued:

Horatio Alger is Spencer’s ideological and narrative model. [...] Spencer’s opening specifically recalls Alger’s [and] places Silas into Ragged Dick’s narrative; they literally begin at the same moment, around 7:00 A.M., and both young protagonists face a hostile disembodied voice that berates them for their laziness. (1996, xxxiv)

The intertextual echoes may well be broadened to include, as the very name of Spencer’s male protagonist suggests, William Dean Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, the

1885 portrayal of the impact of financial acquisitiveness on family relations. Not unlike *The Resentment*, Howells's novel starts with a self-made man's life story, foregrounds Mrs. Lapham's abilities as a nurse as crucial to the unfolding of the plot and presents her attempt to be the "conscience" of her business-minded husband (1983, 50). Like Howells, Spencer addresses the ethical perils of economic success and the dangers of reducing the American dream to the accumulation of wealth. In *The Resentment*, Silas Miller's business career leads him to neglect his duties as a father. His wife Margaret reprimands Silas, pointing out that he is withholding from his children "the thing that they crave most," a "father's love" (171):

"Yes, God has given them [our children] to us; they are what we wished and hoped for. But if you thrust them aside now to make money and lose their love, what joy will you get out of it? If you want their love and respect when they are grown men, and you and I are old, give them a little of your time during their play hours; this is a child's idea of love. It will be worth more than the million that you have made, or the millions that you may make." (172)

Margaret's words, which convert Silas into a more caring father who collaborates with his wife in running the family, evoke Harper's critique of the separate spheres ideology in *Iola Leroy*, as well, and especially Lucille Delany's forceful comments on the need for "enlightened fathers" (1987, 253).

That the thrust of Spencer's traditionally male-dominated cover story favors a gradual project of social change is confirmed by the final conversation between Silas and Margaret:

"He [Silas] had just finished saying to Margaret, "I wish I could show hundreds of young men of my race the way to success."

"Yes, dear, but you cannot do it by yourself; it will take the co-operation of the people of the race. We can do our best; but time and the evolution of circumstances will bring about that which we so earnestly desire. As it is, we see a nation rising slowly up out of the dust—with most of its future before it."

"Yes, Margaret, and we should be proud to be members of that race." (214)

At the same time, the fate of their four children illuminates Spencer's challenge to sectional divisions and her presentation of the South as closely intertwined with the future of the American nation:

Silas' two younger sons had completed the Agricultural course at Tuskegee and were working with their father. The two older ones had attended school in the North; one was graduated from law-school and the other was State Instructor in canning fruits and vegetables in the State of Texas. (213-24)

The utopian centering of a new South in the process of moving beyond Jim Crow culminates in the closing, revised version of Silas's initial conversation with Mr Baxter and Mr. Walker. As the three men meet again at the end of the novel, this time on Silas's splendid farm, Spencer finalizes Silas's overcoming of his initial "resentment" through the

interracial celebration of Black male success in the South, symbolized by the three men taking off their hats to each other. The happiness of the ending, however, is qualified by complex and subtle undertones. On the one hand, Spencer downplays but does not eliminate the realities of segregation. Her exposure of the racist devil emerges in the linguistic details. In the final reunion, Mr. Baxter and Mr. Walker address Silas by his last name, Miller, but do not add the honorific “Mr.” (214-15). On the other hand, and more subversively, by emphasizing the old age of wealthy white Mr. Walker, whose “days are nearly done” (215), Spencer suggests that Silas represents the southern self-made man of the future.

The story: Nett’s Diamond

Silas’s cover story frames the novel in ways that give it great visibility and at a first reading draw attention away from the more transgressive originality of his younger sister’s own *Bildung* and success story. A brilliant student, as a young girl Nett is described repeatedly as “mischievous” (24, 33, 35, 52), a term that, while seemingly chastising her, points to her effective transgression of limited gender roles. Nett’s irrepressible exceptionality derives not only from her determination and outspokenness, but also from being a competent entrepreneur. Hard working, self-reliant, trustworthy, honest, and skilful in administering money, adolescent Nett is the one who, when Silas is working in Philadelphia, manages his hog-raising business in Maryland and eventually enables him to enlarge it. Her abilities are initially at the service of her brother, but they are nevertheless affirmed in the public, male-dominated business sphere. At the same time, within the egalitarian economy of mutual support that governs the novel, Nett’s loyalty and business acumen enable her to pursue her own dream of attending a professional nursing school in Philadelphia.

