Unsettling Feminist Traditions: Domesticities and Agency in U.S. Black Women's Life Writing, 1850-1926

Martha Pitts

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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UNSETTLING FEMINIST TRADITIONS: DOMESTICITIES AND AGENCY IN U.S. BLACK WOMEN’S LIFE WRITING, 1850-1926

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

Martha Pitts
B.A., Princeton University, 2001
M.A., George Mason University, 2008
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This dissertation is dedicated to the four greatest loves of my life:

Mommy
Titi
Oli
&
Abe
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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements......................................................................................................................... iii  

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ vi  

Introduction  
Unsettling Feminist Traditions: Domesticites and Agency in U.S. Black Women’s Life Writing, 1850-1926 ............................................................................................................................................... 8  

Chapter One  
Renegotiating Home and Missionary Work in *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* and *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith* ................. 32  

Chapter Two  
Circulations of Body and Word: Refiguring Domestic Labor in the Kitchen Testimonies of Eliza Potter and Elizabeth Keckly.................................................................................................................... 72  

Chapter Three  
Civil War, Civil Rights: Susie King Taylor’s Motherwork ............................................................. 106  

Chapter Four  
Post-Marital Agency, Collaborative Authorship, and Mobile Couplehood in *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed* ........................................................................................................................................ 138  

Conclusion  
Reading Nineteenth-Century Black Women’s Life Narratives and Black Feminist Theorizing.................................................................................................................................................. 168  

References...................................................................................................................................... 179  

Vita............................................................................................................................................... 187
Abstract

Since its inception, black feminist criticism has produced a number of sophisticated theoretical works that have challenged traditional approaches to both black literature and U.S. women’s writing, as well as assumptions about canon, the concept of tradition, narrative conventions, and more. Far too often, black feminist criticism has been associated with essentialism and presumed to have an anti-theoretical bias. This project begins at this disjuncture and argues that as a mode of analysis and a strategy of reading, black feminist criticism has lost none of its strengths and potential, and that there are still new paths to take and new trajectories to chart. My dissertation, Unsettling Feminist Traditions: Domesticities and Agency in U.S Black Women’s Life Writing, 1850-1926, examines African American women’s representations of domesticity in non-canonical autobiographical narratives published in the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century. Using feminist theory and historical methods, I argue that black women relied upon the tenets and language of domesticity to imagine themselves as active agents within the context of public life. These texts deviate from conventional depictions of nineteenth-century black domesticity as tied to the sentimentalized slave-mother, and I argue that the broader conceptualizations of home, family, domestic labor, motherhood, and marriage engaged by Amanda Berry Smith, Nancy Prince, Eliza Potter, Elizabeth Keckly, Susie King Taylor, and Emma Ray serve to craft new ways of thinking about agency, identity, and subjectivity.

The lack of textual frameworks other than those of impoverished, undereducated, enslaved, and profoundly victimized Africans in America has engendered a flattening of the ways in which we approach texts authored by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black women. By paying closer attention to alternative genealogies offered in these autobiographical
narratives, we can begin to contextualize and articulate different concerns and priorities for the fields of black women’s literary history.
Introduction

Unsettling Feminist Traditions: Domesticities and Agency in U.S. Black Women’s Life Writing, 1850-1926

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I am and my children are now free! . . . The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children’s sake far more than my own.

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*

On February 16, 1888, fifty-one-year-old Amanda Berry Smith, a missionary in Liberia, adopted Baliboo, a three-year-old Kru boy.¹ According to Smith’s *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist* (1893), the father of the boy she referred to as “little Bob,” begged Smith to take his son to America and learn about God. Conversing in “broken English,” which Smith eased into when she conversed with the natives, the father said, “‘I want you to take that pick’n and teach him God palaver,’ pointing to little Bob. ‘Myself, I be fool; I no sabe [sic] God. I don’t want my pick’n to be fool all same like myself’” (394).² Smith, who had been working as an independent missionary in Liberia and other parts of West Africa for five years, desired a son, despite experiencing recurring bouts of malaria, respiratory problems, and arthritis attacks. In fact, it was because of, and not in spite of, her ailments that she wanted to adopt another child, having adopted a young native girl, Frances, years before. Though her reasons for adopting Frances were not explicitly stated in her autobiography, Smith’s reasons for wanting to adopt Bob distinctly reflected the agenda of the transnational evangelical movement: “So I thought if I could get a nice little boy I would train him for a missionary, and a doctor as well. I saw how he might do much good. So I felt led to pray, and ask the Lord to open the way that I might get a boy” (393). After Smith accepted the father’s request, she signed an adoption agreement, which she reprinted in her autobiography, writing, “Now there was Bob; a little, naked heathen, but was happy as a prince” (398).
Expressing a combination of maternal pride and colonial inclinations as she documented Bob’s progress learning English and Bible verses, Smith’s interactions with her adopted son are emblematic of missionary work’s dependency on the tenets and language of domesticity as a way of inspiring and legitimating its global projects. Smith’s sense of maternal duty and moments of kinship and solidarity with the Liberians articulated less a sense of uncomplicated moments of domesticity than a series of productive (or at times unproductive) tensions between individual desire and duty to community, between woman as private domestic subject and woman as public evangelist, and between the metaphorical image of a black female missionary looking after black Liberian “wards” and a black “sister” finally coming “home” to her African brethren. Though Smith’s text, *An Autobiography*, hasn’t received the kind of attention from feminist scholars that Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) has, despite engaging similar themes, I argue that Smith’s text has as much to tell us about how nineteenth-century black women relied upon the language of domesticity to imagine themselves as active agents within the context of public life.

Smith’s particular engagements with the maternal via missionary work in the African space of Liberia, a former American colony created for emancipated slaves, unsettle the narrative of “the domestic” in nineteenth-century black women’s writing. Black feminist literary criticism, in particular, has privileged a particular narrative of domesticity, relying, almost exclusively, on Jacobs’ slave narrative in theorizing nineteenth-century black women’s relationship to motherhood, home, family, the domestic space of nation, and even contemporary black feminism. Scholarly analysis of Jacobs has set the parameters for discourses on black women’s relationship to domesticity and the “domestic,” terms that have traditionally occupied central positions in the study of nineteenth-century American women and their works. The trope
of the heroic slave-mother, the framing of Jacob’s sexuality as both a site oppression and agency, and Jacob’s exclusion from and critique of the ideology of “True Womanhood” have defined how we analyze texts by nineteenth-century black women. For example, black feminist scholars such as Hazel Carby and Claudia Tate have argued that Jacobs’ deployment of domesticity was a means to expose it as a racist, sexist ideological system, and it also served as a “heroic maternal discourse” that framed “the abolitionist poetics of her text” (Tate 32). In these formulations, domesticity is politicized and sentimentalized within the parameters of anti-slavery discourses that overlook the ways in which many nineteenth-century black women saw in domesticity a means of access to social and political worlds from which they as black women were largely excluded. Ultimately, these alternative narratives represent black female agency as a layered, shifting, and complex reality in material and discursive contexts that have suppressed or denied this agency and alternative ways of knowing.

Before continuing, it might be best to briefly explain how I’m conceptualizing domesticity in this project. Several works and social theories guide my interpretation of domesticity. First, to understand my use of the plural of “domesticity” in my title, I have especially found useful approaches from social and cultural geography to better understand the “pluralistic” and “processual” nature of the term. Robyn Dowling and Emma R. Power argue that “[d]omesticities. . .are the processes and sites through which people can create senses of belonging, safety, security, and comfort. We use the plural rather than the singular because domesticities are produced in myriad ways (homemaking, migration, imperialism), in diverse sites (houses, cars, colonial settlements), and across scales (home, city, national, and transnationals)” (290). I am also guided by post-separate spheres scholarship, which emphasizes “how domesticity is saturated by and dependent on a range of factors, terms, and agents
imagined to lie outside its domain,” to use the words of Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (18). The factors challenge the binaric construction of domesticity as private, feminine, white, and apolitical.

Opening this project with Smith is a fitting one with which to begin this study, in which the key concerns are those raised in Smith’s text and her engagement with transnational missionary work: domesticity, agency, and black feminist criticism. In this project, I examine, in addition to Smith’s autobiography, several examples of autobiographical writing by Nancy Prince, Eliza Potter, Elizabeth Keckly, Susie King Taylor, and Emma Ray in the light of various conceptual terms and themes that have organized some strains of feminist thinking on concerns that fall under the umbrella of “domesticity”: manifest domesticity; domestic servitude and discourses about black women’s labor, motherwork, and intra-racial marriage.

In examining these six life narratives by nineteenth-century U.S. black women, a few of whom figure only cursorily in recent criticism with a black feminist focus, I begin in a place similar to that of Barbara Smith almost forty years ago. Smith’s “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1977) begins with a self-described sense of “not knowing where to begin” in writing about black women. In that essay, Smith set out to establish a practice for reading black women writers—and especially, black lesbian writers—from a feminist perspective, which, for Smith, presumed the necessity of a political movement that would frame the analysis of black women’s “experience” and foster the development of a black feminist political theory. Smith offered the following argument: “A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity. Until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not even know what these writers mean” (134). Such prescriptions for a literary critical
practice coincided with what fellow black feminist critic Mary Helen Washington identified as the “renaissance” of black women writers after 1970. This renaissance allowed black feminist critics to identify black women’s writing traditions and canonize under-taught black women writers.

Since the time of the publication of Smith’s essay, as Farah Jasmine Griffin documents in her essay, “That the Mother’s May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names: A Retrospective of Black Feminist Literary Criticism” (2006), a black feminist criticism has come to exist that examines the very important work of such contemporary authors as Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and many others. In her essay, Griffin reviews the production of black feminist literary criticism, noting that by the mid-1990s it had become “one of the most intellectually exciting and fruitful developments in American literary criticism” (484). Black female literary critics in the 1980s and 1990s—including Mary Helen Washington, Frances Smith Foster, Carla Peterson, Deborah McDowell, Hazel Carby, and Claudia Tate, among many others—probed this work and provided theoretical frameworks for analyzing the texts of earlier black women writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Pauline Hopkins. Rather than simply placing these authors in a context of white American texts, they affirmed the contributions of African American women writers as valuable on their own terms. By focusing on these texts in anthologies and criticism, these critics set the stage for the attention to an expanded body of black women’s writing that continues to be brought to the forefront through analytical paradigms. Griffin argues that work informed by black feminism continues to be important for several reasons:

Readings that focus on the intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality, and nationality with an eye toward equality and justice are especially valuable today; a critique that emerges from those whose positionality has made them experience physical, psychic, and economic violence at the hands of the United States from
within its borders provides a unique insight into the workings of this global, imperial power. (502)

Although Griffin admits that it has experienced a backlash, she argues that black feminist criticism in the twenty-first century continues to offer a useful mode of analysis and strategy of reading, and that many scholars are continuing to expand the field.

On this note, I’d like to offer a few disclaimers. The boundaries between black feminist criticism and theory are very porous; often the terms are used interchangeably. The chapters in this project speak to this fact. However, and what I hope is clear, is that their focus is on black feminist theorizing, i.e. on theoretical models/paradigms that can be applied to literature, which is defined broadly in this project. Also, it’s important to note that black feminist production cannot be limited to scholarship produced solely by black women, a point I will return to in the conclusion. However, because the work of literary recovery has been essential to the development of black feminist criticism, this project is limited to U.S. black women’s literary and cultural productions only.

My project begins from a desire to increase literary analysis of writing by earlier black women writers. I delve into texts authored by black women of the nineteenth century with specific attention to the life narratives they wrote, particularly because the most written about nineteenth-century text by a black woman is Harriet Jacobs’ autobiographical text, and life writing holds an important place in the cultural knowledge project known as black women’s studies, which emerged from the intricate connections among political, scholarly, and creative projects, including black feminist social activism, the study of black women writers, and the activity of black feminist criticism. Unsettling Traditions does not investigate life writing as a genre, and concerns over form and classification that frequently preoccupy scholars of autobiographical writing are beyond the scope of this project. To grasp the wider significance of
black women’s engagement with a variety of autobiographical forms beyond the slave narrative, I want to examine autobiography less as an example of genre than of method, similar to what Tess Costlett, Celia Lury, Penny Summerfied do in their edited collection *Feminism and Autobiography* (2000). To view autobiographical writing in this way forces “a change in the perception of autobiography as not just a literary genre or a collection of texts, but also as a widespread cultural practice, produced as much by social pressure as by an individual inner necessity” (17). I am also invested in interrogating black feminist criticism’s continued investment in the privileging of Jacobs’ important work when we think about black writing, womanhood, identity, subjectivity, etc., and what it means to understand these concepts using, almost exclusively, Jacobs’ text.

In the rest of this introduction, I will examine “agency,” another key term that is part of my project’s title, trace domesticities’ literary genealogies that emerged from both Anglo-American and African American feminist criticism, and briefly outline the development of black feminist criticism, ending with brief summaries of each chapter. In sum, feminist voices have been the most vocal and most productive in understanding domesticities. For feminist scholars, domesticity is a key site in the daily lives of women and the reproduction of gendered identities and practices.

**Agency**

As a retrospective narrative, the autobiographical text is apparently steeped in agentive awareness. Agency here connotes self-reflexivity that sees the individual self as autonomous, active, and in charge. “Consequently,” writes Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “we tend to read autobiographical narratives as acts and thus proof of human agency. They are once sites of agentic narration where people control the interpretation of their lives and stories, telling of
individual destinies and expression of ‘true’ selves” (54). With regards to black women’s autobiographical writing, black feminist criticism has provided particularly fruitful analytical frameworks for portraying black autobiographical subjects as active agents whose lives are far richer and more complex than past narratives had suggested. However, contemporary mainstream feminists’ articulations of nineteenth-century black women’s agency, as I will discuss in my analysis of Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life*, has been narrow and not understood within specific temporal contexts. We must acknowledge that how black female subjects claim, practice, and narrate agency is more than simply a matter of free will and individual autonomy.

Following the theories of anthropologist Saba Mahmoud, I understand agency as operative within specific cultural and temporal contexts; thus it must be understood, grasped, and its meaning sought in its particular milieu. According to Mahmood, the concept of agency needs to be delinked from liberal politics that views resistance as agency. The general perspective is that it is through resistance—whether enacted in everyday life or as intentionally undertaken to alter gendered power relations—that agency is exercised. However, women’s agency in different contexts has come to be seen, according to Mahua Sarkar, as disrupting the “normative definition of a unified, autonomous subject exerting her will freely toward clearly defined and transparent ends” (21). Notions of agency tied to resistance may be inadequate to understand agentive actions in different situations and contexts. The liberal template that underwrites much of black feminist literary criticism and politics has not always allowed certain black subjects to be understood on their own terms. Part of my goal in this project is to make the texts under study speak back to the feminist and liberal assumptions about black women’s nature—such as the notion that black women’s agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social, cultural, and
political norms. Mahmoud’s theories allow us to reframe our thinking about the many kinds of domesticities experienced by U.S. black women.

**Domesticities**

The importance of discourses on domesticity in nineteenth-century American women’s literary history cannot be overstated. When historian Barbara Welter published her essay, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” in 1962, she probably could not have anticipated the endurance of her analytical framework of the “four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman.” In her examination of the women’s magazines, novels, memoirs and religious texts of the time, Welter concludes that these four cardinal virtues “promised happiness and power” and encouraged women to celebrate hearth and home in their confinement to the private home (152); this configuration of domesticity was marked by, in the words of Susan Roberson, “sessility, immobility, and the interior recesses of the self” (4). Two other frameworks have dominated how we have read the lives and written texts of nineteenth-century U.S. women: Jane Tompkins’ concept of the “cultural work” of women’s fiction, which argues for the political potential of a literature that had been deemed trivial and too sentimental; and the doctrine of separate spheres, invoked first by Alexis de Tocqueville in his 1840 treatise *Democracy in America* and later adopted by second-wave feminist historians and literary scholars; the discourse of separates spheres divides society into binaries: public/private, male/female, political/domestic, etc. In sum, these three scholarly methodologies present an ideological domesticity that depends on the world of home as the private hyper-feminized space of maternal nurturance and the nuclear family and guided a half-century’s worth of scholarship on concerns conventionally associated with domesticity: motherhood, marriage, family life, and house-and
homemaking. Forever altering notions of an American literary tradition and canonicity in the academy, these new alterations of established traditions and canon almost exclusively focused on the lives and fictional written works of white, middle-class women from the Northeast. The trio of twentieth-century methodologies obscured the lives and texts of those who resided at the intersections of a socially constructed gender, class, race, and regional difference during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

By the late 1990s, literary scholars began to correct, modify, and present direct challenges to these models, arguing that the interrelated and sometimes conflated ideologies of true womanhood, separate spheres, and domesticity were contested, uneven, complex, or even non-existent; as a result, scholars claimed, the traditional methodologies became less useful. For example, Frances Cogan, in her study of advice and etiquette books, domestic novels, and short stories published between 1840-1880, describes a coexisting, competing ideal to true womanhood, which she labels “Real Womanhood.” Real Womanhood includes the virtues of physical activity, robust health, and intelligence, along with a strong sense of duty for others within an expanded version of a woman’s sphere. Another challenge to the true womanhood ideal comes from Laura McCalls’ analysis of the same material Welter used in her formulation. McCalls’ close analysis of various texts found that 37 percent of 234 fictional characters possessed none of Welter’s four cardinal virtues and no character possessed all four. Similarly challenging the idea of the passive woman constrained in her private sphere of home, Barbara Cutter’s “redemptive womanhood,” encouraged women to “take an extremely active role in public life” (8). Cutter argues that “the key to the properness of a woman was not her submission to male authority or her presence in a domestic sphere, but her ability to use her special moral,
religious, and nurturing nature to redeem others” by engaging in public activities that were deemed good for the country (7).

The special issue of *American Literature* in 1998, published with additional essays as *No More Separate Spheres: A Next Wave American Studies Reader* in 2002, ignited a call for a post-hagiographic methodology, which attempted to shift conversation about the “separate spheres” doctrine. In their introduction, Cathy Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher tell their readers, “If there is one feature we want students to take away . . . it is a sense of the complexity of the categories of analysis we choose, the way those categories change historically, and the way the categories themselves are only crude maps to more complex subjects” (22).

Prior to the publication of Davidson and Hatcher’s influential text, Lora Romero’s *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (1997) troubled the category of the “domestic woman,” emphasizing the investment in domesticity by all nineteenth-century American writers and not just women. Romero’s analysis of the cultural currency of domesticity positions specific and non-traditional formulations of domesticity as sites of both resistance and complicity. Though my project is greatly informed by Romero and builds on the work of other post-separate spheres’ literary methodologies, I address the absences that mark their works—namely the lack of sustained analysis of nineteenth-century black women’s lives and texts beyond representational tokenism.9

Though my analysis of the lives and works of nineteenth-century black women is informed by both white and black feminist critics and their sometimes overlapping concerns, I focus more on the challenges and modifications presented by black feminist scholars for three reasons: first, black feminist scholars since the 1970s have made black women’s writing—the focus of my project—more visible, noticed, and recognized in and outside the academy; second,
because I deploy a black feminist critical lens attendant to the material realities of black
women’s lives in my analysis of texts, it is important to link my work to the body of criticism
that has informed and shaped how I engage with written texts; and third, though black feminists
have reclaimed and inserted black women’s lives and texts into traditionally white literary
traditions and black male literary traditions, they have not fully challenged the assumptions that
underlie these traditions or fully investigate the concept of “tradition.” What this means is that
certain texts have been hailed as exemplars, while others have been ignored in the construction
of a black women’s literary tradition.

