

Rethinking African American Female Writers' Resistance: The Case of Strategic Deracination in Sarah E. Farro's *True Love* (1891)

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Abstract

This article examines Sarah E. Farro's understudied novel *True Love: A Story of English Domestic Life* (1891) as a form of literary resistance that I call "strategic deracination." The term describes what happens when an author who is publicly marketed as racially representative writes a text that deliberately leaves race out. The political force of such a work lies in the visible gap between how the author is framed by the marketplace and what the text itself refuses to say. The concept is specified by three jointly necessary conditions (paratextual, textual, and relational) and tied to the late-nineteenth-century "essentializing phase" of print racialization in which Black-authored books were expected to function as racial testimony (Rezek, 2020). While scholarship on nineteenth-century African American women's writing has primarily focused on direct confrontations with racial prejudice, Farro's work presents an alternative mode of refusal that operates by subtraction rather than by addition, performance, or appropriation. This is a mode that neither transnationalism, racial performativity, nor literary appropriation taken individually, can adequately capture. Through close textual analysis coordinated with paratextual analysis of the novel's 1892 press reception, I demonstrate that Farro's adoption of Victorian domestic tropes while she was being marketed as an African American novelist produces a structural negotiation that cannot be reduced to assimilation, market accommodation, or aesthetic preference alone. The textual evidence (the displacement of spiritual reflection from a female to a male character, the unmythologized treatment of the protagonist's death, and the medical framing of the male character's decline) shows that gender critique occupies the structural position the marketplace reserved for racial testimony. This study expands our understanding of dissent in African American literature beyond explicit content to include formal innovation and patterned absence.

Keywords: deracination, Farro, counternarrative, transatlantic literature, performativity, domesticity, authorship, subversion

1. Introduction

Critical examination of nineteenth-century African American female writing has primarily focused on the overt condemnation of racial prejudices in narratives largely informed by the authors' personal experiences (Davis, 2021; Foreman, 2009; Santamarina, 2006; Smith, 2012). This body of scholarship has analyzed how these authors directly challenged the racial ideologies of their era. Although such examination has had a significant impact on the field of literary studies, this scholarly preoccupation often neglects the more subtle forms of resistance that existed in Black female writing. This neglect risks constraining African American women's writings within a framework that implies the primary value of their work lies in its depiction of race and gender in the United States. This paper examines an alternative form of literary resistance by analyzing Sarah E. Farro's understudied novel *True Love: A Story of English Domestic Life* (1891). Farro's novel represents a counterpoint to contemporary Black literary production through its conscious avoidance of racial subject matter. During a period when the majority of African American authors wrote exclusively about race and the American racial situation, Farro's novel is set in England and populated entirely by white British characters. This article examines how Farro's *True Love* appropriates Victorian domestic tropes within the broader context of African American literature's oblique strategies of refusal. As I will demonstrate, the adoption of Victorian domesticity in a novel published under a racialized paratext in the American literary marketplace produces what I term "strategic deracination": the purposeful withdrawal of racial signification from a literary text whose author is publicly racialized by the marketplace. Its political force lies not in what the text adds, performs, or borrows but in the sustained gap it produces between a racialized paratext and a deracinated text. Section 2 develops the concept's relation to neighboring frameworks (transnationalism, performativity, literary appropriation) and specifies the conditions under which it becomes legible.

Although the novel was published in 1891, it disappeared from critical attention until it was rediscovered in 2016 by Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina. Since its rediscovery, it has been mentioned briefly in literary studies. In her introduction to *Handbook of the American Novel of the Nineteenth Century* (2018), Christine Gerhardt discusses Farro's book as an embodiment of "transnational studies" (p. 3) that govern current trends within American literary studies, noting its thematic preoccupation, publication history, and eventual rediscovery by Gerzina in London through a British edition published in 1893. Since 2016, the novel has begun to attract scholarly attention. However, critical interpretation has largely been limited. The novel was discussed as a literary curiosity (Gerzina, 2016), included in anthologies

without deep analysis (Robbins & Gates, 2017), or treated as a failed imitation of a specific Victorian source (Cuenca, 2022). Ironically, Gerzina's speculation about the reason the novel has been "forgotten" from literary history is precisely the same reason the novel has continued to receive modest attention ten years after its rediscovery. As Gerzina observes, "Farro does not fit the mold of familiar early African American writers, revived and 'discovered' today not only because of their race, but because they wrote about race" (2016). A second factor that contributed to its neglect within literary studies is that it was perceived as a direct imitation of the Victorian author Ellen Wood's novel *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (1863). In her research on the novel, Carme Manuel Cuenca (2022) uses a comparative approach and argues that Farro's novel is, in fact, a "plagiaristic reconfiguration" of Wood's novel. Cuenca explains that "rather than being a brilliant plagiarist's performance, [Farro's] unacknowledged reworking ... failed" (p. 25), which contributed to her obscurity in literary scholarship. According to Cuenca, this failure lies not only in Farro's reproduction of passages of Wood's novel with minor changes but also in her refusal to include "any trace of racial reconfiguration of its source or allegory of African Americanness" (pp. 25–6). While both Gerzina and Cuenca provide valuable insights into Farro's historical erasure, their explanations inadvertently reinforce the limited frameworks through which we evaluate African American literary production. Cuenca's reading offers the most detailed textual scholarship *True Love* has received to date, and the comparative work she performs against *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* establishes a body of evidence this article accepts rather than disputes. The disagreement this article registers with Cuenca is not over what *True Love* contains but over how to evaluate what it withholds. The question is whether Farro's refusal of racial reconfiguration marks the novel's failure or its constitutive political operation. Section 3 takes up this disagreement directly, situating Cuenca's textual evidence within the marketplace conditions Section 2 specifies. The critical question pursued there is not whether Farro borrowed, but what her particular configuration of borrowing performs in the marketplace within which her novel circulated, given that she retains the generic structure of her source while withholding its racial recoding.