Unlike Silas’s wife, Margaret, who relocates to the South with him, Nett Miller moves from the South to the North, and Spencer emphasizes explicitly this dual migratory movement to challenge regional hierarchies:

Thus two girls changed places: Margaret Kempt, a city-bred girl, left behind her the fascinating scenes of a large city for the quiet life of the country; and Nett Miller gave up the fields, the flowers, the song birds, and the rural social life to work for suffering humanity in the hot, dusty, noisy city. (166)

Nett moves to Philadelphia permanently. Initially, she works as a domestic for a white family to realize her “one idea to save money to enter the training school for nurses” (98). The utopian economy of the novel is once again at work in Spencer’s choice of Mrs. Schafer, a rich and singularly supportive white woman originally from the South, as Nett’s employer: “[u]nlike most ladies who employ help, Mrs. Schafer did not think that a servant was a mer[e]

machine to grind out work day by day without a little recreation” (97-98). Similarly, her husband, Mr. Schafer, acknowledges that “[f]rom experience, I find that the white man can seldom fathom the Negro” (95) and adds: “I have thought from the first that Nett is a girl for far greater service than ours” (96-97). However, Spencer does not shirk from hinting at the prevailing realities of white racism in the North and presents the Schafers as an exception. Mrs. Schafer’s friends wonder how she can “manage to keep a girl so long” and are puzzled by her reply: “By treating her [Nett] like a human being” (97-98).

After completing her studies and becoming a well-respected professional nurse and “Superintendent” (175) at the nursing school where she studied, Nett works for years as “an angel of pity” (117) among the poor and eventually marries a northern doctor from the hospital where she has been trained, Dr. Lionel. The inspirational near-future speculative economy of *The Resentment* looks beyond the strictures of segregation. In telling the story of Nett’s career, Spencer withdraws attention from how, both in the South and in the North, the “professionalization of American nursing” was accompanied by the “subordination of and discrimination against black nurses” (Hine 1989, 89). Instead, in her portrayal of Nett’s career, she deploys a characterizing feature of utopian fiction and broadens trends of her own time, focusing on practices of Black mutual support and communal self-help that had a real-life equivalent in the two proprietary training centers for Black nurses in Philadelphia: “the Frederick Douglass Memorial Hospital Nurse Training School (1895-1923) [...] and the Mercy Hospital School of Nursing (1907-1949)” (Hine 1989, 26-27). Both were founded by African American doctors and “under black control throughout their existence” (Hine 1989, 27). This self-help philosophy and the solidarity with migrants from the South are explicitly voiced in the novel by one of the doctors: “If we let these poor people go unnoticed and in want, whom shall they look to for succor? Not to the white people, by no means: they have their own poor to help, and we must help ours” (176).³

Spencer’s focus on Nett’s career as a nurse is crucial for establishing the expanded social role of her new Black woman from the South. While geographically dislocated, Nett still maintains close ties with the South both privately, through her visits to her family in Maryland, and professionally, since she volunteers “to work amongst the poor, unfortunate class of our people in this city,” and more specifically among Black migrants to Philadelphia (176). Unsettling the power relations between the North and the South and challenging superficial representations of the North as a promised land, Nett becomes a southern missionary in the North, and in this capacity she emerges as a model Black woman who is independent and fulfilled on a professional level.

Spencer revises both *Iola Leroy* and more traditionally gendered scripts in multiple significant ways, even though Nett’s dream falls within a feminized profession connected with caretaking. Firstly, nursing for Nett is not the result of circumstances (e.g., the Civil War, in

lola's case), but of the dream to become a *professional* nurse that she has cultivated since adolescence. Secondly, Nett is aware from an early age of the tensions between her professional ambitions and traditional gender roles. At fifteen, when the school examiner asks her "Well, what does my little girl at the head of the class intend to be?", Nett replies "in a loud, distinct voice, 'An old maid and a trained nurse, sir'" (75). Thirdly, as a single working woman who has no family in Philadelphia, Nett, like lola, has to learn to negotiate the terms of her identity and sexuality in relation to various suitors. lola famously refuses Dr. Gresham's marriage proposal because it is contingent upon her continuing to be perceived as white, obliging her to hide a part of her identity and renounce her mother's race. In *The Resentment*, Spencer updates this dilemma to address the changing sexual mores connected with the flappers of the late 1910s and the 1920s. Nett's exchange with one of her suitors, an educated man who has "graduated from one of the best colleges in the country," is revealing:

Several young men had called, but after a few visits they came to the conclusion that she was too slow. She was dumbfounded to be frankly told by one young man that "you try to be different from the other girls; there was once a time when women preserved themselves for marriage, but that day is passed now," he said. Nett bowed her head and said, "I have my own ideas of life; let each one live his or her own way." (179)⁴

Notably at stake in this exchange is not the middle-class sexual prudery or the compliance with the politics of respectability often attributed to African American women writers, but rather the transgressive issues of Nett's freedom of choice, her self-respect, the rights of a migrant working woman, and the rejection of the exploitation of the Black woman's body by men within or without the race.

In Spencer's novel, the ideal economy of reciprocity and mutual support obtains in terms of sexuality, as well. Nett's future husband, Dr. Lionel, shares her non-exploitative attitude. In a plot-twist that clearly evokes *lola Leroy*, Nett's devotion to her profession and her community temporarily comes to a halt due to health problems. Years of exhausting work oblige her to rest and at the same time make possible her marriage to Dr. Lionel. Foreman writes: "Nett the nurse-courted-by-doctor is familiar to readers of earlier African American fiction; this subplot replicates Dr. Gresham's appreciation of lola Leroy's angelic ministering abilities" (1996, xxxiii). Unlike Dr. Gresham, however, Dr. Lionel proves himself to be a true life-companion who has been changed by Nett's example of self-respecting celibacy and who, by imitating her example, has become worthy of her. He prefaces his marriage proposal to Nett by acknowledging his own sexual restraint:

Ten long years have I worked and waited, the thought of you always foremost in my mind, has made me a good man. During my practice many homes have been open to me; men have trusted their wives and daughters into my care; I can truthfully say, until now, not once have I betrayed their trust.

Not that I was not tempted (because men of my profession have enough of that before them), but these men paid me their hard-earned wages; I ministered to them, still I depended on them for my livelihood. I fought hard not to yield to things so low. (198)

In the new, more egalitarian polity Spencer envisions, men are called upon to take an active role in preventing the exploitation of women's bodies.

At the same time, marriage and the family are not women's only or even main concern. Like Harper, Spencer refutes the separate spheres ideology and places little narrative emphasis on marriage and biological motherhood, describing them in a few lines (199). Instead, she follows at greater length her heroine *after* marriage and motherhood, focusing on those details of the partnership between the spouses that exemplify the economy of mutual support and reciprocity she advances in her novel. Nett's respect for and compliance with her husband's opinions is paralleled by his attentiveness to her needs. Following her breakdown from exhaustion and their marriage,

Dr. Lionel forbade Nett to even help him in his office, which she wanted so much to do. "No, dear, you must rest. You have worked long enough for a while at least." Nett did not try to argue with him because she knew he was right. (199)

Similarly, when their baby girl is four years old and goes to kindergarten, Dr. Lionel takes seriously Nett's acknowledgement of having "rested so much until I am tired of resting" (200) and prescribes part-time work in his office (201).

To clarify that her heroine is not traditionally submissive, but rather responding to a utopian economy of reciprocity, Spencer prefaces these doctor–patient interactions by noticing that "Nett marveled at herself for being so obedient" (197). In fact, Nett's acceptance of Dr. Lionel's role as the physician-husband who ministers to her health and prescribes when and how much she should work does not undermine Spencer's expansion of her heroine's social role. Challenging the presumed incompatibility between a professional and a private life for women, Spencer places great narrative emphasis on Nett's *post*-marital work-life and successful career, and it is revealing of Spencer's multiple strategies to expand women's role beyond marriage and motherhood that in her *post*-marital career Nett should continue to be known as "Miss Nett," rather than "Mrs. Lionel" (203).