As many scholars have noted, the development of a U.S. black women’s literature and
the criticism it produced was a direct response to both the male bias of the Civil Rights and black
power movements and the women’s movements’ “tendency,” in the words of Farah Jasmine
Griffin, “to normalize the experiences of middle-class white women as equivalent for all women
(485).” As a result, black women found themselves and their experiences marginalized, aptly
captured in the title of a 1982 groundbreaking anthology: *All the Women are White, All the
Blacks are Men, but Some of Us are Brave*. This dilemma became the major thematic and
structural element in black feminist criticism; and black scholars argued that black women’s
writing has always consciously considered what it meant for African American women to be, in
the words of Robert Patterson, “‘raced,’ ‘sexed,’ ‘gendered,’ to name three subject positions, in
American society” (102). In other words, black feminist scholars have claimed that black
women’s writing has always anticipated the concept of “intersectionality,” which has become an
important analytical framework through which black feminist criticism examines black women’s
writing.
As they searched for texts that spoke to their experiences, black scholars recovered black women’s written work that was out of print and discovered new ones. Alice Walker, in the late 1970s, expressed her “desperate need to know and assimilate the experience of earlier black women writers, most of them unheard by you and me, until quite recently” (9) and writes about how re-discovering Zora Neale Hurston’s work validated her own choice of a writers’ life. Black feminists began to claim Hurston and her literary masterpiece *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) because they responded to the novel’s gender politics, particularly its heroine’s sexual agency and independence outside the institution of marriage, from the perspective of a Southern black woman.

What was missing in this narrative of Hurston as the literary foremother was the work of black women who wrote and published before Hurston. This changed considerably with the authentication of Harriet Jacobs’1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Combining the form of the slave narrative and the sentimental novel to create a unique text, Jacobs used her pen and paper to show how her life and experiences simultaneously differed from both formerly enslaved men, with whom she shared racial and class oppression, and white women, with whom she shared sex oppression. Even while nineteenth-century white women strategically usurped the metaphor of slavery to describe their own oppression under white patriarchy, Jacobs highlighted a series of important differences regarding black women’s different relationship to discourses of domesticity, which Ann duCille succinctly summarizes:

As white women lobbied to change divorce laws, black women lobbied to change the laws that prohibited them from marrying. While white women sought definition outside the roles of wife and mother, black women sought the freedom to live within traditional gender roles, to claim the luxury of loving their own men and mothering their own children. (“On Canons” 30)
duCille’s statements highlight not only the divergent experiences and goals of the differently-situated members of American womanhood, but also black women’s investment in a kind of private domesticity that some of their white sisters were attempting to flee. *Incidents* provided scholars a way to theorize the nineteenth-century black female self and her claims to agency centered on motherhood and anti-slavery activism. Claims of Jacobs’ “black feminist principles” and “black feminist consciousness” gave contemporary black feminist literary scholars, as they would argue, some grounding in the nineteenth century. While *Incidents* and the texts I analyze anticipate themes that unify black feminist thought—as both a political movement and literary critical lens—I am less interested in claiming the writers and texts in my study as exemplars of black feminist principles than in offering a black feminist reading focused on the critiques of power differentials across race, class, and gender within the texts.

Nonetheless, as “the most sacred black woman’s text of the nineteenth-century,” to use the words of duCille, *Incidents* has become the representative work of nineteenth-century Black women’s writing—particularly autobiographical writing, and the representative experience of nineteenth-century black womanhood and their engagements with domesticity. Jacob’s salient themes have become the thematic concerns that have shaped the contouric parameters of domesticity, which poses some problems for certain texts by black women, who were born and came of age in the same century as Jacobs.

As the representational-exceptional text in black women’s autobiography, *Incidents* has achieved its much-deserved canonical status, “crop[ping] up on syllabi in American history, Feminist studies, Africana studies, literature of the United States, and other departmental affiliations (6),” according to Rafia Zafar. The work of Zafar, and many other scholars such as Frances Smith Foster, Jean Fagan Yellin, and Carla Peterson, challenged the dismissal and
aesthetic devaluation of Jacobs’ text.\textsuperscript{11} Scholars argued that *Incidents* both domesticized and feminized the presumably gender-free discourse of slavery by highlighting the sexually-violated female slave and the outraged mother, an archetype that Joanne Braxton identifies as one who “sacrifices and improvises to create the vehicles necessary for the survival of flesh and spirit” (21). Scholars have argued that Jacobs defined freedom as an escape from the conditions of slavery and as the ability to experience motherhood, family, and home. As such, Jacobs and her work set the framework for understanding the literary and cultural productions of nineteenth-century black women and “exemplified,” in the words of Robert J. Paterson, “the textual and thematic concerns that ultimately defined black feminist literary criticism” (89). While there is no doubt of the importance of *Incidents* to thinking about black literature, American literature, and feminist studies, our “near-obsession,” in the words of Eric Gardner, “with specific kinds of narratives has drawn sharp and narrow boundaries around ‘what counts’” as and in American literature (9).

Certainly some of the specific phenomena leading to the scholarly oversight of the autobiographical texts under study are tied to those themes that are deemed important in *Incidents*. The slave-mother-author, “plays the hero’s role in most black women’s autobiographies (xxxii),” according to William L. Andrews. Jacobs represents herself as the heroic slave-mother, emphasizing her maternal sentiments while also establishing an important association between herself and domestic ideologies. Relying upon an understanding of the maternal as a form of instinctive attachment, Jacobs presents her actions as largely determined by the effect they will have on her children and their eventual emancipation. Many female slaves were unable to keep their families together, yet by emphasizing the action inspired by maternal sentiment, Jacobs presents motherhood as a site of resistance. By representing a self who is
defined almost exclusively by her maternal identity, Jacobs claims an agency that relies on a rigid binary of resistance/accommodation that has defined much of black feminist literary criticism.

Furthermore, because the generic conventions of the slave narrative and sentimental novel shape Jacobs’ self-representation, alternate models of self-representation are devalued and/or misunderstood. As Joanne Braxton writes, “If I were writing a book on black women’s autobiography today, I would still begin by looking at the works of fugitive and former slave women because however one looks at a tradition of black women writing autobiography, the slave narrative, or if you prefer, the narrative of emancipation, is primary” (130). As such the slave-mother as author and the slave narrative as text have become synonymous with nineteenth-century black authorship and exemplifies the frequent reduction of antebellum and post-bellum black literature to a single, albeit important, genre.

What seems to count in American literature assumes that women such as Smith, Prince, Potter, Keckly, Taylor and Ray have no story to tell because they fail to fit neatly into the context of how we read black American women in the nineteenth century. I admit, however, that their works are not marked by conventional aesthetic accomplishments: the prose is sometimes awkward, dry, and austere. Some scholars would likely consider the lack of literary sophistication unworthy of any extended scholarly analysis. Nonetheless, by focusing on texts that are not marked by conventional aesthetic accomplishments, my project complements other recent works about the writing practices of nineteenth-century African Americans who did not write professionally but were writing in dialogue with issues of their time such as Eric Gardner’s *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature* (2009) and Chris Hagar’s *Word by Word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (2013). Both works expand
the subject of pre-twentieth-century black writing by presenting alternative genealogies that contextualize and articulate different concerns and priorities. Though the writers in my project may lack the literary prowess of certain other writers in the canons, and thus inviting the descriptor, “marginal,” they did not experience themselves or their lives as marginal. In fact, they creatively and actively reimagined themselves and used autobiographical writing to articulate empowered gendered subjectivities. The act of writing becomes, in the words of Rocio C. Davis, a “strategy that blends selfhood and writing” in order to “stress evolving subjectivities, challenge contextual authority, or claim agency” or to “rewrite history and experience” (42).

I am not arguing that we need to push Jacobs and her work to the side. Rather, Jacobs’ *Incidents* should be read with and studied alongside the less canonical works in my study. To do so provides a productive space that demonstrates how these works illuminate each other and need to be juxtaposed with each other in order to be understood in depth.

I return to Mahmoud’s theories of agency to analyze the actions of Smith, Prince, Potter, Keckly, Taylor, and Ray who operate within discourses that have traditionally sustained principles of female and racial subordination: transnational missionary movement, domestic servitude, Civil War remembrance and participation, and marriage. While we can interpret their actions as “accommodating,” arguing that their internalization of dominant norms is the result of socialization, I argue that we can instead look at how Smith, Prince, Potter, Keckly, Taylor and Ray rework the hegemonic meanings of the cultural practices of domesticity and redeployed them for their own interests and agendas. Rather than being on the hunt for expressions and moments of resistance that could suggest a challenge to male or white authority in the social practices that they undertook, I am more interested in looking for ways to move us beyond the simple binary of resistance/accommodation. If this project lacks a unified argument, the
individual chapters address the following question: How are gendered agency and subjectivities produced within normative feminine roles and identities/femininity, some of which are marginally located in social and/or geographic terms? Such engagements reveal far richer and more complex understandings than past readings of nineteenth-century black womanhood.

**Introductions**

Because the women whom I study are not well known, some brief introductions are in order. All but one of these works have been reissued by The Schomberg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, an important series edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and published by Oxford University Press.¹²

In 1799, Nancy Gardner Prince was born free in Newburyport, Massachusetts, a small village more than 30 miles outside of Boston. Raised by a mother unable to cope with the economic and emotional burden of raising eight children on her own, Prince spent much of her youth working as a domestic servant in white households. In *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (1850), Prince documents her years-long struggle to keep her siblings together, her marriage to Nero Prince, and her subsequent travels to Russia where her husband served in the Czar’s court, and Jamaica, where she worked with missionaries to convert newly emancipated Jamaicans. In Russia, where she lived for nine years, Prince boarded children and sold items as an entrepreneur. Before her husband died, Prince left Russia for America because of her health, and in Boston, Prince unsuccessfully attempted to set up a boarding house for Boston’s poor children of color. Prince self-published *A Narrative* three times during the 1850s.

The biographical details of Eliza Potter’s life are scant, and in her memoir she provides few details about her personal life, preferring to provide a behind-the-scenes look at white elite society. What we do know of Potter’s life is the result of the extensive work of Sharon Dean and
Xiomara Santamarina, who edited the latest edition of Potter’s memoir. According to Santamarina, Potter was born free in New York between 1812 and 1820. Potter served as a domestic for wealthy white families in Cincinnati, travelling with them across the United States and to Europe. While employed with an American family, she learned the skill of hairdressing in France, and that subsequently became her main occupation. Travelling throughout the United States, Potter combed and styled women’s hair for the many events that characterized “high life,” including balls and parties held in fancy resort-hotels. According to Santamarina, Potter married at least twice and had two children. Potter published *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* anonymously in 1859.

Elizabeth Keckly, who was born into slavery, was a dressmaker for elite white women, most notabley First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. Though she recounts in her memoir, *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868), the sexual exploitation she experienced as a slave and the birth of her only child, Keckly focuses on her experiences as a modiste and confidante to Lincoln during and following the First Family’s years in the White House. Before this, Keckly bought her freedom and that of her son’s, moving to Baltimore, where she taught sewing to girls of color and then moving to Washington, D.C., six years later. Once in Washington, Keckly gained an esteemed clientele sewing dresses, and became a dressmaker to the wife of Jefferson Davis and then to Mrs. Lincoln.

Amanda Berry Smith was born to enslaved parents in 1837 in Maryland. Smith’s father bought his own freedom after toiling away working toward the goal of freeing his family, and eventually he bought the freedom of his wife and children when Smith was very young. Smith began working as a domestic at the age of 13, and she joined the Methodist church, having dreams and visions through which God communicated with her, according to her autobiography.
She married her first husband four years later, and continued working as a domestic. After her first husband died in the Civil War, she remarried, and experienced sanctification, a process one undergoes to achieve “Christian perfection” and an imperative of the Holiness movement. When her second husband died, Smith became a traveling evangelist, spreading the doctrine of holiness to camp meetings and churches. In the 1870s, Smith preached abroad, becoming an independent missionary in England, India, and Africa, where she spent eight years in Liberia. Upon her return to the United Sates, she opened a school for black orphans outside of Chicago. Smith had five children, and only one survived into adulthood. She also adopted two African children during her travels and ministries in Africa.

Susie King Taylor was born into slavery in 1848 and was raised by her grandmother. Though Taylor writes about her brief experiences as an enslaved person, her narrative, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops Late 1st S. C. Volunteers* (1902), focuses on her experiences as an unofficial nurse and laundress with the Union Army.

Emma Ray was born into slavery in 1859 in Missouri. After the Civil War, Ray attended school until fourth grade and soon after became a domestic in order to help her family financially after her mother died. Eventually she moved further away from home, lived on her own, and at age twenty-eight married Lloyd P. Ray in 1887. In 1889, searching for economic opportunities, the Rays moved to Seattle, becoming part of a small population of African Americans in the area. Emma and L.P. Ray joined the African Methodist Church, and Emma also became active in Seattle’s chapter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. From 1900-1902, the Rays ran a mission in Kansas City, Missouri, for impoverished African American children and a weekly Sunday School. Returning to Seattle, they joined a white, Free Methodist Church; they were
licensed as Free Methodist Conference Evangelists and preached evangelistic meetings in Free Methodist churches throughout the state of Washington for over thirty years. Emma Ray published *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed: Autobiography of Mr. and Mrs. Ray* in 1926.

*Unsettling Feminist Traditions* is divided into four main chapters. In Chapter 1, “Renegotiating Home and Missionary Work in *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* and *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith,*” I read Smith’s and Prince’s texts against Amy Kaplan’s “manifest domesticity,” an ideology that linked the “cult of domesticity” and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. The workings of “manifest domesticity” are complex, and Kaplan argues that domesticity is best understood “not as a static condition” but as “a process of domestication, which entails conquering and taming the wild, the natural, and the alien” (184). As missionaries, both Prince and Smith inevitably engaged with the movement’s civilizing mission to convert peoples throughout the world to Christianity.

Acknowledging that Prince’s and Smith’s missionary work tied them—in ambivalent ways—to discourses of empire and nation, this chapter analyzes the ways in which two black missionary women reimagine manifest domesticity, shifting our understanding of the concept. Indeed, what have been missing from the engagements with the discourse of manifest domesticity are not only the voices of nineteenth-century black women, who were key players in spreading the Gospel beyond the borders of the United States, but also discussions of black women’s nuanced complicity in Christian imperialism and their complex representations of African-descended peoples they came in contact with beyond American borders.

Chapter 2, “Circulations of Body and Word: Refiguring Domestic Labor in the Kitchen Testimonies of Eliza Potter and Elizabeth Keckly” reads *Behind the Scenes* and *A Hairdresser’s Experience* as “kitchen testimonies,” a term that Barbara Ryan uses to categorize
narratives written by servants who witnessed the most intimate aspects of their employers’ lives and wrote about them. In this chapter, I explore the following question: How do Potter’s and Keckly’s self-representations uphold and challenge dominant discourses about black women’s labor, namely through issues around silence, the interplay of visibility/invisibility, and interracial social relations, in their claims to femininity and cultural space?

In Chapter 3, “Civil War, Civil Rights: Susie King Taylor’s Motherwork,” I explore the operations of non-biological maternal agency in Reminiscences of My Life in Camp through the lens of “motherwork,” in order to illustrate Taylor’s survival strategies and challenges to white supremacist remembrances of the Civil War that did not recognize the wartime contributions of African American men and women. Motherwork is a concept developed by Patricia Hill Collins that describes the physical and emotional labor of biological mothers or other women in the community that aims to ensure the survival of families and communities of color in the context of the social inequalities that undermine their survival. I argue that though she recognizes black male heroism, Taylor diminishes the black male presence in order to foreground black women’s maternal heroism that included teaching black soldiers and nursing wounded ones. For Taylor, black women’s wartime work was a privileged site of citizenship-making right alongside black men’s battlefield participation. Ultimately, Taylor uses the maternal trope to underwrite a passionate critique on the ongoing “war” for civil rights.

Chapter 4, “Post-Marital Agency, Collaborative Authorship, and Mobile Couplehood in Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed” focuses on the interconnections between marriage, spirituality, and mobility. Through a concept I call “mobile couplehood,” I examine how Emma Ray reinforces and reimagines the domestic ideals of marital love and duty while also making visible her own individuality outside the couple. I argue that mobile couplehood both reimagines and
reinforces traditional gender roles and hierarchical power relations against a Western landscape that has been a symbol of white hegemonic masculinity. Thus, examining *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed* and understanding the Rays’ shared vision and mobility furthers our understanding of the emancipatory potential of black marriage and its authorization of an emergent black feminine subject.

While each of the chapters introduce a fascinating author or two and texts worthy of study in and of themselves. I also hope that each functions as a springboard for new dialogues and as an indication of where I find some of the most fascinating reworkings of the relationship of domesticity to race, class, and gender. Each chapter links black women’s changing social roles and the range of autobiographical genres they engaged to broad socio-cultural transformations, geopolitical, economic, and technological. They offer opportunities to consider the shaping of identities in the context of American discourses of identity, agency, and belonging. On the practical side, these chapters propose new ways of directing analysis to bring about a fuller understanding of earlier black women’s writing and autobiographical practices. The critical labor of doing justice to these works is an important task ahead of the new generation of black feminist critics.

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Notes

1 The Kru people are an ethnic group indigenous to Liberia. Smith does not mention that she renamed her adopted son; Adrienne M. Israel includes that information in her biography of Smith. See *Amanda Berry Smith: From Washerwoman to Evangelist* (Lantham and Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, 1998) 86.

2 According to the lengthy footnote in George Thompson’s *Thompson in Africa: or, An Account of the Missionary Labors, Sufferings, Travels, and Observations* (1854), “palaver” is a very ambiguous and ubiquitous word: “Some examples,” Thompson writes, “will illustrate. If two persons dispute, or quarrel, they have a ‘palaver.’ If one prosecutes another he makes ‘a palaver with him.’ If rice or cassada is scarce, ‘rice palaver is very hard.’ To consult about war, is ‘war palaver.’ Peace, is ‘peace palaver.’ To talk about God, or to preach is ‘God palaver’” (61).

4 *But Some of Us are Brave*, 132.


6 The “Cult of True Womanhood” has also become to be known as the “cult of domesticity”; in fact, the two conceptual terms are often used interchangeably by scholars. See Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860.” *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-74.


9 What I mean by representational tokenism is the presentation of as discussion of American women’s writing and including a lone black author in this discussion.


11 On the one hand, the acute critical attention *Incidents* has received within the last couple decades is long overdue. For years, scholars and critics, mostly male, resisted the idea that *Incidents* was an “authentic” slave narrative and believed it to be a work of fiction. It wasn’t until Jean Fagan Yellin’s extensive and dedicated research confirmed that the book was not only true but also written by Harriet Jacobs, the “Linda Brent” who was listed as the author when it was first published. Indeed, “Jacobs,” in the words of Rafia Zafar, “missing person in African American women’s and nineteenth-century studies for so long, now appears ubiquitous. . .” (6). See Zafar and Deborah M. Garfield, “Introduction,” *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*.

12 The Schombberg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers is a series concerned with recovering writings by black women absent from the nineteenth and twentieth-century lists.
Chapter One
Renegotiating Home and Missionary Work in A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince and An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith

In the scholarly criticism of nineteenth-century U.S. autobiographies by black women, those who study the writings of spiritual women who participated in Christian evangelical movements have traditionally envisioned these women as heavily invested in the politics of local American communities. Although one of these women, Zilpha Elaw, eventually emigrated to England and had a twenty-year long itinerant preaching career there, encountering patriarchal opposition similar to her experiences in America, this moment has traditionally supported arguments for black women’s clear commitment to a proto-feminist, Western aesthetic, documenting, in the words of Kimberly Blockett, “the dichotomous relationship between the feminization of the American church and the institutional sanctions against women’s advances in religious leadership and preaching” (96). Scholars have missed opportunities to move nineteenth-century black women away from an exclusively local and national context to a transnational and international discourse, which is an approach that better reflects black women’s inclinations to transcend physical and social barriers. This omission obscures the fact that the evangelical Christian movement was a transnational phenomenon that encouraged and compelled women, both white and black, to move beyond the domestic space of home and nation and advance a universal Kingdom of God as missionaries.