Methodologically, this article proceeds through a historicist close reading of *True Love* coordinated with a paratextual analysis of the novel's contemporary press reception. The close reading is conducted comparatively, situating Farro's novel within three reference traditions (the conventional American domestic novel, the African American domestic counter-tradition, and the Victorian domestic novel inherited through Ellen Wood) in order to establish what the novel shares with each and, more importantly, what it omits. The paratextual analysis examines the press notices and advertisements through which Farro was introduced to the American reading public, in order to establish the racializing frame within which her text was received. These notices were recovered through the *Library of Congress's Chronicling America* digital archive, which preserves the substantive surviving record of the novel's American press reception. The relation between these two modes of reading is not incidental to the argument but constitutive of it. As Section 2 develops, strategic deracination becomes legible precisely in the gap between the racialized paratext that the press analysis reconstructs and the deracinated text that the close reading discloses. Strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1996) and racial performativity (Butler, 1988, 1993; Wargo, 2018) supply the interpretive frameworks through which the paratextual and textual evidence, respectively, are read. Their coordination, rather than their separate application, is what permits the central claim.

2. Strategic Deracination: A Conceptual Distinction

Strategic deracination sits close to three established frameworks in literary studies: transnationalism, racial performativity, and literary appropriation. This section explains what each of these frameworks captures about Farro's novel, what each leaves out, and why a new term is needed to name what Farro actually does. Transnationalism (Hack, 2017; Tamarkin, 2008) describes how Black writers imported English literary materials to advance racial arguments that remained the text's organizing concern. The framework theorizes what crosses the Atlantic (Manning & Taylor, 2007). It does not theorize what is left behind. Racial performativity (Butler, 1988, 1993; Wargo, 2018) theorizes the constitution of identity through reiterative discursive practice, a framework that captures how Farro's stylistic choices perform a non-Black authorial voice. However, performativity is interior to the act of writing and continuous with it. It does not theorize the discontinuity between a deracinated text and a paratext that continues to assert racial identity loudly. Literary appropriation, including the strategic intertextuality Hack (2017) identifies, accounts for what Farro takes from Ellen Wood. It cannot account for what she does not take, namely the racial recoding the framework leads us to expect. What unites these three frameworks is a positive logic. Each describes something a writer does with material.

Strategic deracination names a different operation, a negative one in which the resistance lies in what the writer refuses to do under conditions in which doing it is precisely what the marketplace demands. Recent scholarship has increasingly attended to forms of resistance that operate obliquely rather than through direct confrontation. Algobaei et al. (2025), in their analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, theorize what they term polyphonic resistance, in which dissent is articulated through layered and dispersed narrative voices rather than through unified protest. Strategic deracination shares with this conceptual move the recognition that refusal can constitute a politically meaningful act, but it differs in kind. Where polyphonic resistance multiplies voices to evade univocal authority, strategic deracination withdraws a single category of meaning that the marketplace expects the text to deliver. The concept thus depends on a specific historical condition. Joseph Rezek (2020) identifies the late nineteenth century as an "essentializing phase" in the racialization of print, in which "the medium's racialization intensified to the point where a published book by a single author was understood as capable of representing the essential nature of an entire race of people" (p. 419). Outside that condition, deracination is not strategic. It is simply absence. Inside that condition, the deracinated text becomes legible as a refusal and the gap between the racialized author and the unracialized text becomes the site of critique.

The political force of this gap depends on its perceptibility to contemporary readers, not only to retrospective analysis. Rezek's account of

print racialization implies a corresponding horizon of expectation on the reader's side. If a published book by a single Black author was understood as capable of representing the essential nature of an entire race, then readers approaching such a book carried expectations shaped by that understanding. They expected the text to speak, in some legible form, to the racial condition its authorship advertised. Under these conditions, the absence of racial content in a novel marketed as the work of the "first Negro novelist" was not simply a neutral fact about the text but a departure from a horizon the marketing frame had already installed. The gap between paratext and text becomes politically operative because the reader has been oriented, before opening the book, to anticipate the very content the book withholds. Where the horizon does not exist, the absence registers as nothing at all. Where the horizon is installed by paratext and unmet by text, the absence registers as a refusal.

In practice, strategic deracination applies only when three conditions are met at the same time. The first is a paratextual condition: the author must be publicly racialized at the level of advertisement, press notice, or editorial framing, such that the marketplace identifies her as a racial representative before the text is read. The second is a textual condition: the work itself must withhold the racial signification that the paratext leads readers to expect, neither thematizing race nor coding its characters through racial markers. The third is a relational condition: the gap between paratext and text must be sustained rather than incidental. This is shown when authors' own statements, in prefaces, interviews, or stated literary influences, affirm broad literary ambitions rather than distance themselves from the racial framing imposed on them. When any of these conditions fails, deracination collapses into one of the alternative phenomena the concept must be distinguished from: mere absence (no paratextual racialization), assimilation (textual withdrawal accompanied by authorial disavowal of Black identity), or market accommodation (textual withdrawal explained adequately by genre demand alone).

Within this model, strategic essentialism and racial performativity are the two analytical instruments by which the model's first and second conditions, respectively, are interrogated. Strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1996) supplies the framework for analyzing the paratextual condition, since it theorizes the adoption of an essentialized identity for political ends and thereby illuminates how Farro's acceptance of the "first Negro novelist" framing functioned as a market mechanism rather than an ontological claim. Racial performativity (Butler, 1988, 1993; Wargo, 2018) supplies the framework for analyzing the textual condition, since it theorizes identity as constituted through stylistic and citational practice and thereby illuminates how Farro's textual voice performs a non-Black authorial subjectivity through generic affiliation, idiom, and characters' representation. The remainder of this article tests this concept against the textual and paratextual evidence of Farro's *True Love*.