With the money her brother Silas gives her in recognition of her early contribution to his entrepreneurial success, Nett decides to build an annex to the Philadelphia hospital where she trained as a nurse and to devote it to the treatment of Black women, especially migrants from the South. This episode receives much more detailed narrative attention than Nett's wedding and motherhood, and several groundbreaking elements emerge from the woman-centered utopia Spencer portrays. On the one hand, one of the missions Nett continues to perform is education, and more specifically sex-education and family planning:

Nett made three weekly visits to the hospital; two afternoons she set apart to lecture to boys and girls between twelve and sixteen years of age. She gave a series of lectures on Ethics and Care of Self; she considered this a most important part of a child's education which she found so badly neglected during her time as slum district and community nurse.

In addition to this, she issued pamphlets appealing to parents to eliminate all false modesty and teach their children the things that they should know ere they reach the age of puberty; thus preventing the ruination of so many young lives—that we may have a cleaner and stronger generation in the future. (208)

The language is euphemistic, but unmistakably courageous, especially in the context of the novel's original publication for young readers by the AME Book concern, and also because in 1921 family planning was still illegal in many states.⁵ On the other hand, Spencer addresses the needs of Black and southern migrant women and portrays the annex explicitly as a female community. Women run and populate it in all possible capacities: as financiers, doctors, nurses, and patients: "Hundreds of women visited this part of the hospital weekly. It was said this was the hospital owned and controlled by Colored people where women were properly treated by doctors of their own race and sex" (207-208).

The speculative elements of Spencer's vision emerge also from the characteristically detailed utopian description of the deliberately planned beauty of the place:

Some months later at a certain hospital workmen were busy building an annex to the main building. Many had already heard it was Miss Nett's—as she was generally called—gift to the hospital. The interior of the building was beautifully finished. Nett purposely had this building made more home-like than an ordinary hospital, so that the patients would feel more satisfied to stay. There was a beautiful rest room with a large, open fireplace and handsome bookcase containing many interesting books by Colored authors; a large dining room, a sun parlor and a small lecture room to grace the first floor. Nett directed all the most important arrangements. The staff was composed of the best women doctors and nurses she could secure. To these she gave her orders: "There must be no hurrying here; each patient must receive full justice of your ability and knowledge. "There must be patience exerted by all. You must not only be able to administer professionally, but also be able to give encouragement to the least hopeful." (203)

Spencer's emphasis on beauty offers a counterfactual alternative to the conditions and chronic underfunding of Black hospitals in segregated Philadelphia. Douglass Memorial Hospital, for instance, "was inconveniently located and [...] the basement in which the outpatient department was operated was dark and poorly ventilated, reached only by a narrow, steep stairway" (Hine 1989, 36). The author's concern with beauty also forms an integral part of her expansion of women's role in society. As evidenced when Nett describes the annex she builds as "a beautiful diamond" (205), Spencer challenges long-standing stereotypes of women's vanity and consumerism by reinterpreting beauty not as a personal asset, but rather as a community-oriented source of well-being.⁶ Beauty becomes an indicator of societal attention to the condition of marginalized groups, and it exemplifies the

greater respect for the rights of Black women that characterizes the new polity Spencer envisions.

When the last chapter of the novel returns to Silas's story, as well as to a more traditionally masculinist portrayal of woman as man's "jewel" (215), it becomes clear, by contrast, that in telling the story of Nett's "diamond" in the two preceding chapters Spencer has opted for a strategic aesthetics that advances a project of women's creation and successful management of community-oriented institutions like Nett's annex. In this regard, Spencer's narrative choices resonate with Harper's in her description of Lucille Delany, who had

conceived the idea of opening a school to train future wives and mothers. She began on a small scale, in a humble building, and her work was soon crowned with gratifying success. She had enlarged her quarters, increased her teaching force, and had erected a large and commodious school-house through her own exertions and the help of others" (1987, 199-200).

As in the case of Harper, Spencer's alternative utopian polity acquires feasibility and believable narrative three-dimensionality through the use of multiple time frames. The last chapter of *Iola Leroy* shifts from the past narrative tense to the present, describing how Lucille's has become a "large and flourishing school" where her husband also works. Referring briefly to her new Black woman's post-marital professional life, Harper writes that "Lucille gives her ripening experience to her chosen work, to which she was too devoted to resign" (1987, 280) and closes the novel by using the words "Blessed themselves, their lives are a blessing to others" (281) to describe the present condition of her characters.⁷