Nancy Gardner Prince and Amanda Berry Smith were among the free Northern black women who participated in the missionary movement and its civilizing mission to convert peoples throughout the world to Christianity. For these women, the invocation of Christianity was not only an empowering discourse in the face of persistent racist and sexist oppression but also one that authorized their movements abroad in order to improve the lives and status of
women and children in various geographic locales. Prince’s 1850 autobiography, *The Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*, gives an account of her nine-year residence in Russia and her work as a teacher with a white Baptist missionary group in post-emancipation Jamaica in 1841 and 1842.¹ After returning from her missionary travels abroad from 1878 to 1890, working primarily with the Methodist Episcopal Church, a white denomination, Smith published *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord’s Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist* (1893).² Smith achieved international acclaim as a holiness preacher, and her narrative chronicles her preaching tours and missionary work in such countries as England, India, and Liberia.³ She wrote the autobiography, in part, to help raise enough money to support her plans for an orphanage for black children in Chicago.⁴ Both narratives by women who worked within and outside the organized Christian church illuminate understandings of the operations of domesticity in the African diaspora through the continuous renegotiations of home and “feeling at home” as local place.

These renegotiations can be better understood, in part, through Amy Kaplan’s “manifest domesticity,” a concept that underwrote U.S. women’s engagement with transnational missionary work. Scholars have long recognized that missionary discourse depended on the language of domesticity to reach its transcultural and transnational goals, as Kaplan illuminates:

> The border between the domestic and foreign...deconstructs when we think of domesticity not as a static condition but as a process of domestication, which entails conquering and taming the wild, the natural, the alien. Domestic in this sense is related to the imperial project of civilizing, and the conditions of domesticity often become markers that distinguish civilization from savagery. Through the process of domestication, the home contains within itself those wild or foreign elements that must be tamed; domesticity not only monitors the borders between the civilized and the savage but also regulates traces of the savage within itself. (184)
Kaplan’s work focuses on how nineteenth-century white middle-class women participated in American domesticity’s imperial project by attempting to expand their influence beyond the home and nation, while also policing the boundaries of home against the threat of the foreign. Supporting her claims with readings by Catherine Beecher’s *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841) and Sara Josepha Hale’s work as editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and her novel *Liberia* (1852), Kaplan offers insightful analysis of women-authored texts in order to bring to light the inseparability of “narratives of domesticity and female subjectivity” and “narratives of empire and nation building” (186).

In this context, transnational missionary work encompasses the extension and protection of “home,” where “home” has varied meanings: house as home, nation as home, and Kingdom of God as home, and potentially, the diaspora as home. If white missionary women’s interpretations of Christian/heathen, civilized/savage, and proselytizers/proselytized, for example, played on these meanings in the written works they left behind, what would black-authored works reveal? How would placing nineteenth-century black women as the civilizers/domesticators in manifest domesticity’s framework, making the concept more attendant to U.S. black subjects as agents, shift our understanding of Kaplan’s theories?

A black feminist reading of *A Narrative* and *An Autobiography*, using manifest domesticity as an analytical framework, acknowledges that Prince’s and Smith’s missionary work tied them—in ambivalent ways—to discourses of empire and nation. This discourse was potentially empowering because it provided black women opportunities for independence and leadership, and organized their stages of spiritual growth, self-realization, and sense of national belonging as inculcators of westocentric Christian and domestic ideology. A black feminist reading of these narratives also illuminate black women’s nuanced representations of African-
descended peoples they came in contact with beyond American borders, and in the process, these narratives become meditative texts that enable Prince and Smith to comment on larger issues about transnational racial affiliations or “imagined communities.”

In attempting to better understand how Prince and Smith reconfigure the operations of manifest domesticity, it is important to understand the political importance of the various geographic locales they find themselves in; both women both felt compelled to go to places racially marked by ambivalent post-slavery understandings of blacks as citizens. It is significant that when Nancy Prince first arrived in Jamaica in 1841, she entered a country that had become emancipated just three years prior. According to Gale L. Kenny, Americans looked at post-emancipation Jamaica “with great anticipation as they waited to see how Britain’s great experiment would proceed” (1). After emancipation in 1838, to strengthen their economy, British colonial officials tried to recruit free black Americans to immigrate to Jamaica, according to Kenny, promoting the island as a place where black Americans could have the economic, political, and social equality that they didn’t have in America. During this period, Baptist missionaries also began flocking to the island, focused on the spiritual conversion of the formerly enslaved black population. Add to this, the U.S. emigrationist debates that were heating up as restrictive laws such as the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act prompted blacks to consider “home” in alternative places beyond the border of the United States.

Nancy Prince published a pamphlet on Jamaica, *The West Indies, Being a Description of the Islands, Progress of Christianity, Education and Liberty Among the Colored Population Generally* (1841), which included a brief section warning U.S. blacks about immigration to Jamaica.
Like Jamaica, Liberia held out the promise of equality, and its project of nation-building linked the Christianizing mission to modernization, albeit in a markedly different way. Liberia was established in 1821 as a Christian missionary colony for emancipated blacks by the American Colonization Society (ACS). The motivation for the founding of Liberia, although variable among individual members, can be summarized into two main arguments: The first, and most consistent, was the argument about white racial prejudice and anti-black sentiments. The second argument was articulated as the kindness of sending blacks “back” to Africa, both for them and the native Africans they would Christianize. This line of argument was especially popular among religious proponents of Liberian colonization, including northern opponents of slavery like Lyman Beecher, the father of novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe.

When Smith travelled to Liberia in 1879, the United States was in turmoil after federal troops were withdrawn from the South, which officially ended Reconstruction. In An Autobiography, Smith comments on post-Reconstruction black-led efforts to immigrate to Liberia, which many saw as a land of promise, freedom, and liberty.

My readings of A Narrative and An Autobiography will begin with brief biographical sketches, meant to be partial and subjective. I will then comment upon the striking similarities in Prince’s and Smith’s lives and experiences, and then I will examine each work separately, first looking at their early desires for the stability of home as private domesticity and then looking at how missionary work shaped their particular brand of domesticity that enabled an agency beyond the borders of the physical home and the United States.

Prince was born in Newburyport, Massachusetts in 1799. Her father, Thomas Gardner, was her mother’s second husband, and he died when Prince was a young girl. Prince’s mother married twice more and gave birth to a total of eight children. Serving as a surrogate mother to
her younger siblings, Prince detailed her sustained efforts to hold her family together in spite of
the maternal failings of her mother and a sister who was “deluded away” to a brothel, according
to her narrative. In the face of despair, Prince turned to Christianity and faith for spiritual
strength and sustenance, perhaps in an attempt to avoid the mental and spiritual breakdown that
her mother suffered. Deteriorating in health and emotionally anguished, she relied on spiritual
strength for survival, writing, “I resolved, in my mind, to seek an interest in Him; and never shall
I forget the place or time when God spake [sic] to my troubled conscience” (12). As public as
she was about her faith, Prince remained silent, much to readers’ frustrations, about her marriage
to Nero Prince, a black sailor, who would later become a servant in the palace of the Russian
Tzar. After they got married, the Princes moved to Russia, where they lived for over nine years.
While in Russia, Prince seemed to have enjoyed a major change in economic and social status,
becoming a small business woman and working for both religious and social reform.
Prince left Russia for America in 1833 because of her health, and her husband stayed behind. He
died in Russia some time after. Upon her return from Russia, Prince, “indebted to God for his
great goodness in guiding [her] youthful steps,” set out to assist her “fellow brethren” by creating
an orphanage, though those plans failed (46). Intrigued “by the possibilities of black self-
determination in the wake of West Indian emancipation” (35), using the words of Sandra
Gunning, Prince traveled to Jamaica twice, and both times were filled with frustration directed
toward the missionaries and the chaotic state of the Jamaican government. Though not divinely
inspired to preach the gospel to the public like Amanda B. Smith spent most of her life doing,
Prince created her own model of behavior inspired and directed by divine authority and directed
her spiritual energies to labor in Jamaica and address the moral condition of the people.
In 1837, Amanda Berry Smith was born into slavery in Long Green, Maryland, and “too young,” as she writes in her autobiography, “to have any trials of it” (22). Smith owed her freedom to her father, Samuel Berry, because he bought Smith and her mother and four siblings. Her family moved to Pennsylvania where Smith received some schooling when she was eight and later when she was thirteen. Shortly after, Smith began working as a domestic servant to help support her family. She was converted in a Methodist church but, unable to keep up her religious activities on Sundays because of her strenuous duties, she “lost all the grace [she] had, if [she] really had any at all” (29). At the age of seventeen, Smith married her first husband, Calvin Devine, who was not religious and had a drinking problem, she would later discover. A year later, near death after childbirth, Smith had a vision of herself preaching before a large crowd and was reconverted sometime after. Her first husband never returned from the Civil War, leaving her with a daughter, Mazie, her only child—out of five—to survive infancy. In 1865 she joined the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) in Philadelphia. That same year she married her second husband, James Smith, a local preacher and ordained deacon at the Bethel A.M.E. Church and moved with him to New York to find work.

In 1868, Smith learned of the blessing of sanctification, and at a sermon by John Inskip, the founder of the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness, she received “enduring grace,” which she would later promote in holiness camp meetings and revivals around the world (62). In 1870, at the Fleet Street A.M.E. Church in Brooklyn, Smith was called to preach. From 1878 to 1890, she traveled abroad, and in Liberia, she worked closely with the Methodist Episcopal Church, and she adopted two children. In 1892, she moved to Chicago to work with Frances Willard of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, according
to her contemporary biographer. Smith opened a school for black orphans in 1899, which remained open until 1918, when it was destroyed by fire.

There are several noteworthy parallels between *A Narrative* and *An Autobiography* that justify their comparison in this chapter. First, Prince and Smith chose to detail personal family issues as a way of commenting on larger struggles. Their representations of domestic discord in their early lives enable their renegotiations of home beyond the contours of private American domesticity. Because a private black domesticity was, ultimately, not a viable option for them, both Prince and Smith renegotiate what “home” might mean, enabling the possibility of the creation of black domestic places in the African diaspora. Prince’s and Smith’s nuanced portraits of the Afro-Jamaicans and native Liberians, respectively, both challenge and support ideas about racial allegiances and the possibilities of home beyond U.S. borders.

**Breaking Up Housekeeping in *A Narrative***

Nancy Prince did not experience “home” as a place of domestic comfort and stability, but one of exploitive and debilitating labor for others. Thirteen pages of Prince’s eighty-nine page narrative described her concerted and sustained efforts to hold her family together. Devoting much of her narrative to details about her experiences with poverty and disruptions in her family, Prince represents her only legitimate access to middle-class domesticity—as an overworked servant—early in her narrative, when she described the grueling and unending labor expected of household servants:

There were seven in the family, one sick with a fever, and another in a consumption; and of course, the work must have been very severe, especially the washings. Sabbath evening I had to prepare for the wash; soap the clothes and put them into the steamer, set the kettle of water to boiling, and then close in the steam, and let the pipe from the boiler into the steam box that held the clothes. At two o’clock, on the morning of Monday, the bell was rung for me to get up; but, that was not all, they said I was too slow, and the washing was not done well; I had to leave the tub to tend the door and wait on the family, and was not spoken
to, at that. Hard labor and unkindness was too much for me; in three months, my health and strength were gone. I often looked at my employers, and thought to myself, is this your religion? I did not wonder that the girl who had lived there previous to myself, went home to die. They had family prayers, morning and evening. Oh! yes, they were sanctimonious! I was a poor stranger, but fourteen years of age, imposed upon by these good people. (6-7)

Despite Prince’s hard work, she is routinely abused by the family, a sign of her alienation from the comforts and privileges of home even while she lived there. Her account emphasizes unrelenting labor involved in maintaining white domesticity, and highlights the dependence of domesticity on the low-paid labor of servants like Prince. Besides working as a servant herself, Prince also finds employment for her numerous brothers and sisters. Cheryl Fish labels Prince’s caretaking role as an alternative form of the domestic and maternal, using the black feminist concept of “othermothering” to describe her actions. However, contracting out her siblings because of economic necessity confirms her exclusion from “private” domesticity.

Already alienated from the comforts and privilege of home because of poverty, Prince was further alienated when her mother married a man who “was not kind to me or my sister, but, by industry a humble home was provided for my mother and her younger children” (3-4). After the death of her stepfather, Prince infers that the parental failures of her mother, whom she describes as “young, inexperienced, with no hope in God, and without the knowledge of her Saviour” (3), are the result of her lack of Christian faith, yet Prince seems to show sympathy for her mother’s predicament: “Her grief, poverty, and responsibilities, were too much for her” (3). Later she uses dashes to textually connect her own oppression to her mother’s roaming, which forces Prince to assume the maternal role and look to God for comfort and hope: “Care after care oppressed me—my mother wandered about like a Jew—the young children who were in families were dissatisfied; all hope but in God was lost” (12).
The figure of the wandering Jew is one of permanent displacement, of someone who can never find a home or community in which he is safe. The “home,” for Prince, and for many black women in the antebellum period, is removed from sentimental notions of family, and it is a place of “movement,” to use the words of Carol Boyce Davies, “difficulty, pain, learning and love in complex ways” (21). In Russia, as I will show later, Prince is able to access a different domesticity, one in stark opposition to the wandering Jew, or the uncontrollable movements of her mentally ill mother. Prince’s descriptions of her mother clearly emphasized her mother’s mental, spiritual and emotional instability, an experience that would undoubtedly shape Prince’s later cultural work in Jamaica.

Another source of distress for Prince is Sylvia, Prince’s older sister whom Prince rescues from a brothel. It is important to contextualize Silvia’s “being deluded” away because the situation not only emphasizes the lack of economic opportunities for free blacks but also links their moral degradation to economic oppression. As Prince traveled to Boston to rescue her fallen sister from sin, she writes, “It was very cold; but notwithstanding, I was so distressed about my sister that I started the next morning for Boston [from Salem], on foot” (8). The connection between Silvia and how Prince writes of her rescue inadvertently connects with how visible, public women who worked outside the home were often characterized as prostitutes. Fish states, “Women who traveled or worked outside the home were associated with sexuality” (Black and White 76); in representing the working body, Prince ran the risk of reinforcing Victorian perceptions about working-class and black women. Prince’s writerly decision to include this episode is surprising because details relating to sexual indiscretions by nineteenth-century black women have often been omitted or egregiously apologized for as in the case of Harriet Jacobs and her editor Lydia Maria Child in Incidents in the Life. The disclosure of Sylvia’s indiscretions
juxtaposed with the striking suppressions of other personal details—the nature of her marriage and her childlessness—beg for explanations. Why does Nancy Prince who, in the words of Frances Smith Foster, “so carefully documents her ladylike ways,” write about her own sister’s misfortunes “rather than suffer silently” (*Written by Herself* 85, 86)? Part of the answer may lie in Prince’s feminine Christian duty to save the “less fortunate sisters” (Foster 86). Prince describes in detail about physically rescuing her sister with the help of Mr. Brown, an old friend she runs into. Together, they go to the brothel and physically struggle with the brothel owner:

My sister I found seated with a number of others round a fire, the mother of harlots at the head. My sister did not see me until I clasped her round the neck. The old woman flew at me, and bid me take my hands off of her; she opened a door that led down into a cellar kitchen, and told me to come down, she attempted to take my hands off of my sister. Mr. Brown defended me with his cane; there were many men and girls there, and all was confusion. (9)

Up to this point in her narrative, Prince represents herself as exhibiting piety, endurance, and patience, and this episode highlights these qualities because she shows that she is not abandoning someone who does not exhibit these qualities. She includes a small bit of dialogue between herself and her sister: “When my sister came to herself, she looked upon me and said: “Nancy, O Nancy, I am ruined!” I said, “Silvia, my dear sister, what are you here for? Will you not go with me?” She seemed thankful to get away” (ibid). This passage about Silvia’s rescue is a distinct disruption in the narrative because, as Fish notes, “Prince draws attention to herself in the present tense as a writer” (39): “Now while I write, I am near the spot that was then the hold of all foul and unclean things” (9-10). Immediately after, she quotes Proverbs 5:3,4 and 7, verses that are governed by themes of sex and temptation and of the dangers of being lured by “the lips of a strange woman.” As she writes, Prince is filled with emotion, and she states, “Even now, I cannot refrain my feelings, although death has long separated us; but her soul is precious; she
was very dear to me; and often protected me from the blows of an unkind step-father [sic]. She often said she was not fit to live, nor fit to die” (10). Instead of distancing herself from her sister, Prince is proud to portray herself as her sister’s savior and highlights black women’s capacity for virtue. Ultimately, the narration of this unseemly event positions Prince as one suited to inculcate domestic Christian values to “fallen” women—morally deficient women who could potentially be uplifted and redeemed.

Because domesticity in Prince’s early experiences is a site of incessant toil and struggle, scholars have read Prince’s marriage to Nero Prince as a marriage of convenience. Jennifer Bernhardt Steadman, for example, writes that Prince’s marriage “provided an immediate relief from her crushing economic hardships and a ticket to St. Petersburg” (38). In her narrative, Prince does not write about her getting married in sentimental or romantic terms: “After seven years of anxiety and toil, I made up my mind to leave my country. September 1st, 1823, Mr. Prince arrived from Russia. February 15th, 1824, we were married. April 14th, we embarked on board the Romulus, Captain Epes Sargent commander, bound for Russia” (15). Prince’s subsequent voyage to Russia can be seen as an attempt to escape a home life that had become intolerable, and her marriage to Nero Prince allowed her to break from her life in the North and her oppressive familial obligations.

Once in Russia, Prince pursued economic ventures that would have been impossible to do in the U.S.; her business ventures were based in traditional markers of domesticity. For example, Prince writes, “My time was taken up in domestic affairs; I took two children to board, the third week after commencing housekeeping, and increased their numbers. The baby linen making and childrens’ [sic] garments were in great demand. I started a business in these articles and took a journeywoman and apprentices” (32). Prince’s positive reception in Russia voiced an unspoken
criticism of the economic and racial struggles that she experienced in America, where the structure of social inequity disallowed her “home” as a site of comfort, safety and belonging.

With Prince’s marriage and departure to Russia, all further references to her mother and siblings are absent as she forges a new and infinitely more manageable “family” of Russian boarders in her new home, recreating herself as a “respected maternal figure” (Gunning 44). Prince’s concern for the safety of her child boarders, whom she refers to as her “family,” is expressed most markedly during the St. Petersburg flood in 1824. Preoccupied by the severe weather conditions and their late return, Prince makes her way to a neighboring house to accompany the children home. En route, Prince narrowly escapes death when she falls into a sinkhole. She is safely reunited with her “family,” and, she writes, “My family were safe, and they accompanied me home” (21). Prince’s ringing endorsement of her new home as free from “prejudice against color” may be too optimistic, but her presentation is strategic. Russia became a utopian site in the context of Prince’s narrative—a racially accepting alternative to the injustices in her home country.