3. Discussion

Examining Farro's adaptation of Victorian domestic tropes requires us first to establish an understanding of their American counterpart. This context is crucial for grasping the literary options available to Farro when she wrote and published her novel. For analytical purposes, this study approaches nineteenth-century American domestic fiction through two primary categories that shaped Farro's literary context. These are the conventional domestic trope celebrating white middle-class womanhood and, in contrast, the significant tradition of African American female authors who critiqued and reimagined these conventions through their own literary works. American domestic fiction depicted an idealized version of white middle-class womanhood that equipped its heroines with civic duties in addition to their material ones. Within this context, Paula Baker (1984) argues that the domain of the home enabled women to "exercise moral influence and ensure national virtue and social order" (p. 620). This duality contributed to the influential role that white middle-class women upheld in both private and public spheres. A classic example of this genre is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which features characters whose impact extended from the home to transform society as a whole. Ultimately, such representations contributed to forming cultural ideologies that prescribed a specific role for women, typically white and middle-class, within the American imagination.

The genre often marginalized women who did not fit its categorization of femininity either for their class or their race. Such marginalization served a specific cultural purpose. As Amy Kaplan (1998) explains, it has "generate[d] notions of the foreign against which the nation can be imagined as home" (p. 582). The word "foreign" in this context includes both those who do not fit because of their nationality and American people whose social or racial background does not conform to the norms of domesticity. Even when Black female characters were depicted in American domestic fiction, their roles were often reduced to racial stereotypes through their depiction as docile servants, loyal mammies, or sexualized figures lacking the moral virtue and domestic capabilities attributed to white female characters. Black women in these texts were frequently denied character development and agency, serving instead as narrative devices to highlight the superiority of white womanhood. Even Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which departs from its contemporaries by featuring Black people as main characters, runs the risk of amplifying racial stereotypes in its representation of characters like Topsy and Chloe. By defining white, middle-class domesticity as a national ideal, American domestic narratives cast women outside the prescribed realm of middle-class status and whiteness as potential threats, enabling a "cultural incursion," as Laura Smith (2012) terms it, against which white women were responsible for "civilising and defending the American family home" (p. 343). Consequently, these narratives constructed a powerful mechanism of social control that defined acceptable gender identity through what has been termed "the cult of true womanhood" in literary scholarship. These narratives ultimately served to normalize and perpetuate broader systems of racial and class-based exclusion by elevating white middle-class womanhood while rendering other female experiences invisible.

When African American authors used the popular form of domesticity in their fiction, they were confronting the "cult of womanhood" and its exclusionary nature. Susan J. Stanfield (2022) argues that "free women of color strategically embraced the whiteness of domesticity to claim political empowerment for African American households" (p. 12). Recent studies even suggest that the critical response to domesticity by American authors, including African Americans, revealed a sense of "unhousing" which was "a symptom of a core

national anxiety around forms of domesticity” (R íquez, Jonik, & Andr és, 2025, p. 1823). African American authors consistently depicted the domestic sphere not as a sanctuary but as inherently precarious, portraying families perpetually destabilized by systemic racial oppression. Authors like Harriet Wilson and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, among several others, crafted domestic fiction that centered Black female experiences to confront the racist ideologies of white literary domesticity. Wilson’s novel *Our Nig* (1859), for example, depicts the struggles of Frado, who is a mixed-race heroine abandoned by her white mother and forced into harsh labor. Through Frado’s tragic journey, Wilson critiques the idealized portrayal of domestic life by exposing the racial and class-based oppression faced by African American women within the household. The novel reimagines the domestic novel genre, typically centered on family life and moral lessons, to expose the brutal realities of racism and inequality in the “free” North. Similarly, Harper’s novel *Iola Leroy* (1892) follows the life of Iola, a mixed-race woman and former slave, who embraces her African American identity and uses her inner strength to advocate for racial equality. Through her independent spirit and roles as a teacher, nurse, and activist, Iola challenges traditional gender norms while redefining domesticity as a space for empowerment. These novels and several others used this trope to reconstruct the Black family and advocate for racial and social uplift.

In so doing, they were contributing to what Victoria Earle Matthews called in 1895 “race literature” in which she argued that “thoughtful, well-defined and intelligently placed [literary] efforts would lead to influential and accurate information, on all subjects relating to the Negro and his environment, to inform the American mind” (quoted in McHenry, 2002, p. 188). Similarly, Matthews acknowledges the transformative power of literature written by Black authors to counter degrading stereotypes and to articulate visions of Black humanity, dignity, and citizenship that challenged the very foundations of American racial hierarchy. As Xiomara Santamarina (2006) explains, African American authors “provid[ed] an inventory of several types of value, ranging from white privilege to self-worth, from black respectability to sexual and racial equality, egalitarian reform, and even alternative family models” (p. 73). Similarly, Rynetta Davis (2021) argues that these authors “use[d] fictionalized and actual representations of domesticity to intervene in national debates about Black women’s agency and political rights” (p. 72). Thus, as Davis explains, “these writers demonstrate that black female domesticity exceeds its stereotypical association with the physical work of keeping and sustaining white spaces” (p. 73). This expansion of what domesticity could mean and do consequently positions them as engaging in ongoing debates about the status of Black individuals in American citizenship.