In *The Resentment*, Spencer adopts and adapts Harper's strategies using even more pronounced multiple temporal frames that grant her heroine movement through time. Over the course of the two next-to-last chapters (11 and 12), Spencer speedily describes Nett's life and career: her four years as a hospital nurse, two as superintendent, ten as a nurse in the slum district, one as newlywed, and four as mother. These narrative time jumps advance not only the plot but also a new vision of women's identity. Spencer follows Harper in challenging the bias towards youth that in the case of women puts an expiration date on their attractiveness, at a personal level, and on their reproductive usefulness, at a social level. Both authors claim for their women characters a life-long process of growth and an active life of the mind. Contrary to stereotypes of old spinsters and supposedly surplus, because unmarried, women, the value of their heroines increases over time in relation to their self-respect, independence, experience, knowledge of the world, social usefulness, and hard-earned wisdom. From this vantage point, Nett's late marriage can be read not primarily as a tardy adherence to traditional gender scripts⁸, but rather as supporting Spencer's refusal to accept prevailing notions on the unattractiveness of mature women professionals and her

revisionary re-evaluation of female identity that culminates in Nett's affirmation as a community leader.

Back to the Future

Recovering Spencer's "discarded legacy" (Boyd 1994, 11), as is already being done with Harper's, challenges and enriches current perspectives on Black women's writings, on the "prehistory" (Lavender 2019, 3) of Afrofuturist speculative writings, and, more broadly, on African American literature. *The Resentment* exemplifies and brings to the foreground the continued centrality of the South in the African American speculative imagination in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Novels like Harper's *Iola Leroy*, Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1902-03); Sutton E. Griggs's *Unfettered* (1902), *The Hindered Hand* (1905), and *Pointing the Way* (1908); Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream* (1905); Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911); and Lillian B. Horace's *Five Generations Hence* (1916) articulate a revision of regional hierarchies, critiquing the rhetoric of the Lost Cause and a North-South reunion effected at the expense of African American civil rights. In their utopian and dystopian works, these writers envision a Black-centered New South as an integral component of a truly emancipated American nation.

Spencer's understudied novel engages with her literary antecedents, pointing to lines of descent that highlight an uninterrupted tradition. The intertextual relationship between Harper and Spencer represents an instance of the literary networks that characterize early Black feminist speculative fiction. It foregrounds the importance of contextualized readings in order to continue to flesh out in detail the history of African American women's literature of the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Research in this direction will hopefully uncover more bio-bibliographic information on Spencer and her mother, "from whom [she] derived [her] literary talent" (*The Resentment*, 1). Further research may also lead, for instance, to Margaret Sanger's *The Birth Control Review*, which solicited works by African American women writers like Mary Burrill's one-act play *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919) and Angelina Grimké's serialized short story "The Closed Door" (1919), and published Grimké's "Goldie" (1920). During the year 1921 Grimké's play *Rachel* (originally entitled *Blessed Are the Barren*) was advertised in every issue of *The Birth Control Review* among the "Books on Sex, Feminism, Birth Control and Kindred Subjects" available through the "New York Women's Publishing Co., Inc.—104 Fifth Ave, New York."⁹ Such connections challenge assumptions about African American women writers' reticence concerning issues of sexuality and open new vistas on how, even prior to Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston, they weaponized their adoption of speculative fiction and their participation in discourses on reproductive rights to articulate new narrative and social roles for African American women.

Notes

¹ In my ongoing research, I have formulated hypotheses about Spencer's identity. A Mary E. Spencer is listed in the 1913-1914 *Annual circular and catalogue of Spelman Seminary for women and girls in Atlanta, Ga.*, among the graduates ("High School—English-Normal") and described as teaching in Quitman, Georgia (63). This hypothesis is suggestive, because Spencer's known works focus on teaching and on professional nursing, and at the time Spelman had a Nurse Training Department. However, more research is needed to acquire conclusive evidence. I thank Mr. Tamir Mickens for sharing information and materials regarding his great-great aunt Mary Etta Spencer (1887-1970), her teaching, and her correspondence with the President of Spelman College, Lucy Hale Tapley, about the importance of combined literary and industrial education. Mr. Mickens has no definitive evidence that his great-great aunt authored *The Resentment*, but his grandfather, who passed on the family's oral history, "always said she 'had written a couple of books in her lifetime.'" E-mail correspondence, July 21st, 2025.