After spending a little over nine years in Russia, Prince returned to America. Her husband, who remained in Russia to earn money before returning to the United States, died unexpectedly and leaves Prince a widow. Immediately, she decided to undertake a project of raising funds for an orphanage for children of color, which was based upon the same principles of an asylum she “had had the privilege of assisting in forming” in Russia (46). Expanding upon the boarding care she undertook in Russia, Prince’s social activism in America and Jamaica was concerned primarily with the maternal role of providing homes for “destitute and afflicted” orphans, “where they might be sheltered from the contaminating evils that beset their path” (46). In Russia, as in her later experiences in the U.S. and Jamaica, Prince was foremost concerned
with social issues that impact the domestic space of “home.” In these disparate geographical locales, “home” was conceptualized as alternative families forged through affiliations based not merely on kinship, but upon a sense of loss and displacement. In Prince’s words, “my mind was directed to my fellow brethren whose circumstances were similar to my own. I found many a poor little orphan destitute and afflicted, and on account of color shut out from all asylums for poor children” (46). Prince’s statements foreground the continuous renegotiations of home that she engages. In a later section, I will examine how her work in Jamaica and Smith’s in Liberia extend renegotiations of home through reflections about transnational racial affiliation.

**Amanda Smith’s Home Pulpit**

Like Prince, Smith struggled to access the comforts and privileges of “home,” in the traditional sense. In addition to the difficult effects of poverty as an adult because of limited economic opportunities as a working-class black woman, Smith also had to board her daughter, where “sometimes she was well taken care of and at other times she was not.” (57). Throughout her narrative, Smith emphasizes her spiritual convictions and struggles alongside her economic ones as an underpaid washerwoman, who must struggle to support herself and her children, all of whom die except a daughter, Mazie. From the details in her narrative, Smith did not receive much financial support from her husbands during two unhappy marriages.

Smith attempted to find both spiritual and marital fulfillment within traditional domestic spaces. Two years after her first marriage, Smith became determined to be officially converted, having a nagging desire to “go and preach.” When her first husband left home to serve in the Civil War and did not return (he died, presumably), Smith did what many nineteenth-century spiritual women did as their best opportunity to do God’s work: marry a minister. Smith writes, “One reason for my marrying a second time was that I might have a Christian home and serve
God more perfectly. . . . I had seen and known the influence of a minister’s wife and how much she could help her husband or hinder him to a great extent in his work. Mr. Smith said that was just the kind of wife he wanted” (57-58). Smith saw marriage as a gateway to a religiously sanctioned female self-empowerment through female influence.

In her analysis of the rhetoric of “female influence” in African American discourse in the nineteenth century, Martha Jones argues that, “the [black] home was explained as the most powerful realm of female influence. Women’s well-executed direction of her home, husband, and children reflected collective respectability and illustrated the distance from slavery that free black people had travelled” (28). Though a narrow domesticity was not, in general, thrust upon black women, as Jones argues, it was clear that marriage was viewed as a way to not only achieve the ultimate Christian womanhood as wife, mother, and homemaker but also shape women’s stages of spiritual growth and self-realization. And so, in 1865, Smith, already a mother to a nine-year old Mazie, married James Smith, a widower and preacher.

However, Smith’s second husband, at least in her narrative, turned out to be a demanding, unsympathetic, and apathetic husband. Smith was full of spiritual conviction and wanted to directly engage people as a minister’s wife. Though James promised his wife that he would join the A.M.E. Conference as an itinerant minister, when the time came, he failed to do so. Smith chronicled her disappointment:

The marriage was over and the Conference came. For several weeks prior to the session of the Conference I saw that my husband did not seem to be interested and studious as he had been, and when I would speak to him about it he would be cold and indifferent. O, how indescribably sad I felt; I was frightened. . . . I felt I could not stand the disappointment. My heart was sad, yet I tried to hope all through. I watched my husband, but he was still indifferent. (58-59)

Though Smith is disappointed, James’ revelation to her about his true intentions does not immediately end the marriage: “I shall never forget how he took me on his lap and kindly put his
arm around me and said, tenderly, ‘My dear, I was afraid to tell you what was really in my heart, I was afraid you would not marry me’” (59). Despite having been lied to about something that meant a great deal to her, Smith forgave her husband and continued to perform her “wifely” duties: “I went out to days’ work and took washing, in every way to help my husband,” (60) but doing so kept her locked within a system of exploitative and abusive domestic labor. 

As she continually tried to make “home” a place where her piety and morality were fully valued, Smith eventually viewed her husband as a threat to her own spiritual growth, which is a major shift in her thinking. Although her husband is educated and is a preacher, Smith resisted his so-called spiritual authority, particularly his stance against sanctification or holiness.11 Revealing her husband’s attempts to stifle her spiritual growth, Smith writes that,

I would talk to my husband, but he had no sympathy with holiness. He had had advantages far above me, and was far more intelligent. He would always want to argue on this subject, and I could not keep up on that line and it would throw me back, so I told the Lord one day if He would send James away somewhere till I got the blessing he would never get it away again, but that he hindered me from getting it. (70-71)

No longer does Smith think that marrying a minister is the best or only way to achieve spiritual growth, and she realized that having a husband actually prevented her from growing in spirit. Smith and her husband began to live apart, and a few years later, he died. Smith documented his death in a terse, unemotional, yet respectful tone, something akin to an obituary: “My husband, James Smith, was formerly of Baltimore, MD. He was for many years, a leader of the choir of Bethel A.M.E. Church, in that city. Afterward he moved to Philadelphia, was ordained deacon in the A.M.E Church. He died in November, 1869, at New Utrecht, N.Y. Since then I have been a widow, and have traveled half way round the world, and God has ever been faithful” (96). Smith discovered a new and exciting world as a widow, where she was able to travel independently and frequently, guided by the Spirit.
Still, Smith shared many traditional white Victorian values of the upper-middle-class women with whom she was involved, and at times seemed to long for a similar bourgeois respectability. According to Richard Douglass Chin, Smith repeatedly expresses her anxiety over public appearances and “propriety.”12 This is partly true and understandable, given that she was a public figure subject to racialized and gendered gazes.13 Additionally, as a widow, Smith struggled initially with letting go of various concerns associated with traditional markers of domesticity.

According to Elizabeth Elkin Grammer, many black women, following an old Christian tradition, personified personal struggles or whatever they considered the enemy, in the threatening figure of Satan.14 In her narrative, for example, Smith often argued with the disembodied voice of Satan, who represented views consistent with traditional domestic expectations of the late nineteenth century. For example, after receiving “the call” to preach the gospel, Smith is immediately “attacked” by the voice of Satan, who tells her, “‘When Jesus sent out His disciples He sent them out two and two, and now you are going alone; they will say you are going to look for a husband, like others’” (134-135). Disturbed by Satan’s claim, Smith writes, “Then I thought of several that I knew who had gone out and really did get married, after a time; but what business was that to the old Accuser, and what had he to do with it?” (135). In another example, Smith writes of an agonizing situation, in which she is invited to go to England but refused to pray about the matter, believing that it was “well enough for swell people to go,” but not for the “colored washwoman” (242). Later, convinced that she must, in fact, go, Smith is suddenly attacked by Satan, who, again, argues from the point of view of the period’s definition of womanhood, which Smith, despite her independence, had internalized. “‘What about your child?’” he asked (245). Questioning the “propriety” of leaving Mazie, Smith is confronted by
Satan, who forced her to envision the worst: “I saw myself on the steamer in a big storm, and the ship wrecked. . . .Then my daughter got the news, then I saw her frantic and wild with grief!” (245-246). Making Satan a patriarchal oppressor, a role her two husbands played as well, provided Smith a masked means of dissent, and it enabled her to enact an agency in spaces outside the traditional home as an evangelist and missionary.

Reimagining Manifest Domesticity in Jamaica and Liberia

Spreading the gospel as missionaries had larger implications for Prince and Smith. They both felt compelled to go to places racially marked by ambivalent post-slavery understandings of blacks as citizens. Though officially left out of these national conversations, Prince and Smith draw on their close relationships to the “heathen” to participate in these debates. Operating within a non-romantic idea of a pan-African family, the representations of their experiences at times evinced a special and sincere relationship with the native Jamaicans and Liberians.

Both Prince and Smith attempted to bring about change in the lives of African-descended people beyond the national borders of the United States. In doing so, both underwent, on some levels, a cultural transformation themselves, one that allowed them to empathize with the lives and plights of the women and children among whom they worked. In their narratives, the tension between the extension of domestic borders of nation and family to include other homes and other places becomes a complex process of interaction between religious and secular forces. Prince’s and Smith’s relationships with indigenous Afro-Jamaicans and Liberians, respectively, were complex and sometimes contradictory. Because their narratives represent concern for women, children and families in transnational contexts, their missionary work aligned with feminine ideas of social reform and maternal duty.
Urged by American missionary David Ingraham, who had recently returned from his post in Jamaica, Prince turned towards missionary labor, where a more immediate “field of usefulness” seemed to beckon towards her (48). Prince hoped, in her words, “to aid, in some small degree, to raise up and encourage the emancipated inhabitants, and teach the young children to read and work, to fear God, and put their trust in the Savior” (50). Sandra Gunning argues that Ingraham’s expectation was that Prince would “inculcate the structure of a U.S.-based domestic authority that necessarily enforced and sustained a discourse of difference between her and the ex-slaves” (39). Though Prince writes in her narrative that her purpose in going to Jamaica was to morally uplift the Afro-Jamaicans, particularly the women and children, by virtue of the dichotomous ‘U.S. vs. Other or civilized/savage’ paradigm that underwrote transnational missionary work, Prince was inevitably intertwined with the rhetoric of nation and empire. Gunning’s formulation of the “discourse of difference” was also “reinforced and enacted through [Prince’s] use of subgenres (the missionary and travel narrative) that functioned as the discursive pillars of western imperialism” (39). While I am in agreement with Gunning’s analysis of Prince’s invocation of manifest domesticity in The Narrative, I believe she overlooks the role that Prince’s subtle anti-emigrationist rhetoric plays in offering a more nuanced “discourse of difference” that forced her to contemplate the meaning of “home” for both U.S. blacks and the emancipated Jamaicans.

According to Gale L. Kenny, Americans looked at post-Emancipation Jamaica “with great anticipation as they waited to see how Britain’s great experiment would proceed” (1). According to Kenny, Southern slave-holding interests and American abolitionists alike held a large but contrary stake in the economic and social outcome of British emancipation in the neighboring West Indian islands, and particularly in Jamaica—the largest and most profitable of
the islands. Kenny writes that after slavery ended in the British West Indies, missionaries began “an intensive effort to Christianize slaves,” promoting Western notions of proper male behavior and female respectability as the antidotes to the black Jamaicans’ putative ‘licentiousness’ (4, 9). As T. O. Beidelman observes, “Missionaries invariably aimed at overall changes in the beliefs and actions of native peoples, as colonization of heart and mind as well as body” (6). Indeed, before Prince embarked on her travels to Jamaica, she “met the Rev. Ingraham, who had spent seven years [in Jamaica]. He told me that the moral condition of the people was very bad, and needed labor aside from any thing else” (43-44). However, by the end of her two missions in Jamaica, as Joycelyn Moody writes, “the ‘bad people’ Ingraham refers to are not so much the Afro-Jamaicans, as more aptly, the white church officials who are engaged in missionary work there” (Sentimental Confessions 89). Moody’s statement speaks to the many examples of Prince’s narrative presentation of her connection to the Afro-Jamaicans she attempted to convert, a point I will discuss later. Now, I want to further examine how Prince’s anti-emigrationist functioned in her renegotiations of home.

Prince’s The Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince and her earlier pamphlet, The West Indies, some of which is embedded into The Narrative, were important critiques of the promotion of black emigration from the U.S. to Jamaica. As the commissioner general of immigration to Jamaica, Alexander Barclay, a Scotsman by birth and self-made planter, aggressively attempted to recruit free blacks from the United States. A longtime resident of Jamaica, Barclay published a pamphlet he wrote, Remarks on Emigration to Jamaica Addressed to the Coloured Class of the United States (1840), in which he promised economic, political, and social equality. According to Thomas C. Holt, Barclay travelled, in the summer of 1840, to several U.S. cities, including Savannah, Charleston, Norfolk and Philadelphia, where he
met with black leaders and distributed his pamphlet, but he experienced opposition from both black and white abolitionists and the trip proved unsuccessful (197). According to Floyd J. Miller, the emigrationist debate that emerged in the United States after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law addressed the issue of whether or not blacks should leave the United States, and Prince’s account of her experiences in Jamaica responds, in part, to questions about the viability of “home” for blacks outside U.S. borders.\(^{17}\)

Prince framed her critique of African American emigration to Jamaica in subtle ways to convey that emigration to Jamaica was not the solution to black peoples’ search for economic stability and civil rights. For example, on her first visit to Jamaica, Prince encountered many black Americans who had immigrated to Jamaica under the illusory promise of economic and social freedoms. For these “deceived” Americans, as Prince writes, emigration had not provided them with an alternative black homeland and nation, but rather placed them ill-equipped in a foreign nation underdeveloped by centuries of enslavement and colonialism. Publishing their stories to share with the world, Prince foregrounds their sense of displacement that she shared as well:

I went to the Admiral’s house, where the emigrants find a shelter until they can find employment, then they work and pay for their passage. Many leave their homes and come to Jamaica under the impression that they are to have their passage free, and on reaching the island, are to be found, until they can provide for themselves.

How the mistake originated, I am not able to say, but on arriving here, strangers poor and unacclimated, find the debt for passage money hard and unexpected. It is remarkable that whether fresh from Africa, or from new other islands, from the South or from New England, they all feel deceived on this point. I called on many Americans and found them poor and discontented, rueing [sic] the day they left their country, where notwithstanding many obstacles, their parents lived and died,—a country they helped to conquer with their toil and blood; now shall their children stray abroad and starve in foreign lands. (55)
For these black Americans, the promise of a new life was broken by the experience of poverty and disorientation in a country whose native populations struggled to achieve social and economic stability. For these displaced African Americans, Jamaica felt like a space of exile from the United States. Geographic distance allowed these emigrants to feel their American-ness, even as their inability to forge viable homes on American soil facilitated their immigration and journeys abroad, much like Prince’s situation. For Prince, the social conditions of these emigrants attempting to live the American dream on foreign soil using meager support was similar to the orphan trying to live without a sustaining home. The emigrants became, metaphorically, “orphans” of their country, “where. . . .their parents lived and died,” thus linking Prince’s experiences of alienation from her birth country she experienced as a young girl to those of the black American emigrants.

Prince’s critique of emigration to Jamaica was comparable to her growing disillusionment with the effects of missionary “reform” and her increasing hostility towards the white missionary evangelical church on the island. Prince found the destruction of the family the most appalling legacy of slavery in Jamaica and wrote about how family and “home” were destroyed by slavery, which replaced family with the economic bonds of mastery and servitude. In this familial arrangement, siblings, according to Prince, were socialized to abuse their kin relations because of the arbitrary power that slavery invested in some and withheld from others. The missionary church exploited both Afro-Jamaicans and black American missionaries by exploiting “colored” ministers and missionaries alike to facilitate the fiscal matters pertaining to the church:

There was but one colored minister on the platform. It is generally the policy of these missionaries to have the sanction of colored ministers, to all their assessments and taxes. The colored people give more readily, and are less
suspicious of imposition, if one from themselves recommends the measure; this the missionaries understand very well, and know how to take advantage of it. (53)

In fact, Prince’s accounts give us a good idea of what black Jamaicans thought of white missionaries. Upon her meeting and subsequent conversation with a “respectable looking man,” who was formerly in bondage, Prince writes a detailed assessment of their exchange:

The story he told me of the wrongs he and his wife endured while in slavery are too horrible to narrate. My heart sickens when I think of it. He asked me many questions, such as where I came from? Why I came to that Isle? Where had I lived, &c [sic]. I told him I was sent for by one of the missionaries to help him in his school. Indeed, said he, our color needs the instruction. I asked him why the colored people did not hire for themselves? We would be very glad to, he replied, but our money is taken from us so fast we cannot. Sometimes they say we must all bring 1l.; [sic] to raise this, we have to sell at a loss or to borrow, so that we have nothing left for ourselves; the Macroon hunters take all—this is the nickname they give the missionaries and the class-leaders—a cutting sarcasm this! (58).

From what Prince gathers, the church is another colonialist institution in Jamaica that takes little interest in blacks aside from their potential as a financial resource. This passage provides a glimpse of how black Jamaicans thought of the white missionaries, and Prince’s shared racial background gives her an access to the black Jamaican community that others, presumably white, missionaries could not have had.

Another example of this potential kinship occurs when Prince attends a market place in town. She engaged in honest conversation with the Afro-Jamaicans, which revealed a mutual curiosity: “They wished to know why I was so inquisitive about them. I told them we had heard in America that you are lazy, and that emancipation has been of no benefit to you; I wish to inform myself of the truth respecting you, and give a true account on my return. Am I right? More than two hundred people were around me listening to what I said” (54). Though it seems that Prince may have been unsure about the Jamaican’s supposed laziness, she affirms that this
idea is specious, noting that the markets’ in Jamaica are build and run by black Jamaicans: “Thus it may be hoped they are not the stupid set of beings they have been called; here, surely we see industry; they are enterprising and quick in their perceptions, determined to possess themselves, and to possess property besides, and quite able to take care of themselves” (54). Prince’s exchanges with the Afro-Jamaicans are successful and facilitated in part by a mutual identification. In the aforementioned exchange with the respectable-looking man, Prince’s narration of the conversation conveyed an identifiable sense of mutual respect and curiosity, even as the term, “our color” signified an ambivalent category that could potentially include or exclude Prince—as a member of the black race and an outsider as an American, respectively. Prince does, however, differentiate this particular Jamaican from other islanders, in general. She marked the fact that this man was “respectable,” as opposed to possible unrespectable Jamaicans, which, perhaps, signified class markers.

After Prince’s second return to the U.S. from Jamaica, she described a terrifying stopover in New Orleans where she not only witnessed first-hand the hardships of American slaves but where she herself was almost sold into slavery (77-80). Once in Boston, things were hardly better, but her narrative marks a shift towards a more spiritual theme that spoke to the continued search for “home.” Prince arrived in Boston on August 1843 “poor in health, and poor in purse, having sacrificed both” (84). According to her narrative, Prince continued for a period in temporary dwellings, refusing charity, yet unable to secure stable employment or permanent lodgings in “our professed Christian land” (86). She writes, “[t]hree times I had been broken up in business, embarrassed and obliged to move, when not able to wait on myself” (86). The final pages of Prince’s narrative, marked by an uncharacteristically high spiritual tone, summarize the remaining years of her life leading up to the writing and publication of her narrative: “Truly the
promises of God are. . . . a covert from the storm, a shelter from the heat, a sure retreat for the weary and way worn traveller” (87). It is important to note that Prince concluded all three editions of her narrative with the anonymously-written “The Hiding Place,” an enigmatic and unsettling poem that links the home to a spiritual center. What is unsettling about the poem, a series of seven quatrains, each a double couplet, is the repetition of “hiding place” as the last words in the last line of each quatrain. In the poem, the hiding place is linked to God, safety, and heaven, which suggests that Prince’s search for “home” is not in the material world. Whatever feelings of home that she experienced in Europe were fleeting as those feelings disappear upon her return to America. In examining Prince’s focus on the themes of home and safety, we must understand that we’re left with the unsettling sense that America, the country of her birth, has never been and possibly will never be, a place Prince can call home in the fullest sense.