Given this rich tradition of African American women writers who directly confronted racial ideologies through their adaptations of domestic fiction, Farro’s *True Love* presents a paradox in two ways. Unlike her contemporaries, Farro constructs a raceless narrative that neither identifies its characters by racial markers nor explicitly addresses racial themes. Furthermore, rather than reconfiguring American domestic conventions as Wilson and Harper did, Farro seemingly embraces a faithful representation of Victorian domesticity. The novel is set in a small English town and depicts the intertwined lives of several characters as they navigate love, neglect, illness, and death. The narrative tension emerges immediately through a disturbing maternal imbalance: Mrs. Brewster’s undisguised preference for her frail, demanding daughter Mary Ann while her virtuous daughter Janey suffers quiet neglect. Their lives are summed up in the opening pages, as the family lives in modest means and “scrambled through life amidst bustle and poverty” (Farro, 1891, p. 2). From the beginning, then, the novel hints toward a central theme in Victorian domestic fiction which is social mobility through the marriage of the angel-like character to a rich family. Tragedy strikes when Janey dies, leaving the family in mourning. Mary Ann, however, quickly returns to social life, sparking disapproval within the community and causing “a shock of surprise not unmixed with indignation” (p. 69). Meanwhile, the wealthy character Charles Taylor, who is in love with Janey, is devastated by her death, enduring a “shock of agony” (p. 46) and succumbing to illness, as “the ravages of the disease that was killing him were all too conspicuous on his wasted features” (p. 111). This faithful reproduction of Victorian literary conventions extends throughout the novel’s complex web of relationships and moral dilemmas. The narrative also follows the romantic misunderstandings between Martha Taylor and Mark Blakely, a widower who struggles to reveal his past marriage. Gossip and miscommunication lead Martha to reject Mark, despite her feelings for him. Eventually, their conflicts are resolved, and the two prepare for their wedding. However, the wedding occurs amidst Charles’s deteriorating health, which evokes “a low murmur of sorrow, of sympathy” (p. 111). While the wedding brings joy to the community, it is bittersweet. Charles passes away shortly afterward, surrounded by his sisters and cousin and is buried “near his mother’s, who lay beside his father” (p. 121). Through its intricate exploration of maternal favoritism, romantic devotion, and social propriety within a quintessentially Victorian setting, Farro’s narrative fully embraces the thematic preoccupations of conventional domestic fiction.

The novel’s evident debt to Wood’s *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* requires direct engagement before the analysis proceeds, since the most sustained existing reading of *True Love* (Cuenca, 2022) identifies that debt as the novel’s defining feature and the principal reason for its critical neglect. Cuenca’s textual demonstration is detailed and, on its own terms, persuasive. She documents structural correspondences between the two novels, identifies passages in which Farro’s prose closely tracks Wood’s, and argues that the resulting work constitutes an “unacknowledged reworking” that “failed” as plagiaristic performance (p. 25) because it neither concealed its source effectively nor transformed its source into something recognizably new. This article does not contest Cuenca’s textual scholarship. The borrowings she identifies are present in the novel, the structural debts to *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* are real, and the question of what to make of them cannot be evaded by reasserting Farro’s originality in general terms. What this article contests is the interpretive frame within which Cuenca evaluates the textual evidence she assembles. Three points warrant separation. The first concerns the criterion of “failure.” Cuenca’s judgment that Farro’s borrowing “failed” rests on an implicit standard according to which successful literary appropriation must either disguise its source or transform it through visible recoding. This standard, which derives largely from twentieth-century

theorizations of intertextuality, is anachronistic when applied to a marketplace in which, as Baldwin (2016), Spoo (2013), Seville (2006), and Stokes (2005) have variously documented, transatlantic borrowing was a routine compositional practice rather than a transgression requiring concealment. Within the practices of the late nineteenth-century print marketplace, the visibility of Farro's borrowing is evidence not of failed concealment but of an unconcealed compositional method that the period's readership would have recognized as conventional. The standard by which Cuenca judges the borrowing a failure is, in this sense, a standard the borrowing was never attempting to meet.

The second point concerns the absence Cuenca identifies as decisive. Her most consequential observation is that Farro refused to include "any trace of racial reconfiguration of its source or allegory of African Americanness" (pp. 25–6). Cuenca treats this refusal as confirming the novel's failure. A Black author borrowing from a white Victorian source ought, on this account, to have transformed the borrowed material into commentary on Black American experience, and the absence of such transformation marks the novel as derivative. The framework Section 2 has developed permits a different reading of the same observation. Under the marketplace conditions Rezek (2020) describes, in which Black-authored books were expected to function as racial testimony, the absence of racial reconfiguration in a Black-authored novel published under a paratext that named its author "the first Negro novelist" is not the absence of meaning but the production of friction between paratext and text. What Cuenca identifies as the novel's failure to recode its source racially is, on the reading advanced here, the textual condition that strategic deracination requires. Cuenca and I are looking at the same feature of the novel. We differ on whether it registers as deficit or as operation.

The third point concerns the relation between borrowing and originality. Cuenca's framing implies that *True Love* must be evaluated as either a successful original work or a failed plagiaristic performance, with no productive third position. Yet the novel can reasonably be described as both substantially derivative in its borrowing from Wood's novel and substantially original in its specific elaborations, in the pattern of maternal favoritism that organizes the Brewster household, in the medical rather than sentimental framing of Charles's death, in the unmythologized treatment of Janey's death, and in the displacement of spiritual reflection from a female to a male character that the following paragraphs examine. To concede that Farro borrowed extensively from Wood is not to concede that *True Love* lacks compositional integrity of its own. It is to specify what kind of integrity the novel has. Without the Wood material, the divergences this section will trace would have nowhere to register. The borrowing is what makes the originality argumentatively visible. The disagreement with Cuenca is therefore not a defense of *True Love* against the charge of imitation but a reframing of imitation itself as a compositional resource the novel uses to perform work that imitation, on its own, does not predict. The close readings that follow proceed on this basis. They take Farro's debt to Wood as established and ask what the novel does within and against that debt. With the comparative ground cleared and Cuenca's textual evidence reframed, the analysis can now proceed by testing *True Love* against the three conditions Section 2 specified as jointly necessary for strategic deracination to become legible. The paratextual condition is examined first, since it establishes the racializing frame against which the textual evidence acquires its political force. The textual condition is examined second, through close readings of the novel's gendered spiritual economy, its treatment of Janey's death, and its medical reframing of Charles's decline. The relational condition is examined third, through the preface, the authorial influences Farro publicly avowed, and the asymmetry between paratextual cooperation and textual withdrawal that distinguishes strategic deracination from assimilation and from market accommodation alone.