² In the novel, Spencer places the racist slur in quotation marks, thereby questioning it. This is an instance of the author's systematic attentiveness to language as a means to change prevailing racialized modes of speaking and thinking.

³ W.E.B. Du Bois expressed a more explicitly confrontational approach to this self-help philosophy in relation to health facilities in *The Crisis* in 1928: "When white people close the doors of every hospital to Negro nurses and physicians there isn't anything left for them to do but establish hospitals of their own. It certainly does not prove that they want to be segregated" (quoted in Hine 1989, 38).

⁴ This episode of male sexual entitlement anticipates Axel Olsen's proposals to Helga Crane in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928).

⁵ Spencer makes explicitly clear in the novel's dedication that she is addressing both "the growing boys and girls of my race" (1). In this regard, Shockley notes: "The novel was written in the vein of an inspirational racial success story for young boys and girls. More than likely, it was intended for a Sunday school book by the A. M. E. Book Concern which published it" (1989, 387). In "THE AUTHOR'S PURPOSE" Spencer writes: "It is not my desire to write this book merely to show my ability to write or to win fame as a writer, but that I may write some little something that would inspire some boy or girl of my race to be willing to endure struggle, to become a man or woman of worth by refusing to stay on the ground floor, and thereby be classed as a "good-for-nothing," by willingness to do hard and honest labor, by doing well whatever task is assigned you, by unselfish deeds, by preservation of virtue, by alienation of vice, by determining your course, and if that course proves right, let nothing turn you from it; that determination backed by will-power and sticking to it through thick and thin." (3).

⁶ For a similar emphasis on beauty as central to more egalitarian social housekeeping, see another understudied novel by an African American woman of the 1920s, Alfarata Chapman Thompson's *Idealia, A Utopia Dream, or Resthaven* (1923).

⁷ For an analysis of *Iola Leroy* as a feminist utopia, see M. Giulia Fabi's *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (2001, 55-65).

⁸ Before her marriage, Nett is already described as having "greying hair" (191).

⁹ The advertisement for *Rachel* reads, rather generically, "A powerful drama of the omnipresent tragedy of the Black people." "Books" 1921, 20.

References

Ammons, Elizabeth. 1991. *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bone, Robert. 1955. *The Negro Novel in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

"Books on Sex, Feminism, Birth Control and Kindred Subjects." 1921. *The Birth Control Review* 5 (1): 20.

Boyd, Melba Joyce. 1994. *Discarded Legacy: Politics and Poetics in the Life of Frances E. W. Harper, 1825-1911*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Burrill, Mary. 1919. *They That Sit in Darkness: A One-Act Play on Negro Life*. *The Birth Control Review* 3 (9): 5-8.

- Chesnutt, Charles W. 2014 [1905]. *The Colonel's Dream*. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1989 [1911]. *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Fabi, M. Giulia. 2001. *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- . 2023. "Early Black Feminist Sci-Fi and Future Fiction." *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction*, edited by Lisa Yaszek, Sonja Fritzsche, Keren Omry, and Wendy Gay Pearson, 325-31. New York: Routledge.
- Foreman, P. Gabrielle. 1996. Introduction to Maggie Shaw Fullilove, *Who Was Responsible?*, and Mary Etta Spencer, *The Resentment*, xv-xli. New York: G. K. Hall & Company.
- Foster, Frances Smith. 1988. Introduction to *Iola Leroy; Or, Shadows Uplifted*, xxvii-xxxix. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. 1984 [1979]. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gregg, Robert. 1993. *Sparks from the Anvil of Oppression: Philadelphia's African Methodists and Southern Migrants, 1890-1940*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Griggs, Sutton E. 2017 [1905]. *The Hindered Hand; Or, The Reign of the Repressionist*, edited by John Cullen Gruesser and Hanna Wallinger. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.
- Griggs, Sutton E. 1971 [1902]. *Unfettered and Dorlan's Plan*. New York: AMS Press.
- . 1974 [1908]. *Pointing the Way*. New York: AMS Press.
- Grimke, Angelina. 1920. "Goldie." *The Birth Control Review* 4 (11): 7-11; 4 (12): 10-14.
- . 1919. "The Closed Door." *The Birth Control Review* 3 (9): 10-14; 3 (10): 8-12.
- Harper, Frances E. W. 1987 [1892]. *Iola Leroy; Or, Shadows Uplifted*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . 1994 [1869]. *Minnie's Sacrifice*. In *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances W. Harper*, edited by Frances Smith Foster, 1-92. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . 1994 [1876-1877]. *Sowing and Reaping: A Temperance Story*. In *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances W. Harper*, edited by Frances Smith Foster, 93-176. Boston: Beacon Press.
- . 1994 [1888-1889]. *Trial and Triumph*. In *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances W. Harper*, edited by Frances Smith Foster, 177-286. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hine, Darlene Clark. 1989. *Black Women in White: Racial Conflict and Cooperation in the Nursing Profession, 1890-1950*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hopkins, Pauline E. 1988 [1902-1903]. *Of One Blood; or, the Hidden Self*. In *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins*, edited by Hazel V. Carby, 441-62. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Horace, Lillian B. Jones. 2013 [1916]. *Five Generations Hence*. In *Recovering Five Generations Hence: The Life and Writing of Lillian Jones Horace*, edited by Karen Kossie-Chernyshev, 11-102. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Howells, William Dean. 1983 [1885]. *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. New York: Penguin Classics.