(Re)writing Africa in Smith’s An Autobiography

In 1872, while attending the Sea Cliff Camp Meeting in New York, Smith heard speakers share their missionary experiences abroad in a variety of places. In her autobiography, she writes, “I kept thinking of what I had heard, and all at once it came to me that I had not heard them say anything about Africa. Then I remembered when I was quite young I had heard my father and mother talk about Africa” (215). As she reflects, memories and images from her childhood come to mind: “I remembered, too, that I used to see a large paper. . . . It had large pictures, and Africans in their costumes and huts, and Indians in their wigwams, great boa constrictors, bears, lions and panthers; and some of the pictures were horrid, as I remember them now” (215). Though “haunted” by these stereotypical images of Africa, Smith is bothered by the absence of Africa in the missionary stories she heard, and she asked a peer about this omission, wondering whether “all the people in Africa are converted” (216). After hearing this woman tell
her about a well-known Methodist missionary, who spent his life laboring in Liberia until his death, Smith sets a goal to go to Africa, but not before spending time in Europe, preaching and holding prayer meetings.

When Smith arrived in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, on January 18, 1882, Liberia had been an independent republic for only 35 years. Though the Americo-Liberians, U.S. blacks who migrated to Liberia beginning in the 1820s and their descendants, were the powerful ruling-class, Smith did not spend much time describing her interactions with this group, if she did interact with them, choosing instead, to focus on her interactions with members from many of the sixteen different indigenous ethnic groups in Liberia.\(^{18}\)

One of the possibilities Smith explored with her missionary work was the chance to meaningfully engage with native Liberians. Writing about her tender and caring work helped her challenge negative stereotypes of Africans, and Smith’s account is striking compared to those written by nineteenth-century black clergymen.\(^{19}\) Works by Henry M. Turner, William Nesbitt, and Martin Delany, for example, were the result of visits to Liberia that lasted weeks or sometimes months. What prompted their visits to and writing about Liberia stemmed from curiosity and desire about Liberia as an alleged utopian place for black people. These writers not only found the lack of resources and infrastructure in Liberia alarming but also still viewed its associations with the colonizationist movement as troubling. Nesbitt, in particular, expressed his grave disillusionment early on in his text, *Four Months in Liberia: Or African Colonization Exposed* (1855):

> On stepping ashore, I found that we had been completely gulled and done for. The statements generally circulated in this country by the Colonization agents, respecting the thrift and prosperity of that country, are most egregious falsehoods. Everything is exaggerated. The whole country presents the most woe begone and hopeless aspect which it is possible for a man to conceive of, and having lived in this country and seen and enjoyed the blessings of civilization, he readily
conceives that he has been taken out of himself, metamorphosed into something else, and cast away into a region of darkness and desolation, for which there is no hope. (89)

Nesbitt’s anti-Liberia sentiments resonated with Delany, who wrote the introduction to Four Months in Liberia. In 1852, Delany published The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered, and in it, Delany dismisses the integrity of the American Colonization Society and of Liberia. Arguing that Liberia was devised by supporters of southern slavery and therefore could not be in the interest of American blacks, Delany advocated emigration to countries in the Caribbean and South America.

Smith’s shift in focus—her discussions about Liberia’s peoples and customs—depart from Nesbitt’s and Delany’s more stridently political texts, and she chooses to write with an anthropological and highly sympathetic tone. Her autobiography contains especially moving accounts of her interactions with and observations of Grebo, Vei and Kru people, for example, and while her descriptions, at times, utilized Christian/heathen rhetoric, they also showed deep appreciation for Liberian family life and parenting, for native skills in pottery and weaving, the physical beauty and dignity of the people, and, most surprisingly, respect and accommodation for native customs and worship practices.

Like some black missionary men, Smith regarded Africa and Africans as having an equal claim and rightful place in world history. However, unlike her male counterparts, Smith deployed the language of domesticity, leading with what she termed a “mother’s pity in my heart” (374). Likely because she presented herself as apolitical and showed particular concern for women and children, Smith had an easier time moving toward fellowship with Liberians than other missionaries, both black and white. Granted, she was more “modest” in her ambitions and
did not come with an expectation to recreate nation or race, but to extend God’s kingdom and export Western ideas of domesticity.

While some of Smith’s reporting on cannibalism and polygamy reflects “dark continent” stereotypes that were prevalent in this period, her writing also reflects optimistic and generous views of the native population. For example, when Smith writes about “[t]he poor women of Africa,” she is both expressing sympathy and invoking stereotypes that generalize a specific group of people:

As a rule, they have all the hard work to do. They have to cut and carry all the wood, carry all the water on their heads, and plant all the rice. The men and boys cut and burn the bush, with the help of the women; but sowing the rice, and planting the casava, the women have to do. You will often see a great, big man walking ahead, with nothing in his hand but a cutlass (as they always carry that or a spear), and a woman, his wife, coming on behind, with a great big child on her back, and a load on her head. No matter how tired she is, her lord would not think of bringing her a jar of water, to cook his supper with, or of beating the rice; no, she must do that. A great big boy would not bring water for his mother; he would say: “Boy no tote water; that be woman’s work.” (389-390)

Smith’s description of the “poor wom[a]n of Africa” as the downtrodden, subjugated, victim of colonialism and male dominance, echoed dominant representations of African women as helpless victims. Or, perhaps, Smith thought of her own “woman’s work” as a “poor washwoman,” as she often referred to herself, working until the point of exhaustion, and therefore linked her experiences with those of Liberian women. The resulting ambiguity is likely the result of a desire to maintain an “objective” anthropological tone in order to appeal to her readers and to do justice to the richness of Liberian culture.

In general, Smith’s tone becomes more sympathetic when she writes about women, and particularly, Liberian girls. Immediately after the passage about the “poor women of Africa,” Smith writes, “The moment a girl child is born, she belongs to somebody. The father, who has a son, makes it the highest aim of his life to see that his son has a wife; so he settles, and begins to
pay a dowry for a girl for his son. Sometimes they are but a few months old, when you will see them with their betrothal jewels on” (390). Smith continues, “Poor things, they are not consulted; they have no choice in the matter. If they don’t like the man, they are obliged to go with him anyway, no matter how ill he may treat them; and sometimes they are cruelly treated. But their own father could not protect them. The laws in this are very strict. A man’s wife is his wife, and no one dare interfere” (390). Smith is cautious with her commentary, expressing subtle sympathy but not critiquing the patriarchal system that values boys more than girls.

Smith illustrates the truth of her statements by relating an incident she observed. Hearing “deep, piteous crying” one morning, Smith looked out the window and saw a beautiful young girl being dragged and beaten by her old husband, a man Smith described as “ugly as a monkey” (391). Alarmed, Smith begged a neighbor to help “the poor thing,” and the neighbor replied that the girl, who ran away because the “horrid old, man” beat her, was unable to do anything because the husband had paid his dowry, and his authority over his wife was absolute. Though Smith offered no extended critique of this practice, she expressed sympathy and hopeful thinking—within the cultural confines of this practice—that the old man would sell his wife for a higher price to a kinder husband-to-be.

Smith’s descriptions of the plight of the Liberian girl provide, in part, the context for Smith’s adoption of Frances, a six-year-old Bassa girl. She writes, “Now that is the reason it is so much better for the missionary to buy the girls. . . .If a girl has been bought by a missionary, she is free as long as she lives; no one will ever claim her. . . .” (392). Certainly Smith shared the belief that by adopting Frances and presumably grooming her to become a missionary, she was improving her quality of life. Beyond such paternalistic and religious motivations, the practice of adoption had positive benefits as well—most importantly the formation of extended kinship
relationships between black missionary workers and indigenous Africans. This increased contact between both communities enabled the “transference” of culture that was reciprocal. As Claude Clegg explains, “The presence of these youths in Monrovia and elsewhere certainly opened lines of communication between immigrants and Africans, which undoubtedly facilitated trade, diplomacy, and other interactions. These linkages spread both colonial culture among indigenous people and African cultures among immigrants” (95). Yet, as I will explain in my analysis of Smith’s relationship with her adopted son, Smith inevitably reifies the gendered value system where boys were, in the long run, valued more than girls.

In adopting two native children, Smith attempted to negotiate these difficult gendered dynamics of a social system in which girls seemed to have no value beyond the dowry. According to her narrative, placing girl children usually entailed negotiations between natives and missionaries, but Frances was apparently gifted to Smith by her father, after having first bound her to a Mr. and Mrs. Brown as a servant. The girl’s father seemed to have not been able to meet Smith’s price for her return. Smith later explained that Frances’s “mother died, and I told Mr. Brown if her people wanted her, they must pay me two bullocks; for it had cost me that with the care and trouble I had had with her” (392). Smith hardly mentions Frances in the text of her autobiography, and in fact, the first mention of Frances seems to come out of nowhere: “I had left my little native girl at Monrovia, so I asked Brother Palman if he would take Frances to his house” (338). Smith provides somewhat of a context roughly sixty pages later, as I detailed, but it seems that Smith left her adopted daughter in the care of other missionaries during her frequent travels throughout West Africa.

Smith’s adoption of Bob is rooted in her missionary impulses and her observations on what she believed the Liberians needed. She writes, “When I first went to Africa, I saw there was
much to do, and I felt I could do but little. At that time, there was no real medical doctor within twenty or thirty miles of Monrovia” (393). Her observations on the lack of doctors and medical facilities in the area fans her desires to have a child: “So I thought if I could get a nice little boy I would train him for a missionary, and a doctor as well” (393). Smith writes about the process of “adopting” in a manner coded in imperialistic language—in fact, the partial title of the chapter is “How I Came to Take Little Bob.” She writes,

I saw three boys that I liked. They lived in different Liberian families. One was the son of a king, who lives with Mrs. Crusoe at Hartford. He was a nice lad, and I would have liked to have him. Another was at Edina, Bassa. He lived with Mrs. Moore. The other lived with Mrs. Harris, at Lower Buchanan, in Bassa. They were very bright, smart boys and only needed a little help, as I thought. But one of these parties would consent to my taking the m. They wanted I should take a Liberian. (393)

Called “Mammy” by the neighborhood kids, she observes Bob and his playmate regularly and often gave them leftover food; Smith anticipates the reader’s possible objection to this label and includes a parenthetical note: “For you must know that all foreigners and Liberians are called ‘Mammy’ and ‘Daddy;’ and in the sense it is used in America, one would feel like drawing up their shoulders some-times; but when the natives use it, it is as we would use ‘Mr.’ and Mrs.” (394).

What’s striking in Smith’s adoption passage is the slang from U.S. slavery: the name, “mammy” for adult women and mothers and the nicknames “pick’n” and “little darky” for African children—Smith even refers to little Bob by such names. Though Smith’s comments make clear or attempt to extract the negative connotations of words that moved across the Atlantic, the legacy of U.S. slavery and racism is alive and well in the lives of the native Liberians; that Smith advocated buying African girls to protect them from their own society and
that she called her own adoptive son a “darcy” makes an absolute assessment of Smith’s kinship with the natives difficult.

What isn’t difficult to assess is Smith’s preference for her adoptive son. As I’ve mentioned before, Frances is barely mentioned in the text, and she was frequently left in the care of a missionary or Liberian family when Smith traveled to other parts of West Africa. Smith wants Bob to become a doctor; she doesn’t express that for Frances, who remained behind in Liberia when Smith left for America by way of England. By contrast, little Bob’s adoption, education, conversion, and travels to England take up more than a whole chapter and is rendered with literary flair and riveting detail. We see Smith’s “mother’s heart” in action with little Bob, as they pray together and work through learning English, and she coaches him through dealing with racist taunts on the streets of London. By contrast, almost nothing about Frances is offered. The girl is described as a burden—in the end, she is too sick to leave the country. Bob is held up as a missionary success story. Nonetheless, in the end, Smith leaves Bob at a boarding school in England, and even he, by the end of the narrative, has disappeared from the pages of An Autobiography, never to be mentioned again.

In addition to her mother’s heart, Smith’s attempts at understanding rituals and traditions of other cultures reveal another level of racial kinship as expressed in her narrative. Christian missionaries frequently described native belief systems as “devil worship,” and Smith also used this language in her assessment of African religion. Smith, however, retained a respectful curiosity, as best she could. For example, she described the practice of native women burning fires inside their huts for cooking, leaving rice and other offerings outside for the “devil”:

The custom was that every house in the town in the evening had a little fire outside in the front of the door, and many times a piece of tobacco and a pipe would be laid by it; that was for any of their friends who were dead, or the Devil could come and light his pipe; (of course they suppose the Devil smokes); they
thought it was a good thing, and would please him. This was why they would not allow us to build a fire outside. I thought it was nonsense; but they told me I had better not persist. (386)

Instead of protesting or challenging this custom, Smith acquiesced, writing, “I just did what I was told, and did my own cooking in my own native house” (386). One may wonder how Smith’s prior interactions with the Devil shaped her response to this custom. After all, the Devil she interacted with was a patriarchal oppressor who tried to keep her in her gendered place. Here, her criticism of the Bassa is not that the Devil exists, but rather that the Devil is treated with such reverence and “idolatry” as master of a certain kind of suffering. Nonetheless, in these moments, Smith’s notions of American domesticity come head-to-head with native practices, and yet in choosing to describe her house as “native” Smith expresses kinship with the natives.

Another moment of palpable kinship is during the witchcraft trial where Smith is a sympathetic spiritual observer and participant. She proceeds to describe the case in which a king’s wife is accused of witchcraft, and as a result is made to undergo a test of drinking sassywood to prove her innocence—if she is innocent she will vomit. The queen is vindicated by her vomit, but Smith awaits the verdict with trepidation; notably, she is not preoccupied with criticizing any superstitions regarding the test, but rather, “pray[ing] for the poor, dear woman, that God would make her throw up” (387). Then she “trembled [and] said, ‘Lord, do make her throw it up’” (388). This type of direct request to the God is also characteristic of Smith’s religious disposition. So involved is Smith in the ritual process that one cannot sense her judging a “superstitiousness,” but she wants to “shout” to the Lord in thanks for the queen’s vomit: “Well, I could have shouted. I said, ‘Thank God.’ But I didn’t say it very loud, for those fellows looked vengeance, and I was afraid they would drive us away. Then she drank the second basinful, and then the third, and threw it up, and she was victor. My! Didn’t I come home out of
that place jumping? I cannot describe how I felt” (368). Smith does note a gendered bias involved in the judgment and the queen’s relative powerlessness, but she also criticizes Christians for this type of behavior on different moral questions. In Smith’s interactions with native Liberians, she embraces the space of religious and cultural exchange and is able to affect the dispositions of those around her as they do for her.

Similarly, when Smith was disturbed by parenting practices—like the mother over-stuffing her baby’s mouth with rice or the practice of rubbing a baby, even its eyes, with pepper to prevent colds (407)—Smith engaged the mothers by conversing and trying to understand their practices:

The mother was sitting with this little thing, about six months old, I suppose, and a beautiful child in form, with features regular and well ordered, and she had a little iron pot, that held about a quart, full of soft boiled rice sitting beside her, and a little tin cup that had been used for condensed milk, full of water; the rice was boiled very soft, and hot with pepper, with a little salt, and she was stuffing her baby; we say feed, but she was literally stuffing it; they generally stuff them till their little stomachs stand out.

She held the little being between her knees, and filled its mouth, and it scrambled and hollowed, and almost choked; but when it did choke a little she would shake it till it caught its breath, then put a little water in its mouth, and it would strangle and choke and kick till you would think it would go into spasms. I went over and thought I would beg for it; I felt so sorry to see the little thing; to me it looked like brutal punishment. (406-407)

The mother showed Smith that the baby was not in danger, and Smith came away appreciative. “Well, it is wonderful,” Smith writes, “there is a pretty good logic in it” (407). Commenting on the same “native baby,” Smith focused on its cleanliness, writing, “[The mothers] are very particular about bathing [their babies] and keeping them clean; of course they wear no clothes, not a stitch, and they bathe them every morning, and sometimes oftener, during the day; their skin is generally as clean as can be; really I never saw a dirty native baby” (406). These details challenge traditional missionary domesticity’s domestic reform and bodily discipline around
child rearing, sexuality, and food, which frequently led to struggles and negative moral judgments of natives by missionaries. Yet, in *An Autobiography* Smith consistently affirmed the native’s domestic ways, including praising their skills with pottery and cloth, which caused her to describe them as “great geniuses” (410-412). Smith’s descriptions firmly intervened in judgmental missionary discourses that viewed Africans as physically, intellectually, and morally inferior.

Furthermore, from this practice of kinship, Smith took a more political step and directly attacked the practices of some missionary workers. Despite her grounding within an imperial framework that privileged Christianity as the only true religion, we see Smith critiquing other elements of missionary ideology, particularly the racist and unjust treatment of indigenous peoples. The last chapters of her autobiography explore the weaknesses of both sides of the color line. She laments the presence of white missionaries abroad “who were just as full of prejudice against black people as they are in the country and did not have grace enough to hide it” (424). Smith also criticized the black emigrants’ complaints about white people, believing that anti-white sentiment ran counter to the ideal of “perfect love” in holiness thought.

Still, Smith gave honest, but cautious answers regarding race and missionary work. According to her, in proportion to the number of whites that died, withdrew, or limited their activities in Liberia, the work of schools and missions overall “declined.” She admitted that white missionaries frequently developed “good native teachers and preachers, who are loyal and true” (426). She writes that when “the whole work is left” to the natives, “the interest seems to flag” (426). Smith also notes that black missionaries suffered from underpayment and overwork and that this “great mistake” led to exploitive practices, self-sacrifice, and even death. When
responding to the question of whether or not white missionaries should go to Africa, Smith provided a detailed response:

Yes, if they are the right kind. If they are thoroughly converted and fully consecrated and wholly sanctified to God, so that all their prejudices are completely killed out, and their hearts are full of love and sympathy, and they have firmness of character and good, broad, level-headed common sense, and are possessed of great patience, and strong, persistent, persevering faith, and then keep up the spirit of earnest prayer to Almighty God, day and night. I do not say that it is necessary to be under a dead strain all the time; not at all; but my own personal experience is that the more one prays and trusts in God, the better he can get on. (423)

This response is not a ringing endorsement of white missionaries over black. Instead, it illustrates that though race may not have anything to essentially to do with one’s potential to do God’s work, Smith embraced and advocated the idea that African American women might provide a special and successful model for Africa, the diaspora, and the world.