3.1 The Paratextual Condition: Racialized Reception and Tactical Cooperation

The first condition strategic deracination requires, that the author be publicly racialized at the level of advertisement, press notice, or editorial framing, is satisfied by the press record through which *True Love* entered public circulation. The press often referred to her through her race, mistakenly introducing her as "the first Negro novelist" ("The First Negro Novelist," 1892b), "the first colored novelist" ("The Chicago belongs ...," 1892), or "The first novel ever produced by an Afro-American lady" ("The First Novel Ever Produced," 1892). Such racial identification of Farro stands in stark contrast to the content of her work and her own literary influences, as she is reported to have said that her favorite authors were "Holmes, Thackeray and Dickens" ("The First Colored Woman Novelist," 1892). This stated affiliation, while not by itself conclusive, is consistent with the transatlantic, universalist self-positioning Farro adopts in her preface, where she frames the novel as a contribution to a literary field "diligently cultivated by the best minds in Europe and America" rather than as racial testimony (a paratext examined in detail in Section 3.3). The publication of a raceless plot under the racializing paratext that named her a Black woman of "good education" ("The First Colored Woman Novelist," 1892) produced, at the level of public circulation, the assertion that she possessed the right to inhabit the consciousness of the English gentry. The textual configuration withheld the Black trauma and authorial spectacle that the marketing frame led readers to expect.

Farro's approach is best understood through the lens of strategic essentialism and racial performativity. Farro's career serves as a prime case study for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism. Spivak defines this as the "strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (1996, p. 205). As scholars have shown, "the system of political oppression is multidimensional and cannot be deconstructed through only one style of attack" (Newson & Lengel, 2022, p. 25). The publishing marketplace of the 1890s expected African American writers to produce narratives that addressed the race problem, the trauma of slavery, or the quest for social respectability within a Black communal context, creating what Matthews termed "race literature." What the historical record permits us to observe is that the essentialized identity the press projected was not refused. The surviving press notices reproduce biographical details like her age, her education, her stated literary preferences for Holmes, Thackeray, and Dickens ("The First Colored Woman Novelist," 1892) that could only have reached print through Farro's publisher or through Farro herself, indicating at

minimum a cooperation with the racializing frame within which these details were circulated. No surviving statement from Farro disavows the “first Negro novelist” designation, and the novel continued to circulate under it across multiple notices between 1892 and 1893. The maneuver, whether deliberate or emergent, consisted in coupling that paratextual non-refusal with textual withdrawal. Between 1891 and 1893, newspapers across the United States heralded her as a racial pioneer. The repeated appearance of the “first Negro woman novelist” (“The First Negro Novelist,” 1892b) and the “first colored woman who ever produced and published a novel” (“The Chicago Belongs ...,” 1892) designations across newspapers indicates a coordinated publicity apparatus that Farro neither initiated nor publicly resisted, and that gained her a level of visibility extraordinary for a 26-year-old debut author.

The specific character of the press notices is important for understanding how contemporary readers would have approached the novel. The notices did not merely identify Farro as African American. Instead, they framed her authorship as a racial first, a category-defining event, and thereby prepared readers to encounter the book as a document of Black authorship. Details circulated in the press (her age, her education, her stated favorite authors) reinforced this framing by presenting Farro herself as the object of curiosity. A reader who purchased *True Love* on the strength of these notices opened the book expecting, at minimum, a Black authorial presence legible in the text. What such a reader encountered instead was an English town populated by white characters whose racial identity was so unmarked that the very question of race did not arise. This experience of expectation followed by non-fulfillment is the mechanism through which the paratextual-textual gap acquires its political force. The absence is not silent to the reader who has been told what to expect. It is, precisely for that reader, loud.

This racial branding accompanied the rapid sale of the novel’s first edition as “the first edition is nearly exhausted, and the author is writing another one” (“The First Negro Novelist,” 1892a; “The First Negro Novelist,” 1892c; “The First Negro Novelist,” 1892d). The paratextual record raises a legitimate question about whether *True Love*’s formal choices are explained more parsimoniously by market demand than by political resistance. The answer, on closer examination, is that they are not. A purely market-driven African American author writing in 1891 had readier commercial paths available, including the racial uplift narrative, the slavery memoir, and the postbellum domestic novel centered on Black family life, genres for which a demonstrable readership existed and which Farro’s racialized paratext would have served more directly. To choose instead an English setting populated entirely by white characters in a marketplace that explicitly named her “the first Negro novelist” was not the path of least commercial resistance but one that introduced friction between paratext and text. Market logic alone would have minimized that friction. Farro’s choices maximized it, suggesting that commercial calculation, while undoubtedly present, cannot fully account for the specific configuration of refusals her novel performs. The acceptance of the essentialized identity at the paratextual level functioned tactically rather than ontologically, in the sense that it secured circulation for a text that did not perform the race-work the framing led readers to expect. Whether this asymmetry was authorially designed or emerged from the contingent meeting of an aesthetic preference with a racializing marketplace, its effect in the public sphere is the same: visibility granted on racial grounds underwrote the circulation of a text that withheld racial signification. By not refusing the racializing paratext, Farro engaged what Rezek (2020) identifies as the tactic by which early Black authors challenged “print’s presumed whiteness” (p. 422) not through direct confrontation but through indirect literary navigation of social and racial hierarchies.

3.2 The Textual Condition: The Withdrawal of Racial Signification and the Inversion of Gendered Convention

If the paratextual condition is satisfied by the racializing frame the press constructed around Farro, the textual condition is satisfied by what the novel itself omits and what, in the place of the racial subject, it nevertheless performs at the level of gender. The close readings that follow trace the second condition through three sites. First, Farro revises the angel-of-the-house archetype. Second, she displaces spiritual centrality from a female to a male character. Third, she replaces the sentimental framing of romantic loss with a medical one. Before turning to these three sites, one further clarification is warranted regarding how the textual condition would have registered for contemporary readers. The absence of racial signification in *True Love* is not the kind of absence a modern reader must be taught to notice. Under the reception conditions Section 3.1 has described, it was an absence a reader of 1892 would have encountered as such, having been directed by the press to expect racial content and finding, in the text, none. What the following close readings recover is not merely what the novel omits but what it substitutes in the structural position the reader’s expectation had prepared. That substitution, as the analysis will show, is a critique of gender rather than an absence of politics, and its legibility to the contemporary reader depends on the very expectation of racial testimony that the paratext had installed.

