

Coda

On Burials and Exhumations

Cemeteries
are our only
tended gardens
we tend to die
—Saul Williams

the future is blossoming around
us. yet the fields of our destiny
have been gardens untended
over grown, and malnourished
we have come to cultivate this garden
—Anonymous

I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life my
ancestors lived, and in the writing of it, I felt joy and strength and
my own continuity.

—Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*

It seems I've always had a critical affinity for narrative beginnings but it's untended endings that tend to haunt me. While doing the research for this book, two authors seemed to call to me, beckon me even, to find them and pay my respects. Standing at Harriet Wilson's grave, its majestic stone jutting cleanly from the ground, I was overcome by the prospect that my companion and I were perhaps the first to visit her there in just over a hundred years. "Hattie E. Wilson" had been buried well, her name etched deeply in local Quincy granite. After looking for her for years, Wilson's three-foot tombstone sitting right off the main cemetery road wiped out my Zora-inspired fears of a grassy unmarked grave.¹

I set out to visit Amelia Johnson's grave with as much trepidation. The late Rev. Frank Drumwright Jr. seemed stalwart and strong when, in 2003, I first visited Baltimore's Union Baptist Church, which, to me, was still the

Johnsons' congregation. He had written and produced a play about Harvey Johnson in the 1990s, he shared with me after services, but knew nothing of the congregation's then-first lady. No one at Union seemed to realize that their beloved past pastor's wife Amelia was also a published author and activist. When I returned to Baltimore, Rev. Drumwright strained against his wife's concern and his own failing body to drive me to the Johnsons' grave site, rightly convinced that the passed-on, handwritten directions to the unmarked yard would never guide me there.

As beloved as Harvey Johnson remains today, as celebrated as both he and Amelia were when they died in the 1920s, their bones were unceremoniously unearthed just twenty years later. Laurel Cemetery, the premier gravesite in Black Baltimore from its founding in 1852 until the 1940s, was dug up after a land-grab coup by white business and city leaders. In its day, Laurel had been no stranger to august public farewells. Bishop Daniel Payne, the esteemed A.M.E. leader who had led Wilberforce for thirteen years as the first president of any Black-run college in the Western Hemisphere, had been laid to rest there. Frederick Douglass had come to eulogize him. Some thirty years afterwards, in 1823, Harvey Johnson's funeral at Laurel was attended by two thousand mourners and was front-page news in the *Afro-American's* national edition.² Yet neither public stature nor civic contribution, recognition nor family, had protected Baltimore's dead from having their remains spread out like fertilizer in a remote field once used to inter farm animals. Now that past had been buried and Laurel Cemetery's once-regal headstones were poorly transplanted in some stranger's overgrown acreage adjacent to sprawling, mowed side and back yards. I cried silently standing at that grave, Black efforts and lives welling up in the face of such stunning disregard.

What has haunted me in the years during which this book and I have grown together and apart is how easily Black women's lives are carelessly unearthed, the evidence of our work scattered and thrown away. Had her own mother's story been lost, Alice Walker wrote in "Saving the Life That is Your Own," it "would have no historical underpinning, none which I could trust, anyway."³ As I join others to recover the buried archival remnants that seem to have both stubbornly and patiently waited for our coming, what has inspired me is our ancestors' literary activism and the ways in which we, their cultural kin (to borrow from Karla Holloway), build on their struggles for expression and justice.⁴ This project is meant to help recover the individual strands and collective strains of their stories. I seek to recuperate for these texts and their authors the various, multiple histories and complexities that have been long and systematically denied them.

Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women in the Nineteenth Century charts the years directly before the Civil War to those that marked the century's

end, examining how writers moved from near rhetorical invisibility and isolation to prolific literary and activist productivity and connectedness. In it, I pay particular attention to social literacy and the power of multivalent interpretation. As the book weaves together historical research and literary exegesis, I realize that my writing sometimes perches on a delicate line; as I land after a certain analytical turn or historical jump, I watch myself poised midway between straightening up triumphantly and tipping over while trying to maintain my own critical coordination. Those balancing moments sometimes bring up methodological questions, particularly for those of us who are attentive to history's multiple timelines and to temporal frames punctuated by measurable markers: the passing or enforcement of a law or statute, the publication dates of a newspaper, the invention or application of a specific technology. Take, for instance, my discussion of the relation, in the calculus of print capitalism and modernism, between *Four Girls at Cottage City's* character "Vera Earle," the popular writer, clubwoman, and activist "Victoria Earle," and the specific body of photographs of club women editors that emerge in sustained circulation the year after the *Four Girl's* first printing in 1895. In my account of this instance, as in others, the narratives and histories that serve as my principal subjects anticipate a convergence of dynamics that come together an important beat late. My goal is to account for the ways in which these texts circulate as living words, as it were, alongside reception histories that are not fixed but fluid.