After years of living and experiencing Liberia, Smith was able to make pointed responses to political issues, such as colonization. Believing the ACS was, originally, a useful organization, Smith offered some harsh criticism of its continued existence. Arguing for black people’s right to American citizenship, she states,

God bless the Colonization Society. It was raised up at a time of imperative need. . . .It did its work. But from the standpoint I look at it, I would move its disbandment forthwith, and let the white people who want the Negro to emigrate to Africa so as to make more room for the great flood of foreigners who come to our shores, know that there is a place in the United States for the Negro. They are real American citizens, and at home. They have fought and bled and died, like men, to make this country what it is. And if they have got to suffer and die, and be lynched, and tortured, and burned at the stake, I say they are at home. (452)

Though it may seem unclear why Smith began her critique of the American Colonization Society by paying homage to it first, one likely possibility is that Smith’s initial honoring of the ACS is a way to appease her white evangelical readers, who may have been supporters of the organization,
as missions and colonization were often inextricably linked in the nineteenth-century. Claude Clegg explains, “A missionary strand of thought was evident in many of the pronouncements of colonizationists. Some individuals believed that sending Christian African American immigrants to Africa was the best way to spread the Gospel and civilization across a supposedly savage continent while at the same time imparting to the settlers freedom in the land of their ancestors” (33). Whatever the reasons for Smith’s initial support of the ACS, her political position on the organization clearly distinguished her from the large majority of other free black intellectuals and leaders, including Richard Allen, Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, David Walker, and Maria Stewart. The criticism of free black people was largely in response to the racism underlying the ACS and its practices: “believ[ing] colonization to be a specious solution to racial discrimination and slavery. . . .African American spokespersons and writers, almost without exception, shunned the objectives of the ACS and similar organizations” (Clegg 35). Of course, Amanda Berry Smith was one of the few exceptions who supported the ACS for a time. Nevertheless, Smith’s position on the ACS does indeed change and her attempts to pay respect to the organization are quickly undermined by her scathing criticism of “white people who want the Negro to emigrate to Africa,” especially those who believe that blacks do not belong in the country, those who believe that blacks have failed to and will never make any lasting contributions to the society. Like Prince’s anti-emigrationist response, Smith’s response positions African Americans as “real American citizens,” whose right to citizenship has been secured by their own willingness to fight, bleed and die in defense of a country who has rewarded such patriotism with the continued violation of and violence against black bodies. For Smith, both forms of bloodshed prove the citizenship rights of black people, who endured centuries of suffering and continue to endure because they believe this land, however unfair and
unjust in its treatment of black people, to be their home. In the end, Smith’s position on
colonization mirrors that of most free blacks who “thought of themselves as too deserving of
American citizenship and civil rights. . . to lend it much support” (Clegg 143). Notably, Smith
grounds her belief in America as home, not in an idealized portrait of America as a land of
freedom and Christian civilization but, rather, in the image of black bodies being lynched,
tortured, and burned on American soil. With this lasting image of irrational and barbaric violence
on American shores, Smith calls into question notions of a civilized West, refusing to privilege
America as the source of Enlightenment for all those “native Africans living in darkness.” One
need not leave America to find such terrifying darkness—the heart of which, she asserts, can be
found far closer to home than most white Americans would like to admit. Smith’s writing these
words after spending eight years in Africa, the supposed “Dark Continent,” makes her sharp
criticism of American hypocrisy all the more potent.

Conclusion

Prince’s and Smith’s navigations of home, racial affiliation, and political themes unsettle
the organizing metaphor of manifest domesticity. In terms of spreading the Gospel, Prince and
Smith write themselves into the overarching narrative of Christian imperialism, but as heroines
of their own narratives and recorders of their unconventional experiences, these women both re-
inscribe and challenge the conventions of the civilizing discourse. Their uses of the language of
domesticity often reflect their acceptance of nineteenth-century gender roles and imperialist
rhetoric, yet their special and sincere relationship to the indigenous people of Jamaica and
Liberia, respectively, provide them with the authority to participate in political debates about
emigration and national belonging. They acquired new ways to share their observations and
experiences, which challenged conventional ideological boundaries of race, nation, and gender.
During their travels, these women were never at home in a traditional sense; though they allied themselves with various reform and missionary groups, they were both part of and separate from these communities. Their ventures into uncharted geographies allowed them to perceive uses of domesticity beyond the conventional rhetoric of imperialism and social reform and toward cultural exchange.

Notes

1 I use the edition of Prince’s narrative published by Markus Wiener Publishers under the title A Black Woman’s Odyssey Through Russia and Jamaica: The Narrative of Nancy Prince. References to Prince’s narrative are from this contemporary reprint and cited in this paper unless otherwise noted.


3 William Andrews offers a clear definition of holiness or “sanctification” for many African American female preachers in the antebellum and postbellum eras. He notes that sanctification was “a second experience of divine grace in the soul following conversion.” In the Holiness strain of Methodism, “There was a state of blessedness beyond justification. . . . To be sanctified was to experience full freedom from ‘intentional sin’—the liability, to which all fallen humanity was heir, to commit sins in full knowledge that they were sins” (Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 5.


7 The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) was formed in Philadelphia in 1816 by black members of Methodist churches in response to mistreatment by white members. Richard Allen, who is considered to be the founder of the church, became its first bishop. Allen also authorized Jarena Lee to preach after initially rejecting her requests. Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote paved the way for Smith’s eventual public ministry. Although none was officially licensed or ordained, all three women pursued public ministries because they believed they were called by God to preach. See Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century (1986), edited by William L. Andrews.

8 Though Patricia Hill Collins’ popularized the term “othermothering,” the coining of the term is attributed to Stanlie M. James. See “Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social

9 For a discussion of the Wandering Jew figure see “The Flying Dutchman, the Wandering Jew, and Wagner’s Anti-Semitism” in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 81.4 Fall 2012.

10 Carla Peterson argues that resistance and adaptation to white racism and a capitalist economic structure was reflected in the construction of black “households...based not on nuclear family structures but rather on larger domestic networks that often included nonkin members, for example, boarders who were gradually incorporated into the household and contributed to its maintenance” (10). See Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

11 According to Elizabeth Elkin Grammer, “The notion of sanctification or holiness can be found throughout the Bible. It is important to note that for some holiness advocates sanctification was an emotional experience, for others an act of will, for some an instantaneous experience that was sufficient unto itself.” See *Wild Visions: Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 158.


13 Ibid., 146.

14 Ibid., 93.


16 For biographical information about Barclay see the website “Legacies of British Slave-ownership” (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/15549).


18 According to Richard Douglass-Chin, “In the early- to mid-nineteenth century, however, the Americo-Liberians struggled to establish a foothold on the West African coast, building (initially under the auspices of white missionaries) a small, fragile settlement in the town of Monrovia in what was to become part of Montserrado County and then seeking opportunities to explore the African interior” (214). The Americo-Liberians clashed often with indigenous groups.


20 Ibid., 79-126

21 An actual indigenous practice in order to determine whether a person is guilty.
Chapter Two  
**Circulations of Body and Word: Refiguring Domestic Labor**  
in the *Kitchen Testimonies of Eliza Potter and Elizabeth Keckly*¹

He repeated his invitation to me, and said he would give me five hundred dollars a year to keep house for him and his daughters. I told him I would not take all he was worth in the world and keep house for him... He gave in to me, and did not say anything more about my going as his housekeeper.  

Eliza Potter, *A Hairdresser’s Experience*

I have been her confidante, and if evil charges are laid at her door, they also must be laid at mine. To defend myself, I must defend the lady I have served.  

Elizabeth Keckly, *Behind the Scenes*

While the focus of chapter 1 centered the transnational re-imaginings of the black home and family in the African diaspora, this chapter focuses on the reconfigurations of black servitude in white domestic spaces. Eliza Potter, a Cincinnati-based hairdresser, who wrote and published *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* (1859), was a free mixed-race woman from the North and moved as easily through the private rooms and parlors of her clients as she did across parts of the United States and Europe. As a “cosmopolite and confidante,” as one reviewer for the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* described her, Potter, as well as other nineteenth-century black women such as skilled dressmaker Elizabeth Keckly, author of *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868), capitalized upon their feminine expertise in beautifying white women’s bodily appearances at a moment when “the production of white bourgeois femininity was just emerging as an income-generating beauty industry,” according to Xiomara Santamarina (“Black Hairdresser” 152).² Both women linked themselves to an emerging elite class that sought to show off their wealth and social position, and both Potter and Keckly “exploit,” in the words of Santamarina, their respective professions’ “structural relations of ‘anonymous friendship’ to inscribe [themselves] not as the gossipy and socially inferior servant but as an expert in [their] clients’ shortcomings as ladies” (*Belabored* 

¹ Santamarina, Xiomara. “Black Hairdresser.” 
² Santamarina, Xiomara. “Black Hairdresser.”
Certainly, as Santamarina’s statement implies, the nature of Potter’s and Keckly’s work allowed them into the interiors of certain elite white places, and it was an access most black women in antebellum and postbellum American society did not have. I am hesitant, though, to follow Santamarina’s lead of disassociating the label of “servant” from the labor that Potter and Keckly performed in spite of Potter’s own self-representation as “hairdresser” and Keckly’s reference to “modiste” on her title page. I am hesitant to do so because Potter’s and Keckly’s first-person narratives hinge on white dependency on black “help,” a relationship that characterized, regulated, and enabled black-and-white relations in the homes of the white middle and upper class.

One might reasonably inquire why linking Potter and Keckly to domestic servitude should be expected and singled out—after all, all of the women under study in this project have worked as domestics at one time or another. The answer partially lies in nineteenth-century responses to both *A Hairdresser’s Experience* and *Behind the Scenes* that cry foul over Potter’s and Keckly’s recordings of what they had observed of their employers’ domestic and private lives. One such response, a review of Potter’s text, appeared in the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* in October 1859:

The book is distinguished by nothing so much as the total lack of taste and delicacy which we should expect to find in a work professing to narrate a “hairdresser’s [sic] experience in high life.” The innate vulgarity, the prying curiosity, the offensive coarseness of the class to which the author belongs, are fitly and fully illustrated in its pages. To have been, or to have imagined herself to have been, the trusted confidante and the intimate toilette companion of a lady, is here made a warrant for writing down and deliberately publishing to the world whatever tales of gossip and scandal that may have floated to her ears respecting that lady or her circle of friends. . . .It is the production of this impudent pretender to literary honors, whose sins against grammar and good taste are only excelled by her shameless violation of all the confidences of private life. . .
What seems to outrage the reviewer is Potter’s presentation of “kitchen testimony,” a label that Barbara Ryan uses to categorize narratives written by servants who witnessed the most intimate aspects of their employers’ lives and wrote about them. According to Ryan, the phrase “kitchen testimony” originated with an alleged lover of nineteenth-century actress Catherine Forrest. The alleged lover, author and editor Nathaniel Parker Willis, tried to challenge the validity of servant testimony that implicated him in sexual wrongdoing with Forrest by publicly denouncing “testimony... from the kitchen” (qtd. in Ryan 105). Kitchen testimony was unsettling because, as Ryan argues, it “posed a huge challenge to sentimental visions of non-kin attendance, not least because the things that servants saw and heard could be highly marketable” (119). Relying on a variety of sources, including servant manuals and antebellum novels, Ryan argues that nineteenth-century American writers reframed the relations of servitude into sentimental terms of familial obligation. “[T]he ideal of family-like service,” she argues, “implied an orderliness and stability that were vitally attractive to ‘privileged’ Americans uncomfortable with the exigencies of a rank/gender status most would not have relinquished for the world” (44). In her examination of kitchen testimonies, Ryan includes the narratives of the formerly enslaved as well as brief analysis of both A Hairdresser’s Experience and Behind the Scenes, arguing that kitchen testimonies touched on antebellum and postbellum anxieties and perceived threats to the hegemonic security and well-being of the middle and upper class.7

As scathing as the review of A Hairdresser’s Experience was, it paled in comparison to the outrage and virulently angry responses that followed the publication of Behind the Scenes, one of which included a viciously racist parody entitled Behind the Seams by a Nigger Woman Who Took in Work from Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Davis.8 Sharing a similar dismissive tone, a review published in the Washington National Intelligencer stated the following:
If the negro servant in one conspicuous home may be tolerated in spreading to the world her presentations of all the most secret and unguarded words that are uttered in the bosom of such a family, what family of eminence that employs a negro is safe from such desecration? Where will it end? What family that has a servant may not, in fact, have its peace and happiness destroyed by such treacherous creatures as the Keckley [sic] woman.\textsuperscript{9}

This review, much like Potter’s, expressed, implicitly, white desires for black silence, subservience and unabashed loyalty, recasting Keckley, who designed dresses for Washington, D.C.’s political wives and daughters, as a domestic servant. Keckly’s reporting of what she had observed of the Lincoln’s private domesticity violated behavioral expectations of not only those women who labored as domestic servants but also, more specifically, black women who worked as domestic servants; Potter and Keckly seemed to have stepped beyond the bounds of proper behavior for hired help. In order to better understand the depth of these deep-seated beliefs about race, gender, labor, and dependency that are at work in the texts by Potter and Keckly, I now want to turn to the most visible and pervasive representation of and the proscribed de-facto model of black servitude, “Mammy,” an ideological figure who has been the site of an interpretive dispute over black womanhood and race relations in the white domestic sphere. A sustained analysis of Mammy sheds light on the multilayered strategies that Potter and Keckly employed in their interactions with their white female employers.\textsuperscript{10}

Frequently, narratives that feature black help deploy representations of the industrious and diligent black woman, most famously embodied in Mammy. While there is little evidence of the actual existence of Mammy in antebellum slavery, there were enslaved women in charge of caring for white children or white mistresses. Traditionally presented as a stout, dark-skinned, faithful, obedient, and doting woman, Mammy became the symbol for black servitude, first circulating in antebellum Southern literature and emerging again in post-Civil War imaginings, and, according to April Schultz, this reemergence accompanied the tremendous growth in the
number of black domestic servants in the North (77). In the antebellum period, the image of Mammy served as testimony to the supposed familial bonds between master and slave, particularly in the plantation house. In this narrative, Mammy was loyal not because she was compelled to be, but because she had great affection for and dependence on her masters. Mammy embraced her domestic responsibilities and loved the family that exploited her and called her “auntie,” a label Southern whites had long adopted, “in a specifically non-reciprocal show of power and authority, even if coupled with some affection” argues Patricia Sotorin (39). The identification of a black woman as Mammy articulated maternity and domesticity with white privilege and enslavement. Popular representations of mammy were almost universally of heavyset women whose large bosoms symbolized their roles as nurturers for white families; their bodies literally provided sustenance, first through breast milk and then later through the preparation of food.

A classic example of the Mammy figure appears in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). In Stowe’s canonical text, Aunt Chloe, Uncle Tom’s wife, serves as the cook for the couple’s white owners, the Shelbys, nurturing the master and his family. Even when her beloved husband is sold to pay off debts for the Shelbys, Aunt Chloe does not turn against the white family who owns her. She is portrayed as simply and inevitably maternal, embracing servitude, serving her own children after the Shelbys, and continuing to do so regardless of horrific events. As she prepares to bid farewell to her husband, Aunt Chloe nurtures by cooking breakfast:

The simple morning meal now smoked on the table, for Mrs. Shelby had excused Aunt Chloe’s attendance at the great house that morning. The poor soul had expended all her little energies on this farewell feast—had killed and dressed her choicest chicken, and prepared her corn-cake with scrupulous exactness, just to her husband’s taste, and brought out certain mysterious jars on the mantelpiece, some preserves that were never produced except on extreme occasions. (140)
Domestic labor is all Aunt Chloe can do to honor her departing husband and to prepare him for his difficult journey ahead. Yet while she condemns the selling of her husband, Aunt Chloe does not dispute the rightness of her disempowerment. Mrs. Shelby is portrayed as powerless to stop her husband from selling Tom, yet it is Aunt Chloe who comforts her mistress as they cry together: “And in those tears they all shed together, the high and the lowly, melted away all the heart-burnings and anger of the oppressed” (142). Though their tears are shed from very different subordinated social positions, this passage erases the black woman’s anger and reconciles her to her subjugation. The passage minimizes the black woman’s grief, loss, and the injustices that she experiences and alleviates the white woman’s shame and culpability. Even when losing her husband, Aunt Chloe does not turn against her mistress; she continues to relieve Mrs. Shelby of domestic work. The inevitability and naturalness of this Mammy’s servitude to her white mistress is reinforced by her sustained performance of domestic duty in the face of personal tragedy and institutionalized injustice. “Mammy,” in the words of Deborah Gray White, “helped endorse the service of black women in households, as well as the close contact between whites and blacks that such service demanded. Mammy did a lot of explaining and soothed a troubled conscience” (61). Though Mammy was a fictional ideal, “the Mammy myth” was grounded in the reality of black female house service (White 49). Thus, we can begin to see how the aforementioned reviews of *A Hairdresser’s Experience* and *Behind the Scenes* implicitly invoked “the Mammy myth” as a way to regulate the acts of laboring black women.

As a figure of pleasure and security, the Mammy figure never shared the secrets of her employers. As they worked in the domestic space of whites, domestic servants inevitably learned the family’s innermost secrets. Witnessing family dynamics, love affairs, frictions, and abuse came with the territory. The servant may not have been interested in knowing the details of her
employer’s life, but they were nonetheless revealed when she entered her employer’s domestic space. Thus, many employers considered domestic workers to be harmless and treated such workers as “invisible,” making little effort to conceal from them potentially embarrassing information about their home lives. David Katzman’s words are particularly illustrative of this point:

One peculiar and most degrading aspect of domestic service was the requisite of invisibility. The ideal servant as servant (as opposed to servant as status symbol for the employer) would be invisible and silent, responsive to demands but deaf to gossip, household chatter, and conflicts, attentive to the needs of mistress and master but blind to their faults, sensitive to the moods and whims of those around them but undemanding of family warmth, love, or security. Only blacks could be invisible people in white homes. (188)

In understanding how the Mammy figure framed black women’s claims to femininity and cultural space, as well as illuminate similar terms of obligation and affiliation that also underwrote black servitude, we can begin to see how Potter and Keckly manipulate dominant representations of domestic labor and black help. Both Potter and Keckly use the language of servitude to articulate their lived experiences and entrepreneurial desires that depended upon profiting from white dependency on black help. Before learning the trade of hairdressing, Potter worked as a domestic servant in the early years, travelling with various employers to Europe and other parts of the United States. After studying several crafts, she settled on hairdressing, which required an attendance to her clients in the manner of someone’s maid, and she continued work as a domestic servant for wealthy families intermittently. Though not officially employed as a White House domestic servant, Keckly had a servant’s-eye view of the First Family through her close relationship with the First Lady and performance of duties typically assigned to domestic servants: dressing Mrs. Lincoln for balls and receptions, brushing President Lincoln’s hair, and watching over one of the Lincolns’ sick sons, for example. Referencing Keckly’s slave past,
Francis Smith Foster, too, argues that in her position with the First Family, “Keckly had gone from being nursemaid in a Big House to domestic servant in the Biggest House” (*Multicultural Autobiography* 37). Moreover, in “doing hair” and making dresses, Potter and Keckly, respectively, reposition domestic labor as professional work.

Even so, scholarship on *A Hairdresser’s Experience* and *Behind the Scenes* has overlooked the imbrication of race, gender, labor, and dependency in the authors’ self-representations and acts. While my lens of analysis may run counter to some familiar discussions about Potter’s and Keckly’s agency, and I want to unsettle the traditional framework of how we’ve read them, shifting it away from professional work as agency to a more nuanced picture of how Potter’s and Keckly’s domestic servitude, both literal and metaphorical, enabled their enactment of agency. Rather than assuming that servitude is an already understood, easily dismissed simple condition, I try to read it as complex and expansive, as inclusive of affective interpersonal relations, paradoxical intimacies, and dependencies, and as therefore demanding of a nuanced reading.

In this chapter, I will explore the following question: How do Potter’s and Keckly’s kitchen testimonies uphold and challenge the markers of Mammy, namely silence, the interplay of visibility/invisibility, and interracial social relations, in their claims to femininity and cultural space? I argue that by deliberately choosing what she will tell and with whom she will associate, Potter utilizes the possibility of a strategic dissimulation that granted her the right to privacy. While Potter’s narrative seems to focus solely on the follies and secrets of the upper class, Potter reveals her own feelings and desires when she exposes the secrets of “high life,” particularly white upper-class women’s more prurient desires and lack of refinement; she captures a servant’s-eye view of mid-nineteenth-century America, particularly in private boudoirs, as well
as the watering-places and resorts the elite class frequented. What she does not explicitly tell us about herself is just as important as what she tells us about them, exploiting and negotiating, I argue, the invisible/hypervisible aspect of domestic servitude. Keckly’s more intimate relationship with one of the most infamous women of our time, Mary Todd Lincoln, reveals, I argue, a re-imagination of the intimate relationship between white women and black domestic workers by offering a nuanced portrait of the possibilities for a different kind of intimacy and loyalty between white and black women, one that still depended on the deferential model of mistress/servant relations. Ultimately, Potter’s and Keckly’s kitchen testimonies expose and revise white domestic space as a container for the invisible/hypervisible labor of black women and a site of black female agency.