Janey exhibits the “angel of the house” archetype. She is a character defined by her kindness and selflessness. Despite the indifference by her mother, Mrs. Brewster, and the demanding nature of her sister, Mary Ann, Janey remains dedicated to her family. She is described as the “sunshine of her home,” (p. 3) with a “sweet countenance and merry heart,” (p. 3) and her cheerful demeanor brings joy to everyone around her, even in a household marked by tension and favoritism. Janey is patient and caring, bearing her sister’s complaints and demands with a grace that contrasts with her sister Mary Ann, described as “[a] pale, sickly, fretful girl, full of whims, full of complaints, giving trouble to everybody about her” (p. 3). Janey is willing to sacrifice her own comfort (and, eventually and unintentionally, her life) to please her family. One example is when Mary Ann falls ill and wakes Janey at an unreasonable hour, demanding tea. Janey, instead of being annoyed, immediately responds with concern, asking, “Where do you feel pain, dear, in your head or chest, where is it?” (p. 7). Even when Mary Ann snaps back peevishly, accusing her of being unfeeling, Janey remains calm, gently reassuring her, “I will see what I can do” (p. 8). She goes so far as to light a fire and prepare tea herself, although servants were available. Her selflessness is further demonstrated when she offers her own room, which is cooler and better ventilated, for Mary Ann’s care, telling the doctor, “[m]y room is a cool one. The sun never shines upon it” (p. 13). This willingness to sacrifice her comfort for her sister’s health exemplifies Janey’s capacity for unconditional love. Janey’s

engagement to Charles Taylor introduces a romantic dimension to her character and further showcases her virtues. Charles, a wealthy and kind gentleman, deeply admires Janey for her “loving nature” (p. 7) and selflessness. His affection for her stands in stark contrast to the lack of appreciation she receives from her mother and sister. Despite Charles’s desire to protect her from the risks of staying in a fever-stricken household, Janey refuses to leave her family, prioritizing her duties over her own happiness. This decision creates tension between her love for Charles and her sense of responsibility toward her family, a typical trope in domestic fiction.

Yet *True Love* shows subtle signs of generic inversion, most notably in the ironic application of its seemingly conventional conclusion. The novel ends with the narrator’s reflection on love, loss, and resilience, declaring, “fellow sufferers, if we could but read that burden aright, we should see how good it is, and bless the hand that sends it” (p. 119), and contrasting the joy of new beginnings with the sorrow of inevitable endings. This final reflection appears to encapsulate the Victorian domestic tradition’s focus on an inward spiritual journey, where personal suffering is framed as a divinely ordained test leading to pious acceptance. In doing so, it diverges from the American domestic tradition, which reimagined the home as a base for an outward civic mission aimed at national reform. However, the novel complicates its own Victorian alignment through the ironic application of this message. The profound reflection on suffering is reserved not for the heroine, whose death is treated with surprising brevity, but for a male character, Charles. This shift in sympathy is sharply at odds with the genre’s conventional focus on the heroine’s spiritual journey as the narrative’s moral center, suggesting a quiet inversion of the very tradition it otherwise seems to uphold. This displacement of spiritual enlightenment from female to male subject disrupts Victorian literary expectations and constitutes a departure from the genre’s gendered conventions. The textual evidence for this displacement is concrete. Charles is granted a religious vision in which, as he tells Mary, “I dreamt I saw Jesus Christ standing by the window waiting for me, he had his hand stretched out to me with a smile, so vivid had been the impression that when I awoke, I thought it was a reality” (pp. 115-116). His deathbed scene extends this spiritual centrality. His final word is “Jesus,” and he tells his sisters, “Don’t grieve, I am going on first” (p. 117). Janey, by contrast, is granted no comparable transfiguration. Janey’s death, caused by the fever she contracts while caring for Mary Ann, serves a symbolic purpose beyond highlighting the heroine’s selfless nature. Her death occurs largely offstage and is recounted retrospectively in summary form. The genre’s gendered spiritual hierarchy is thus reversed in these scenes.

What appears on the surface to be a faithful execution of Victorian deathbed convention is in fact its quiet inversion, and this inversion exemplifies the broader pattern this article traces, in which Farro inhabits the formal architecture of her source tradition while withholding the assumptions on which that architecture conventionally rests. In order to grasp the meaning behind this, we need to examine the conventional representation and function of the death scene of the “angel of the house” in American domestic fiction. In works like Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the death of virtuous female characters, such as Little Eva, serves as a moralizing tool to highlight social injustices and promote reform. Little Eva’s death is imbued with spiritual transcendence, symbolizing purity and moral righteousness while awakening sympathy for enslaved people and urging resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law. Her passing is not merely a personal tragedy but a narrative device to inspire societal change, reinforcing ideals of piety, purity, and feminine martyrdom. As Jane Tompkins (1986) notes, such deaths have a cultural function, using “sentimental power” to mobilize readers toward moral and political action (p. 122). However, these portrayals often idealize suffering as redemptive, particularly for women, and tie their worth to their ability to endure pain for others. While effective in their time, such tropes have long faced criticism for reducing female characters to symbols of moral virtue rather than fully realized individuals (Baym, 1993; Berlant, 2008; Douglas, 1977). Stowe’s use of Little Eva’s death exemplifies how American domestic fiction often used female martyrdom as a means of advocating for social reform, blending emotional appeal with moral and political messaging.