The disciplinary fields that document, engage, and theorize the historical and narrative legacies I and so many colleagues examine mirror that movement from early critical isolation to the plenitude of our present academic moment. Yet as I finish this book, I must acknowledge that I am just a slightly older version of a younger me, a woman who came of age in the heady times when nineteenth-century texts were first being rediscovered and reprinted, while the novels of their literary descendents broke onto—and then seemed to dominate—the *New York Times* Best Seller lists. Then, I had yet to greet a fresh masterpiece with my present fatigue-laced enthusiasm or "maybe this summer" insouciance. The possibility that history might not record the unarguably historic achievements of contemporary Black women felt real to me as I studied writers, many of whom had been popular and widely reviewed before they were forgotten and disremembered. Despite the seeming permanence—even popularity—of gendered and racialized subjects of study, I still catch myself glancing over my shoulder to catch the shadows that mark the absence of Black women's images in the intellectual archive.

The academic recognition and plenitude nineteenth-century studies of race and Blackness presently enjoy coexist with our own new nadir; they are coeval temporal happenings on a completely different time curve, to borrow

language from *Activist Sentiments*' introduction. Despite the achievement and power of some individuals of African American descent, Black communities bear the brunt of violence as principal targets in today's attacks on people of color, the poor, and the disenfranchised. In Los Angeles, where I live, African Americans experience hate crimes at a rate nearly ten times higher than any other group.⁵ In the United States, Black women are the fastest growing population in the incarceration industry, a campaign that has over one million African Americans, about half of all inmates, imprisoned. As Black women, we make up nearly 70 percent of newly diagnosed HIV cases in the United States.⁶ Between 2000 and 2005 nearly 61 percent of people under age twenty-five with HIV are African American.⁷ In cities such as Chicago, New York, and Detroit, between 66 percent and 75 percent of Black male high school students do not graduate.⁸ Black college students have a 43 percent graduation rate, 20 percent lower than our white peers.⁹ These are the uncultivated "fields of our destiny," to borrow from the unidentified author whose words serve as one of this chapter's epigraphs. They are "gardens untended over grown and malnourished."¹⁰

Over this book's pages hover the ghosts of recovered archives and ancestors. They inform my discussions about texts, their histories, and the critical apparatuses we bring to interpretation. They make visits to my classrooms, I sometimes think, and appear on the walls of my home. Above a heavy dictionary, my symbolic inheritance from my granddaddy Foreman, hangs a photograph of Niagara Falls taken by the accomplished Black lawyer and dentist Hamilton Sutton Smith. In it, tiny dark figures (my punctum) appear like cutout silhouettes against the luxuriant snow, that, shimmering and vast, dominates the frame even with the falls looming in the background. The image, so formally rich in composition and texture, sometimes reminds me of a huge print that I encountered every time I went to visit Momma and Pop, my other grandparents. Standing on the front porch, waiting eagerly after ringing the bell, on my tiptoes I could peep through the heavy door's glass cutouts to see the picture that hung in the entry hall, a somber Black boy enveloped in an all but monochromatic room, the brown of his skin the only thing to interrupt the image's flat and unrelenting whiteness. Now, on my walls, another photograph hangs, one that memorializes a Detroit man beaten to death by police.¹¹ White words painted on a black backdrop take up almost the entire frame; the chalkboard-like image, punctuated by several small red handprints, recalls what we do not learn in school. They also underscore, as Karla Holloway puts it, that "Black death is a cultural haunting."¹² This message, one that connects my activist sentiments to those who came before me—before us—reminds me of what cannot be buried when we pledge to preserve what's come before so we can continue to persevere:

We remember that when people lose
their lives as a consequence of injustice
their spirit wanders, unable to pass over—seeking resolution.
We remember that our lives are a continuation
of those who have come before, and that many
of those who are our kin have died as a consequence of injustice—
and so are wandering—seeking resolution.
We remember that as long as the souls of our kin
wander then so too do we—
and so we make places for their souls to be.

We are helped to remember our right to be here.
We are helped to remember our responsibilities.
We create our justice daily.
We do.

They did. Harriet Jacobs, the writer, school founder, and housing organizer; Harriet Wilson, once “our Nig,” then successful entrepreneur and “eloquent and earnest colored trance medium”; Frances Harper, anti-slavery lecturer, novelist, temperance leader; Victoria Earle Matthews, journalist, NACW leader, founder of the White Rose Mission; Amelia Johnson, critical player in Black activist Baltimore and the DuBois Circle. They help us to remember our right to be here. They help us to remember our responsibilities. They help us feel the joy and strength of our own continuity. They do.