The Servant-Hairdresser’s Experience and the Politics of Dissimulation

Reissued in 1991 as part of the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, A Hairdresser’s Experience as kitchen testimony begins not with descriptions of Potter’s employers but with the presentation of herself as one who has the right to be sharing her story, the right “for one in [her] humble sphere of life,” as she writes, to publish her kitchen testimony. In “Author’s Appeal,” which precedes the narrative proper, Potter writes,

The physician writes his diary, and doubtless his means of discovering the hidden mysteries of life are great. The clergyman, whose calling inspires the deepest confidence, and into whose ear the tales of sorrow are unreservedly breathed, sends forth his diary to an eager world, and other innumerable chroniclers of fireside life have existed; but the hairdresser will yield rivalship to none in this regard. If domestic bitterness and joy, and all the heart-emotions that exist, cannot be discovered by her, she defies all the rest of the world to find them out. (1)

This declaration (and there are many in Potter’s text) sets the stage for undermining the characteristic docility and submissiveness associated with domestic servitude and manipulating the interplay between the visibility and hyperinvisibility of black women’s labor.
Who was this daring and proud woman of color who shared her observations of white antebellum domestic life, even at the risk of her own livelihood? It is difficult to know the answers to this question, partly because Potter focuses on observations and opinions about others, rather than on the particulars of the private details of her own life. Much of the information that we do know about Potter can be attributed to the work of Sharon Dean, who wrote the introduction to the Schomburg edition of *A Hairdresser’s Experience* and Xiomara Santamarina, who has recovered much about Potter’s life in recent years. The following summary is based on their research and what Potter tells us in her narrative.12

According to Santamarina, Potter’s birth date and birthplace are uncertain. Identified in the archive as a free mulatto from the northern United States, Potter was raised in New York, but, according to Santamarina, she may have been an escaped slave from Virginia.13 By her own account, she went out at an early age to earn her living “in the service of people of ton” (3), meaning fashionable people, but soon realized she had a “vagabond disposition, and loved change” (8). She wanted “to see the world—and especially the Western world” (3), so she went traveling. She ended up marrying in Buffalo, but after a few years left her husband to travel on.14 Whether the two ever reunited for any period, whether they divorced, or whether he died is unknown. Santamarina references a review that referred to Potter as “the former Mrs. Johnson,” which confirms, according to Santamarina, that Potter, at the very least, married a second time.15

Potter visited Canada and then went west, probably arriving in Cincinnati in the 1830s. She worked as a domestic servant in the early years and traveled with various employers to Europe and other parts of the United States. In Paris she decided to study several crafts, settling on hairdressing as her occupation. Her choice proved fortunate because she loved it and was good at it. From time to time she even taught hairdressing (19, 115).
According to Santamarina, Cincinnati was Potter’s home base for three decades, despite being gone for long periods because of her employment, and in 1853, she married Howard Potter, a widower with two children: Kate, born about 1849, and James, born about 1851.16

Potter, according to her narrative, was taken to jail while living in Cincinnati. According to her account, she was accused of helping a Kentucky slave escape, and “thousands” of people apparently followed her when she was taken to an Ohio River ferryboat to be turned over to Kentucky authorities (7). She spent three months in a Kentucky jail awaiting trial, but refused to confess. She spoke out in her own defense in court and was finally freed. Santamarina has been unable to locate records corroborating this curious part of Potter’s life that aligns her with other black antebellum activist writers, a detail that would undermine scholarly claims about an absence of an obvious racial politics in her text.17

Literary scholars have highlighted Potter’s presentation of herself as a free mobile subject, and Santamarina raises the following question that is likely to be asked by first-time readers of A Hairdresser’s Experience. “How could a Black woman author,” Santamarina asks, represent herself as an independent working woman who proclaims her ‘liberty’ in the book’s first paragraph and not a goal to be reached at its end?”18 In the first chapter, Potter begins her text with the usual reference to the place of her (apparent) birth and childhood (New York), but then quickly links this to the unique characteristics and motives of Potter:

I was brought up in New York, and went out, at an early age, to earn my living, in the service of people of ton. For some years, this occupation was agreeable to me; but at length I weared of it, and being at liberty to choose my own course, I determined to travel, and to gratify my long-cherished desire to see the world—and especially the Western world: so I started as soon as possible toward the setting sun. (3)

Potter’s “declaration of independence and geographic mobility,” using Santamarina’s words, distinguishes her from other antebellum black authors such as Nancy Prince, though a notable
exception is Mary Seacole, a mixed-raced Jamaican nurse in the Crimean War and entrepreneur, who published *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* in 1857. Prince framed her travels to Jamaica within discourses of Christian domesticity and missionary work, and her travel was motivated by a need that she believed she could help meet in the West Indies. In contrast, Potter emphasizes her choice to move in terms of personal and economic desire rather than necessity and social reform.

Potter’s silences, then, are not a sign of deference to the white upper-middle class. Instead, for Potter, dissimulation functions as an act of resistance; in the narrative, keeping aspects of her identity private is a rhetorical strategy. Although she does not fully embrace the “self-imposed invisibility” Darlene Clark Hine describes in her theory of black women’s “culture of dissemblance,” I argue that by deliberately choosing what she will tell and with whom she will associate, Potter legitimizes the black female servant’s “right to privacy” by insisting upon boundaries that allow black women the psychic space to develop their subjectivity. Potter’s efforts to establish her interiority and to maintain her privacy are especially revealing when we consider that, as literary scholar Milette Shamir has shown, privacy was a class-based privilege. By demanding that her readers respect her right to privacy, Potter claims middle-class status even as she creates a new ideal of servant worker—one who has agency and integrity. In *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature* (2005), Shamir explains that “[b]y the mid-nineteenth century, middle-class thinkers had begun to base the autonomy and inviolability of the individual on a right to secure one’s privacy, to withhold information from the public, to avoid, in [John] Ware’s words, being ‘exposed front and rear’” (150). For a nineteenth-century black working woman such as Potter, however, the desire for privacy was an ideal that was not only fraught with contradictions, but that was also
incompatible with her public role in the service industry. As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon points out, “On the one hand, privacy is the site of freedom; on the other hand, privacy must be made publicly visible in order to perform the cultural work of representing the freedom of the liberal subject” (235). To establish herself as a respectable free black subject, Potter had to perform her desire for privacy publicly—an act for which she received, according to some newspaper reviews, public censure.

Throughout the text, Potter destabilizes traditional perceptions about service work even as she reveals her struggles to establish her interiority. Representing interiority proved especially difficult for Potter because of her sex and racial identity. Christopher Castiglia explains that although whites, particularly abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, “could move in and out of the national symbolic, criticizing the nation so as paradoxically to gain ground in its public discourse, blacks, who had no privileged place in that public, were positioned as the unwavering bearers of (privatized, interiorized) virtue” (43). This “privatized, interiorized virtue” is precisely why some contemporaneous reviewers took issue with Potter’s narrative; in attacking her decision to publicize her clients’ deplorable behaviors, these reviewers contested Potter’s right to enter a privileged public sphere. Returning to the Cincinnati Daily Commercial review of Potter’s text, the reviewer does not take issue with Potter’s awareness of her clients’ faults and secrets; I’d like to highlight that the reviewer’s key complaint against Potter is that a black woman, whether a domestic servant or hairdresser (or both) had no right to criticize white women publicly. Indeed, the reviewer never objects to the private advice Potter may offer her clients and employers for their personal “benefit” in their intimate domestic space. That Potter “undertook publicly,” using the words of another review in the Cincinnati Daily Commercial, to
scrutinize these supposedly refined ladies for public viewing, however, is seen as trespassing into a space denied to black people.

In other words, Potter was not supposed to diverge from what whites presume to be her subject position. If she expresses her own opinion, which hints at a subjectivity not constructed by whites, she challenges the dominant vs. subjugated relationship because she expresses agency and a worldview that challenges theirs. Like Frederick Douglass, as Castiglia points out, Potter constructs her own public image; she contests whites’ insistence that her entry into public discourse needed their “mediation” (Castiglia 43). The story of Potter’s relation to and interaction with her clients and employers, then, is a complicated one, and she attempts to reconcile this tension throughout the narrative. As she labors to establish a new ideal of servant worker, Potter must distinguish herself from her clients’ immoral behavior, while simultaneously negotiating aspects of her life that resemble theirs, namely her willingness to gossip about their personal lives.

As feminist scholars bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins have shown, black female domestics had to consistently negotiate their subjectivity as an “insider/outsider” in their employers’ homes. In her analysis of the process of black women’s self-representation, Collins persuasively argues that “[b]lack women’s lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African American women with our objectification as the Other” (99). As a possible response to this exclusion, many black service workers could have retaliated by writing and publishing gossip about the families for whom they worked, though most did not and/or could not. Though Potter deliberately “indulges” in a “little gossip,” she maintains her integrity by adhering to what Dean
refers to as a “code of genteel disclosure” (xlvii); this code is reflected in her use of pseudonyms, as well as single letters and dashes to protect the identities of the individuals she discusses.

Because Potter knew that the gossip contained in her narrative would provoke the ire of certain readers, and that it could possibly discredit her authority, she offered a disclaimer in anticipation of the criticisms that a disclosure of secrets might elicit: “I hope the few incidents mentioned by me in these pages will injure no one. I merely write them out for the amusement of those who may wish to indulge themselves in a little gossip which has no evil intention in the world” (37; emphasis in original). As a hairdresser for leisure-class women, Potter’s occupation enables her, and by extension her readers, to see into the domestic and private space of her employers. In this space, she learns about the posh lifestyle of “high life” and the unsavory aspects of it. Exposing her employers’ secrets allows Potter to divert readers’ attention away from her own properly clothed body and encourages us to focus instead on the secrets she tells and, more important, the injustices to which she bears witness.

In the narrative, Potter describes her experiences as a hairdresser for the fashionable elite. She focuses primarily on her relationships with clients and their families and, in particular, the role she fulfills in their homes and private boudoirs. As she travels from watering-places to prominent resorts and from ballroom to ballroom, Potter tells a variety of stories about what she knows, observes, and overhears. For example, readers learn what dress and accessories ‘Mrs. So-and-So’ wore to a full-dress ball, what happens to socially ambitious women who are duped by potential suitors simply because they appear wealthy, and how envy and strife cause “would-be-ladies” to destroy other women’s character. In addition to Potter’s revelations, the narrative emphasizes her nuanced social and political beliefs. For example, as I mentioned in the summary, Potter wrote that she was arrested for assisting a fugitive slave, and throughout the
narrative, she expresses that she “could not recognize the right of one human being to own another” (6; emphasis in original). Though she refuses to call herself an abolitionist (150), visits plantations and seems to be seduced by Southern charm, Potter expresses the most ire for black slaveowners, who seem to be the most cruel. After meeting one of the “most cruel women I had ever seen or heard tell of,” at a soiree in New Orleans, Potter “got a petition drawn up,” determined to present it to Congress “to prevent colored people from owning slaves through some change in law” (113-114). The petition, which Potter kept in her trunk, was stolen, according to her, and that is the last readers hear of it.

Through Potter’s eyes, we also learn about the class anxieties associated with society’s fear of “confidence men and painted women,” to use Karen Halttunen’s term and to what Rafia Zafar refers to as the “breakneck social climbing” (165) that took place in “high life.” Returning to “The Author’s Appeal,” I’d like to emphasize, for example, Potter’s promise to “speak” for the “tesselated [sic] hearths,” “satin tapestries,” and “marble statues” that are silent witnesses to the “misery” in her employers’ homes (1). In so doing, she reveals the “domestic bitterness and joy,” as well as the “wretchedness” that fills her employers’ homes and lives. Like these objects, Potter is considered invisible, and at times, deemed irrelevant. Thus, her goal is to speak for and through the material goods that inhabit her employers’ homes. Additionally, in this “Appeal,” Potter establishes her literary authority as a servant-hairdresser and links her authorial labors to other writers in respectable occupations; as Potter sees it, “[t]he physician writes his diary, and doubtless his means of discovering the hidden mysteries of life are great. The clergyman. . .sends forth his diary to an eager world, and other innumerable chroniclers of fireside life. . .but the hairdresser will yield rivalship to none in this regard.” In short, Potter substantiates her authority by mediating her labor through other forms of respectable and widely-valued labor. In doing so,
she claims the public legitimacy often withheld from antebellum black women writers. This
“Appeal” also describes her motivations for writing, as well as the social value of her profession
in the nineteenth-century United States. Here, Potter acknowledges that her labor as a
hairdresser, and the intimate relations it requires, is just as significant as the physician’s and the
clergyman’s labor. Indeed, Potter identifies the analogous laboring relationship she shares with
the clergyman and the physician. Just as these occupations require the laborer to see and
understand the innermost thoughts of their clients, so, too, does Potter’s; she justifies the idea
that she is working on the body and soul of her clients by dramatizing their need for moral uplift.

Though Potter capitalizes upon the invisible/hypervisible rhetoric of domestic servitude,
literary scholars have argued that Potter desired, ultimately, to be invisible. In *We Wear the Mask*
(1997), for example, Rafia Zafar argues that Potter wears a social mask and intentionally “veil[s]”
her identity” to avoid “public censure” for her revelations (160). Similarly, Sharon Dean
suggests that Potter relied on her “double invisibility as a black woman and as an employee,” to
enter the homes of her clients and learn their most intimate secrets (1). That is, Potter allegedly
uses her “insider-outsider” status to learn confidential information about her employers and their
family. Although *A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life* is ostensibly about Potter’s clients and
their follies, I argue that Potter exposes her inner self in the text through expressions of pleasure,
amusement, rage, and frustration; her narrative is replete with revelations about how events,
places, people, and things, as well as her work, affect her. While critics have persuasively argued
that Potter “veils” specific details about her own life and remains out of view, her private self is
never completely hidden; in fact, she “unveils” and discloses her private self even as she tells
readers about her various experiences in “high life.” In other words, Potter’s private or inner self
—her subjectivity—is inextricably linked to her public identity as a roving servant-hairdresser.
From the very beginning of the narrative, Potter describes herself as “a stranger among strangers” (12). While traveling alone on a steamer bound for Canada, she “gazes out” and meticulously observes her surroundings, a strategy that she uses throughout her careers. Zafar describes Potter as “an observer unobserved,” one who gazes but is not “gazed upon” (161). According to Zafar, Potter is an “unseen viewer who kens the minds of whites who pass her by without a thought. Apparently secure in their whiteness and middle-class status, [her] subjects allow her to operate in their own back regions; casting her as invisible, they mistakenly believe their own actions are equally obscured” (162). Although her employers’ may have considered her invisible, Potter recasts her body and the work it performs as visible in their homes. Like Elizabeth Keckly, Potter invokes her visibility even as she exposes white women’s faults, particularly their improperly clad bodies, which as Lori Merish argues, she “contrasted with the conspicuous and prudent covering of [her] own” (255). In Sentimental Materialism (2000), Merish explains that black women’s exposure of white women results in “an inversion of power relations and racial hierarchies” (255). For wearing inappropriate clothing and trying to pass for what they are not, her employers are, as Zafar observes, “dress[ed] down,” or “publicly divested of social garments—figuratively defrocked, unveiled, exposed by Potter, as well as by the social circle they are trying so desperately to enter (154; emphasis in original). As Zafar suggests, Potter’s “talents for discerning falsehood and knowing where supporters can be found, of being able to know one’s employers while shielding oneself—gifts born of a demeaned racial status and low social condition—become Potter’s ticket to the middle class” (164). Although I disagree that Potter was completely “shielding” herself, her ability to uncover disguises and to detect deception became useful tools in her capacity as servant-hairdresser, and these talents were undoubtedly a key part of her financial and material success.
Potter negotiates her “invisible” identity as a domestic servant and her “visible” identity as a hairdresser. As she travels from Canada to Cincinnati on a river boat, Potter highlights the scope of her visibility when she notices that a mulatto slave woman is treated differently than her enslaved brethren. In this scene, Potter speaks on behalf of the light-skinned slave who receives preferential treatment from her master. Here, Potter publicly disagrees with a white male slaveholder, chiding him for his impure motives. She explains that during the trip,

...[t]he number of our passengers had increased. Among the new ones was a negro trader, whose name was W.; he had with him a number of unfortunate beings in chains and shackles. They were destined for the Southern market, and were all confined, with the exception of one—a good-looking, well-formed girl, for whom he had obtained a cabin passage, and who was treated better than her unfortunate companions. Why? Because the trader doomed her to ignominy. He knew he would be paid for his trouble and expense. She had beauty enough to arouse the base lust of some Southern buyer. I objected to sit at [the] table with her— not through any feelings of superiority on my part toward the girl, but I thought if she came to that table her companions on the lower deck ought to have the same privilege—and it grieved me to contemplate the cause of the distinction shown between those who had been equally bought, and were alike to be sold. (5-6; emphasis in original)

Potter’s impassioned plea for justice reflects an attempt to identify with members of her oppressed race even as it establishes her refusal to be silenced. Though she does not explicitly acknowledge sexual abuse, Potter’s strong condemnation of this slave trader (and others while she was working in New Orleans) could suggest that perhaps she may have experienced sexual exploitation in the workplace, an experience that marked the lives of many domestic servants; the epigraph that opens the chapter points to an implied salacious offer that Potter unequivocally rejects. Indeed, Dean persuasively argues that Potter articulates her desire for intra-racial affiliation “by adopting a voice that is both personal and collective, but she does so in a highly oblique and ironical [sic] manner” (xxxviii). That a black working woman engages in a verbal and public disagreement with a white male slave trader is worth noting. In this scene, Potter
openly challenges a white male and urges him to rethink the class bias and sexual hierarchy he has established among his slaves: “My objection caused some disturbance, and considerable discussion arose in regard to it among the passengers. Mr. W. was highly indignant that I should have questioned his right to treat his goods and chattels as he pleased” (6; emphasis in original). Here, Potter chooses to object rather than defer to an “indignant” white male who questions her right to challenge his behavior. In short, Potter speaks on behalf of her enslaved sister, and in doing so, she reveals her allegiance to other black women, as well as her frustration that slaves cannot claim the same right to privacy that she experiences.

Potter makes herself visible through her labor; as a worker in the beauty industry, Potter’s occupation, despite any anxieties about the hypervisibility of the black female worker’s body, required her to assume a public identity that often invited derision, particularly from contemporaneous reviewers of her narrative, as I have explored. According to Barbara Ryan, A Hairdresser “won a large local audience” (119). The narrative’s popularity can be traced to the reaction it elicited from early reviewers; it even sparked a debate between two of Cincinnati’s leading newspapers because their reviewers, one of which I’ve discussed, disagreed about its social and literary value. A review from the Cincinnati Daily Gazette praised Potter for her literary achievements and celebrates her “bold, if not very polished...pen.”

The Fickle Mistress, Moral Servant: Interracial Intimacy in Behind the Scenes

In the second epigraph that opens this chapter, Elizabeth Keckly invokes her loyal service to the “lady” whom she called her “friend,” uniting her fate and reputation with that of Mary Todd Lincoln, the wife of President Abraham Lincoln and First Lady of the United States. When one considers that at the conclusion of Behind the Scenes, Keckly underscores the fact that “though poor in worldly goods,” she is “rich in friendships, and friends are a recompense for all...
the woes of the darkest pages of life,” (235), then we can better understand the way in which Keckly reconfigures domestic labor. For Keckly, the purpose of publishing her kitchen testimony was to not only make visible the labor she performed “behind the scenes” in the White House, but also show the potential for true social intimacy between a black worker and her white female employers that still depended on the deferential mistress/servant model. This relationship was, according to David A. Davis, “the product of a labor arrangement, a legacy of racism, and a vestige of slavery” (144).