In *True Love*, however, Farro shifts the narrative focus from idealized notions of spiritual transcendence or social reform to the human cost of Janey’s caregiving and family obligations. Unlike the moralizing or sentimental framing typical of nineteenth-century domestic fiction, Janey’s death emphasizes the physical and emotional toll of her selflessness, exposing the burdens placed on women within the domestic sphere. The text emphasizes the bodily cost of Janey’s caregiving with unusual specificity. Asking to remain in bed, Janey tells her mother “Oh, mamma, I am sick; indeed I am. I can hardly lift my head for the pain; feel how hot it is” (p. 51). Mrs. Brewster refuses, accusing her of selfishness toward “that dear, suffering angel” Mary Ann (p. 51). When the doctor finally arrives, he finds Janey “stretched out on the floor before the fire, groaning,” and cries out, “How long has she been like this? ... Child, child, why did they not send for me?” (p. 53). The text refuses to spiritualize this exhaustion. It presents it as bodily collapse produced by labor neither valued nor relieved. The white woman in Farro’s narrative is neither privileged by her race nor protected by her social status. She is subjected to the toxic gender expectations of the period. Though Janey’s passing creates a brief sense of loss for her family and fiancé, this grief is short-lived. The novel quickly illustrates how life moves on for those left behind. Mrs. Brewster, who had openly favored Mary Ann over Janey, is soon preoccupied with her surviving daughter, who is eager to return to public life. The novel stages this explicitly at the social gathering Mary Ann insists on attending while still in deep mourning for Janey. Mrs. Brewster explains the visit as an accommodation of Mary Ann’s demands: “poor child, she continues so weak and poorly that I scarcely know what to do with her, she set her heart upon coming here ever since Mrs. Brown’s invitation arrived; she has talked of nothing else, and I thought it would not do to cross her” (pp. 69-70). When she adds that Mary Ann grieves Janey “always,” the narrator pointedly registers George Taylor’s silent counter-judgment “I don’t believe it” (p. 70). The novel thus dramatizes, rather than merely reports, the rapidity with which Janey’s sacrifice is set aside once it ceases to be useful.

Even the illness of Janey’s grieving fiancé, Charles Taylor, is not caused by the emotional devastation of her death, but by a hereditary condition from his mother’s side. The novel explicitly frames Charles’s decline in medical rather than sentimental terms. Mary recognizes

the symptoms as identical to those that had killed their mother, noting that “a sharp acute pain had occasionally attacked her, the symptom of the inward malady of which she had died” and recalls that “the doctors had expressed their fears then that it might be hereditary” (pp. 75-76). When George asks whether the pain might be rheumatism, Charles replies that “it is something worse than rheumatism” (p. 97) and confirms to George that what is killing him is “the same” that killed his mother (pp. 97-98). This medical explanation for Charles’s decline, rather a romantic one, represents a significant departure from domestic fiction conventions. In these fictions, male characters frequently waste away from broken hearts after losing their beloved. Unlike the consumptive male characters of novels such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) or Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854–1855), whose physical deterioration symbolizes emotional suffering, Charles’s condition is presented as a matter of genetic inevitability rather than sentimental tragedy, further undermining the conventional romantic narrative that typically frames female sacrifice as inspiring male devotion. Farro invites readers to consider not just the sacrifices women make for their families, but also the ways in which those sacrifices are often quickly forgotten or dismissed once their absence is no longer an inconvenience. The novel’s critique of the household’s gendered economy is voiced explicitly within the text itself, not only inferable from its structure. Doctor Brown indicts Mrs. Brewster for having “lost her treasure and kept her bane” (p. 60), and Mrs. Brewster herself confesses, in the recognition that arrives only after Janey’s death, “I would give my own life to bring her back. I never knew her worth until she was gone, I never loved her as I love her now” (p. 55). The text thereby names what the angel-of-the-house convention typically suppresses: that the angel’s value is registered only after her labor has ended in death, and that the recognition arrives too late to alter the structure that consumed her. Through this nuanced approach, the novel is both a critique of and a contribution to domestic fiction, revising sentimental tropes to present a more complex and critical exploration of white women’s roles within the family and society. These textual moves in this section satisfy the second condition the framework requires. The novel does not deliver the racial signification its paratext leads readers to expect, and the absence is not evasive silence but a substitution. Gender critique occupies the structural position the marketplace had reserved for racial testimony.

3.3 The Relational Condition: Sustained Gap, Authorial Self-Positioning, and the Distinction from Assimilation

The third condition, that the gap between paratext and text be sustained rather than incidental, is what distinguishes strategic deracination from mere absence, assimilation, and market accommodation. Three bodies of evidence satisfy this third condition. First, the asymmetry between paratext and text in Farro’s case must be distinguished from assimilation, with which it might easily be confused. Assimilation, properly understood, would require Farro to have disavowed the racial framing imposed by the press, or at a minimum to have distanced herself from it through public statement or biographical retreat from Black communities. The historical record shows the opposite. As Section 3.1 established, Farro did not disavow the “first Negro novelist” designation, and the novel continued to circulate under it across multiple notices between 1892 and 1893. What she withheld was not racial identification at the paratextual level but racial signification at the textual level, an asymmetry that assimilation cannot account for, since assimilation would predict alignment between paratext and text rather than the friction between them that strategic deracination names.

Second, the relational condition is satisfied by the way the text’s stylistic and citational practice performs an authorial identity continuous with the universalist literary ambition the preface articulates rather than with the racial-representative function the press notices imposed. Racial performativity, established in Section 2, supplies the analytical lens for this dimension of the argument. For Farro, the act of authorship navigated between two conflicting sets of signs: these signs are the “Black author” as a public figure and the “Victorian novelist” as a creative voice. That *True Love* appeared in this marketplace, under this paratext, registered as an anomalous event in the field of African American writings. At a time when Black life in America was being increasingly defined by Jim Crow laws and the “literary ghetto” of white-life fiction was not yet an established mode of authorial response for African Americans, the novel’s commitment to white British characters functioned, in this marketplace, as a refusal of the expectations that constrained Black writers. The text’s adoption of the stylistic markers of white Victorian literature performed an authorial identity that exceeded the racial categories within which Farro was publicly framed, producing friction with the practices that attempted to confine African American creative expression to predetermined racial categories.