- Larsen, Nella. 1986 [1928]. *Quicksand*. In *Quicksand and Passing*, edited by Deborah E. McDowell. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Lavender, Isiah III. 2019. *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.
- Margolies, Edward, and David Bakish. 1979. *Afro-American Fiction, 1853-1976: A Guide to Information Sources*. Detroit: Gale.
- Rado, Lisa. 2012 [1994]. *Rereading Modernism: New Directions in Feminist Criticism*. New York: Routledge.
- Rodgers, Lawrence R. 1997. *Canaan Bound: The African-American Great Migration Novel*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Roemer, Kenneth M. 2003. *Utopian Audiences: How Readers Locate Nowhere*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Rush, Theresa Gunnels, Carol Fairbanks Myers, and Esther Spring Arata, eds. 1975. *Black American Writers Past and Present: A Biographical and Bibliographical Dictionary*, vol II. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press.
- Shockley, Ann Allen. 1989 [1988]. *Afro-American Women Writers 1746-1933: An Anthology and Critical Guide*. New York: New American Library.
- Spencer, Mary Etta. 1921. *The Resentment*. Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern.
- . 1929. "Beyond the Years." *Opportunity*, 7 (10): 311-313.
- Tal, Kali. 2002. "'That Just Kills Me': Black Militant Near-Future Fiction." *Social Text* 71, 20 (2): 65-91.
- Thirty-Third Annual Circular of Spelman Seminary for Women and Girls in Atlanta, GA., for the Academic Year 1913-1914*. 1914. Atlanta, GA.: Spelman Messenger Office.
- Thompson, Alfarata Chapman. 1923. *Idealial, A Utopia Dream, or Resthaven*. Albany, NY: J. B. Lyon Company.
- Watson, Carole McAlpine. 1985. *Prologue: The Novels of Black American Women, 1891-1965*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Whiteman, Maxwell. 1955. *A Century of Fiction by American Negroes, 1853-1952: A Descriptive Bibliography*. Philadelphia: n.p.
- Williams, Ora. 1994 [1973]. *American Black Women in the Arts and Social Sciences*. Third Edition Revised and Enlarged. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press.
- Yellin, Jean Fagan. 2009. Introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself. Enlarged Edition*, xix-liii. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

M. Giulia Fabi is Associate Professor of American Literature at the University of Ferrara. She is the author of the Choice Outstanding Academic Book *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* (2000) and *America nera: la cultura afroamericana* (2002). She has edited the Penguin Classics edition of W. W. Brown's *Clotel* (2004) and a series of Italian translations of African American novels. She is co-editor of *New Black Feminist Criticism* (2007) and *Nella Larsen's Letters, 1917-1935* (2022). Her work has appeared in *The Henry James Review*, *African American Review*, *Letterature d'America*, *Acoma*, *American Literary Realism*, and *Legacy*. She is a contributor to *Jim Crow, Literature, and the Legacy of Sutton E. Griggs* (2013), *African American Literature in Transition, 1900-1910* (2021), and *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction* (2023). She is completing a manuscript on African American speculative fiction. Email: fbg@unife