One might object that Farro’s stated admiration for Holmes, Thackeray, and Dickens explains her stylistic choices as a matter of taste rather than politics, and that no further interpretation is required. This objection captures something real and should not be dismissed. Aesthetic affiliation is plainly part of the explanation for the novel’s form. However, aesthetic preference and political resistance are not mutually exclusive categories, and treating them as such reproduces precisely the racialized expectation this article interrogates, namely that a Black author’s aesthetic choices must be either reducible to racial expression or politically inert. The argument advanced here is rather that, under the historical condition of an essentializing print marketplace, an aesthetic preference for white-authored English models, once realized in a published novel released under such a marketing frame, itself becomes politically meaningful.

Third, the relational condition is satisfied most directly by Farro’s own preface, which positions the novel within a transatlantic literary field rather than within the racial-testimony tradition the marketplace expected of her. In it, she expresses her desire to contribute to a literary field “diligently cultivated by the best minds in Europe and America” (p. 1). This statement situates Farro within a transatlantic literary tradition that had long excluded African American voices, demonstrating her determination to claim a place in a global conversation about literature and culture. Her goal, as articulated in the preface, is to explore the transformative effects of “true love” through a narrative that is both engaging and grounded in proper romance. Farro states explicitly in the preface that she has “tried to make the plot exciting without being sensational or common, although within the bounds of proper romance” (p. 1), distancing her work from the racialized narratives that often dominated portrayals of African Americans in literature. Instead, she creates a story that speaks to

universal themes of love, morality, and personal transformation, implicitly asserting that African American writers could excel in genres traditionally dominated by white authors. This decision positions her novel within a literary field broader than the one the marketplace assigned to her, and within that broader frame the text can be read as an act of refusal as well as a contribution to the range of African American literary practice. With all three conditions jointly satisfied, *True Love* registers not as failed plagiarism, market accommodation, or aesthetic assimilation, but as the specific operation this article has named strategic deracination.

4. Conclusion

This study has positioned *True Love* as an alternative form of literary resistance through what I have termed strategic deracination. That *True Love* is set in England with exclusively white characters cannot be read as an abandonment of racial concerns. The text's relation to its racialized paratext, whatever its authorial genesis, functions as a negotiation of the constraints placed on African American authors in the late nineteenth century. The textual evidence developed in Section 3 (Farro's ironic displacement of spiritual enlightenment from a female to a male character and her unmythologized treatment of Janey's death) demonstrates that her apparent conformity to Victorian convention is accompanied by a partial reworking of both the racial expectations the paratext imposed and the gender conventions the genre installed. The reading advanced here does not claim that assimilation, commercial calculation, or aesthetic preference are absent from Farro's practice, but rather that none of these, taken individually, accounts for the specific configuration of refusals *True Love* performs. Strategic deracination is the framework that integrates what each registers partially.

Beyond its specific findings about Farro, the case of *True Love* yields three theoretical conclusions for the study of nineteenth-century African American literature. First, the concept is not a synonym for transnationalism, performativity, or strategic intertextuality. Instead, it names the operation those frameworks individually approach but do not isolate. Second, it suggests that strategic essentialism, as Spivak conceived it, must be understood not only as a political tactic deployed by subaltern collectives but also as an authorial practice operating at the level of the literary marketplace, one in which the very category that constrains the writer becomes the mechanism of her circulation. Third, the article's findings suggest that Rezek's essentializing phase of print racialization should be understood as having generated not only the constraints he describes but also a corresponding set of evasions (strategic deracination among them) that scholarship has yet to fully catalogue. Recovering this set would substantially revise our map of late nineteenth-century African American literary resistance, which has been drawn largely from texts that confront racial ideology directly. Farro's case suggests that an equally significant tradition operates by oblique address.

A final word is warranted on the scope of the concept advanced here. By tying strategic deracination to Rezek's "essentializing phase" of print racialization, this article has deliberately rendered the concept historically specific rather than universally portable. Strategic deracination, as defined in the preceding analysis, requires a marketplace in which Black-authored books were expected to function as racial testimony. Outside that condition (established in Section 2) deracination is not strategic but mere absence. Whether the concept can be productively extended beyond the late nineteenth-century print culture in which Farro wrote, to the Harlem Renaissance, to mid-twentieth-century debates over universalist Black writing, or to contemporary post-soul fiction, is a question this article cannot resolve but hopes to open. Frank Yerby's mid-twentieth-century career, for instance, presents a particularly striking test case. As the first African American author to produce a bestselling novel with *The Foxes of Harrow* (1946), Yerby made a sustained career of historical romances populated largely by white characters and publicly resisted being categorized as a "Negro writer," even as his work circulated within a racialized authorial frame. Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* (1947), which centers on an Italian-American protagonist and refuses to confine its Black-authored narrative to the race question, offers a second candidate. At the earlier boundary of the twentieth century, the case of Jean Toomer's authorial trajectory after *Cane* (1923), and elements of Nella Larsen's positioning within the Harlem Renaissance marketplace, would each test the boundary between strategic deracination and the assimilation from which Section 2 is careful to distinguish it. Each of these literary-historical moments features its own configuration of marketplace expectation, paratextual racialization, and authorial refusal, and each would test the concept against historical conditions distinct from those that obtained in the late nineteenth century. The recovery of strategic deracination as an analytic category should therefore be understood as a beginning rather than a conclusion, an invitation to ask, across the long history of African American literary production, where else the politically charged silence traced in *True Love* might be found, and what it has meant, in each of its historical moments, to refuse, by structural design, to write the race.

Declaration of the Use of AI

The author used Claude Opus 4.7 (developed by Anthropic) solely for language editing purposes, including grammar and punctuation correction and improvement of clarity and academic style. The tool was not used to generate ideas, develop arguments, conduct analysis, or identify bibliographic sources. All scholarly content, including the concept of "strategic deracination," the close readings of Sarah E. Farro's *True Love* (1891), and the conclusions drawn, is entirely the author's own. Every suggestion produced by the tool was reviewed individually by the author, who retained full editorial control and takes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

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