Writing during the Reconstruction Era, Keckly portrays her labor against a chaotic backdrop of emancipation where newly-emancipated black Americans fled the south and “came to the capital looking for liberty” (80). While African Americans were technically emancipated from their status as chattel, there was no freedom from the racist assumptions about the inferiority of black people and their rightful place as servants to whites, sentiments that Keckly’s *Behind the Scenes*, with its emphasis on initiative and industry, challenged. Born on a plantation in Virginia in 1818, Keckly worked energetically and devotedly enough as a slave to buy her freedom at the age of thirty-one. She moved to Washington, D.C. shortly before the Civil War started and established herself as a skilled dressmaker among the city’s elite women. There, Keckly’s clients—among them Varina Davis, wife of Senator Jefferson Davis, who would become the president of the Confederacy during the Civil War—affectionately treated Keckly with respect, even wanting her to move with them to the South when the war started. Through another client, Keckly got connected with Mrs. Lincoln when the latter needed a new dress for the inauguration, and Keckly continued to work for the First Lady through the president’s assassination. While powerful economic and social forces attempted to re-inscribe a system of slavery onto this first generation of nominally freed black Americans, Keckly casts the story of
her success in Washington as an important lesson in how to succeed in life, showing the possibilities for the successful integration of blacks into the national economy as a step toward national healing after the Civil War.

With its focus on these lessons, Keckly’s narrative has been placed within the tradition of the postbellum slave narrative. As Frances Smith Foster explains, postbellum slave narratives served a particular rhetorical function: “Unlike the antebellum slave narrators who downplayed their individual initiative and self-discipline to enhance their argument against the insidiousness of slavery as an institution, postbellum slave narrators needed to convince their readers that the former slaves, especially those who had passively endured their bondage, were capable of assuming responsibilities of freedom” (*Written By Herself* 123). They accomplished this by emphasizing agency and empowerment through stories of hard work, determination, and self-sacrifice in the pursuit of success. The optimistic and hopeful tone of these works was designed to promote acceptance of free blacks and aid in national reconciliation in the Reconstruction period. The first three chapters of *Behind the Scenes* do, indeed, exhibit many of the thematic and stylistic markers of the postbellum slave narrative, particularly their emphasis on reconciliation, forgiveness, and the economic ability of former slaves.

The postbellum slave narrative is, in a larger sense, a version of that timeless American narrative, the “rags-to-riches” story, according to Steve Criniti. Making that connection explicitly, Criniti has compared *Behind the Scenes* to the popular series of post-Civil War novels by Horatio Alger, noting that Keckly’s story of her rise from slavery to successful White House dressmaker epitomized the values taught by Alger’s popular juvenile morality tales: hard work, determination, courage, and high moral character. Like the characters in Alger’s stories, Keckly had risen from poverty to middle-class respectability, confirming the promise of the American
Dream and demonstrating that, in America, anybody who persevered and worked hard could “make it.”

While both the postbellum slave narrative and the “rags-to-riches” success story provide important interpretive frameworks, they do not sufficiently explain the focus of *Behind the Scenes*, which is Keckly’s relationship with the notorious Mrs. Lincoln. Unlike Potter’s numerous emotionally unattached associations with the white women whom she worked for, Keckly was “intimately associated with that lady in the most eventful periods of her life,” as she writes in her preface (6). Having known and worked closely with Mrs. Lincoln from 1861 through the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln and Mrs. Lincoln’s subsequent relocation to Illinois, Keckly privileged her employment with the First Family in her narrative and published a narrative about her labor in the White House as a response to public outrage over what came to be known as the “Old Clothes Scandal,” which became public in October 1867 after the former First Lady, who was in heavy debt because of her fickle spending habits, tried to raise money for herself through the sale of her fashionable wardrobe. Although Mrs. Lincoln had been the object of unprecedented public scrutiny throughout her husband’s tenure in the White House, the vituperative responses were unprecedented. Keckly, who worked closely with her as an advisor during this time, believed it was necessary to provide the public with more background information behind Mrs. Lincoln’s actions, and thus wrote and published *Behind the Scenes* to clear the name of her friend Mrs. Lincoln, as well as clear her own name, as the epigraph states.

Despite her stated sincere intentions, Keckly’s act had a hostile reception as I noted in the beginning of this chapter. In review after review, critics dismissed Keckly’s representation of the First Family. What is most interesting about the reception of *Behind the Scenes* is that while the
public viewed Keckly’s kitchen testimony as particularly dishonorable, most critics, then and now, have overlooked the disconnection between this text’s reception and Keckly’s deferential and defensive representation of herself. When Keckly’s text continues to be propped up against Washington’s *Up From Slavery* as paradigmatic postbellum slave narratives, interpretive problems continue to persist. A careful reading of Keckly’s reconfiguration or “reconstruction” of the modes through which a black person could generate credibility will bring the socio-historical and literary possibilities and limitations of interracial social relationships into view, illuminating how this specific configuration of black/white relationships continued to shape the terms in which the nation framed its denial of political and social status to black female workers.

“Thirty Years a Slave”: The Workings of Slavery’s Slaves

Although Keckly’s three chapters on her life in bondage constitute only a small portion of *Behind the Scenes*’ fifteen chapters, their representation of her status and work as a slave frame the entire text. In these chapters, Keckly represents the injustices of enforced servitude that was slavery: the breaking up of families, sexual exploitation, and the racialized division of labor.

What makes this section unique—and emblematic of the postbellum slave narrative—is Keckly’s choice to portray the “bright side” of slavery. As she states in the second paragraph of “Author’s Preface”:

If I have portrayed the dark side of slavery, I also have painted the bright side. The good that I have said of human servitude should be thrown into the scales with the evil that I have said of it. I have kind, true-hearted friends in the South as well as in the North, and I would not wound those Southern friends by sweeping condemnation, simply because I was once a slave. They were not so much responsible for the curse under which I was born, as the God of nature and the framers of the Constitution for the United States. (3)

Keckly’s curious statements about presenting both sides of slavery speak to an obligation she believed she had regarding her “kind, true-hearted friends” (among them the family to whom she
once belonged). For Keckly, this relationship is more important than her slave status—“simply because I was once a slave”—and thus represents a deliberate writing against the grain of those slave narratives that expressed only “sweeping condemnation.” Instead, Keckly’s grounding in the social relations of southern paternalism motivate a rhetorical interweaving of seemingly contradictory impulses, evident in the denunciations of slavery that she issues alongside her personal expression of attachment to a southern social system of duty and obligations.

In this regard, Keckly’s open affection for her last slaveowner’s family and her desire to withhold condemnation of the South, specifically, manifest the contradictions historians have attributed to ex-slaves’ initial and temporary adherence to slavery’s paternalistic codes. On this basis, then, interpretations of Keckly’s complex representations of her work and social relations as simply symptomatic of postbellum political priorities fail to tell the whole story regarding *Behind the Scenes’* deferential stance. I see Keckly’s sectional affiliation as emblematic of an ethic of social cooperation that exemplifies her commitment, as a cultural southerner, to the deferential structure of paternalism’s socio-economic values.

This social cooperation is manifested in Keckly’s rationale that presents seemingly irreconcilable perspectives. Often, in the ambivalent representations of her work, Keckly introduces the conflicts and paths that make up her work history and social consciousness. This means that the effort to portray the “bright” and the “dark” represents both the systems of constraints and opportunities proposed by slavery’s paternalism. Keckly’s initiation into the slave’s economic role exemplifies this with the relation of her first assigned task:

...a sweet, black-eyed baby, my earliest and fondest pet... was my first duty. True, I was but a child myself—only four years old—but then I had been raised in a hardy school—had been taught to rely upon myself, and to prepare myself to render assistance to others. The lesson was not a bitter one, for I was too young to indulge in philosophy, and the precepts that I then treasured and practiced I believe developed those principles of character which have enabled me to triumph
over so many difficulties. Notwithstanding all the wrongs that slavery heaped upon me, I can bless it for one thing—youth’s important lesson of self-reliance. (10)

Keckly’s relation continues with a demonstration of slavery’s “lesson” in self-reliance:

. . .it was pleasant to me to be assigned a duty in connection with [the baby], for the discharge of that duty transferred me from the rude cabin to the household of my master. My old mistress encouraged me in rocking the cradle, by telling me that if I would watch over the baby well, keep the flies out of its face, and not let it cry, I should be its little maid. This was a golden promise, and I required no better inducement for the faithful performance of my task. I began to rock the cradle most industriously, when lo! out pitched the little pet on the floor. I instantly cried out, “Oh! the baby is on the floor,” and, not knowing what to do, I seized the fire-shovel in my perplexity, and was trying to shovel up my tender charge, when my mistress called to me to let the child alone, and then ordered that I be taken out and lashed for my carelessness. (10-11)

This anecdote of youthful excitement and disproportionate discipline is riddled with ambiguities; the precocious wisdom and ignorance of an enslaved child, the benevolent and punitive character of slavery’s paternalism; the episode’s comic aspect dramatically contrasted to the image of a four-year-old-child being whipped. But perhaps most importantly, it combines the scenes of slavery’s gendered and racial subordination with Keckly’s attribution of the development of her character to the “hardy school” of slavery and its lessons in both self-reliance and the ability to “assist” others. Consequently, she can represent her effort in this episode as a “faithful performance” characterizing “industriousness” despite the fact that the baby falls on the floor and her mistress accuses her of “carelessness.” By tapping into the pedagogical potential inherent in power relations in this way, Keckly herself produces the “bright” side that slavery offers, without overshadowing its “dark” side.

The beginning of Keckly’s narrative thus represents the vivid and pervasive discrepancies evident in the presentation of the labor of the enslaved: the slave mistress’s ownership and devaluation of slave labor, the slave’s resistance to these devaluations, and the meanings the
slave associated with the performance of that work. But as Keckly’s perspective suggests, in hindsight, one of the ironies of slavery’s “teachings” was that a slave’s work was necessary and valuable and thus crucial to providing a slave with a sense of self-worth. Though continually subject to verbal and physical disciplining for the value of her work, Keckly reiterates her resistance to this devaluation. Following the anecdote of her “first duty,” Keckly relates how she remains unwavering in her disbelief in her owners’ sentiments of her worth: “I grew strong and healthy, and, notwithstanding I knit socks and attended to various kinds of work, I was repeatedly told, when even fourteen years old that I would never be worth my salt” (21). In relating this in her kitchen testimony, Keckly publicizes the value of her work in order to demonstrate, using the words of Santamarina, “how her work is instrumental to the family’s participation in the pleasures of its social, class position. . . .She demonstrates how her role in the creation of status justifies her view of herself as a member-participant in the paternalistic slaveholding ‘family’” (“Black Labor” 523). To support her argument, Santamarina cites an 1838 letter from Keckly to her mother while Keckly was loaned out to another household; Keckly writes, “[G]ive my love to all the family, both white and black” (25). Here, and throughout her narrative Keckly imbues her labor agency with the language of family.

The deferential model of mistress/servant relations also shapes her recollections when she recalls her visit to her former slave owners. At this point in the narrative, Keckly is a successful dressmaker in Washington, D.C. In a chapter entitled “Old Friends”—a title that, in itself might have caused readers to pause—Keckly described her joyful and affectionate reunion with her former owners in 1866. Showing no bitterness or resentment towards her former owners, Keckly instead focused on the affectionate bonds of friendship that remained after the Civil War. In response to her Washingtonian friends who are incredulous about her relationship with her
former owners, Keckly writes, “You do not know the Southern people as I do—how warm is the attachment between master and slave” (176). Though Keckly’s conciliatory tone was typical of postbellum slave narratives, it also affirms her dependence on the antebellum domestic model of mistress/servant relations with its imbrications of family and labor discourses.

Even Keckly’s former owners provided testimony that spoke to the supposed familial bond that underwrote mistress/servant relations. In response to Keckly’s sharing of her Northern friends incredulity, one mistress, who by all accounts caused Keckly much emotional and physical pain when she was a slave, states, “Love is too strong to be blown away like gossamer threads. The chain is strong enough to bind life even to the world beyond the grave” (185). In this same chapter, Keckly included a letter from one of the children, who proclaimed her love for her former slave in even stronger terms, signing the letter, “Your child” (191).

“Four Years in the White House”: The Politics of Domestic Work Space

Keckly’s movement from “South” to “North” (which is how she describes Washington, D.C.) organizes the generic structure of Behind the Scenes: Keckly’s slave narrative becomes a memoir that hinges on the deferential model of mistress/servant relations expressed in the slave narrative portion of the text. Keckly deploys an intimacy based on her physical proximity to her white employers due to the traits that slavery developed: diligence, self-reliance, and loyalty. These traits supply the terms in which Keckly can make her work visible in the North’s political and national context. That is, the close, physical proximity Keckly shares with Mrs. Jefferson Davis and Mrs. Lincoln in particular, and with the whole Lincoln family in general, comes to symbolize the moral and social value that Keckly claims to produce through her work.

Keckly’s representations of the Jefferson Davises provide many examples of how this spatial and social configuration of lives works for her. She frames the Davis family in terms of
her willingness to accommodate them with their schedule, often working long and late hours to complete important work. In turn, these intense relations generate the trust the Davises have in her, the observations of the family that this trusting relationship allows her, and the unique knowledge Keckly obtains concerning Jefferson Davis’s prominent role in the secession movement. This intricate relationship of contact and knowledge emerges in Keckly’s story about staying late one Christmas Eve to finish a dressing gown commissioned by Mrs. Davis for her famous husband. In this scene, an unexpected encounter with Mr. Davis, who finds her working late in the family room, means that Keckly witnesses, at first hand, the toll which the nation’s growing crisis inflicts on the South’s leader:

Wearily the hours dragged on, but there was no rest for my busy fingers. I persevered in my task, notwithstanding my head was aching. . . . I looked at the clock, and the hands pointed to a quarter to twelve. I was arranging the cords on the gown when the Senator came in; he looked somewhat careworn, and his step seemed to be a little nervous. He leaned against the door, and expressed his admiration of the Christmas tree, but there was no smile on his face. (45)

Despite the evident burdens inherent in Davis’s public role as southern leader, Keckly takes this opportunity to assert the integrity and respect constituting the Davises’ family relations. She uses this story to represent the man who would soon be in the eye of the storm as “a thoughtful, considerate man in the domestic circle,” and she participates vicariously in the Davises’ war excitement through the robe that she was sewing at that moment: “As the clock struck twelve I finished the gown, little dreaming of the future that was before it. It was worn, I have not the shadow of a doubt, by Mr. Davis during the stormy years that he was the President of the Confederate States” (46).

Keckly’s observations of the Davis family as their seamstress also include political observations, among those some of which Mrs. Davis shared with Keckly about the political crisis preceding the outbreak of the Civil War. Mrs. Davis’s open discussion of the crisis
underway in the South and in Washington, D.C., and her offer to take Keckly south with her as employee, function as clear signs of the trust Keckly has generated with the family. While Mrs. Davis’s openness does surprise Keckly somewhat, she interprets this sign of confidentiality as bound up in the work relations they share, for as Keckly relates, “I was bewildered with what I heard. I had served Mrs. Davis faithfully, and she had learned to place the greatest confidence in me” (47-48). As a working observer, Keckly frames the confidentiality of her work interactions as providing the basis for the physical access to her employers’ bodies that she translates into a form of access to their trust, confidence, and the knowledge that they generate and circulate.

The kind of physical closeness that Keckly conveys in her one-to-one encounter with Jefferson Davis is central to her representation of the social intimacy she shares, not only with the Davises, but also with the Lincolns. Keckly’s account of the spatial and social relations characterizing her White House experience function as further evidence of the moral value that her work generates. In the representation of her work relations, Keckly constantly stages the links between her work and the production of her special relationship with the Lincolns through the intense and repeated use of verbs associated with the responsibilities of domestic servitude, as I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter: While fitting and dressing Mrs. Lincoln for balls and receptions, brushing President Lincoln’s hair, and watching over one of the Lincolns’ sick sons, Keckly witnessed the loving relationship between wife and husband, as well as the stresses that political life and wartime difficulties imposed upon the family during Lincoln’s presidency. While tending to her work, the Lincolns “discussed the relations of Cabinet officers and gentlemen prominent in politics, in [Keckly’s] presence” (92) and would solicit her advice on various concerns, from the possibilities of transforming state dinners into state receptions, to the
significance of Mr. Lincoln’s proceeding into reception dinners escorted by other women, to
asking Keckly’s opinion on the chances of Lincoln’s reelection in 1864.

These anecdotes of social intimacy and contact culminate in her status as sole
witness to Mary Lincoln’s grief and mourning in the wake of President Lincoln’s assassination.
Keckly points to the various efforts made to locate her in the moments immediately following
the assassination so that she could help console the distressed widow, and thus represents her
special role and closeness to Mrs. Lincoln. Furthermore, she stresses her unique role as Mary
Lincoln’s only adult contact with those around her in the days that followed: “She denied
admittance to almost every one, and I was her only companion, except her children, in the days
of her great sorrow” (142). The significance of this sole witnessing should not be underestimated
since Keckly clearly experienced it as a privileged token of trust and value. As that sole
companion, Keckly suggests her own status as a privileged member of the nation. Witnessing
Mrs. Lincoln’s grief provides Keckly with an exclusive form of knowledge in the sense that
Mary Lincoln’s grief, as widow, was the most authentic expression, or the most intimate way of
knowing the personal, emotional effects of Abraham Lincoln’s assassination.

Conclusion: The Kitchen Testimony as a Site of an Empowered Black Female Self

What emerges from the kitchen testimonies of Eliza Potter and Elizabeth Keckly is the
complication of reductive understandings of how black bodies that serve or attend to white
bodies live in and write through domestic spaces that consign them to invisibility or marginality.
Though the “Mammy myth” informed and shaped discourses about black women’s labor, both
Potter and Keckly create empowered subjectivities that were not oblivious to the racial, class,
and gender tensions permeating U.S. history and politics.
At the same time, domestic service—conceptualized rather broadly for my purposes in this chapter—should not assumed to be an already understood, easily dismissed simple condition. In this chapter, I attempted to read black women’s engagement with it as complex and expansive, as inclusive of affective interpersonal relations, paradoxical intimacies, and dependencies as deeply fraught by intersecting axes of power, embedded in multiple hierarchies and as therefore demanding of an historically attentive nuanced reading.

Potter and Keckly spent the better portion of their lives engaged in various types of domestic labor to white families, as did many black women in the antebellum and postbellum years. But their negotiations and sites of struggle are not even regular footnotes in black literary history or black feminist thought. In her work of literary criticism, From Mammies to Militants: Domestics in Black Literature, black feminist scholar Trudier Harris describes the personal fortitude of many black women domestic workers: “They refuse to stay in the kitchen; they refuse to be silent; they refuse to recognize the power of any external force to shape their identities and redefine their cultural values” (24). Ultimately, by writing and publishing their kitchen testimonies about their experiences in the white households they worked in, Potter and Keckly refused to be defined or limited by external forces.

Notes
1 According to James Emerson in The Madness of Mary Lincoln (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), “Historians have been misspelling Elizabeth Keckly’s surname as Keckley since 1868.” Jennifer Fleischner, author of Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between the First Lady and a Former Slave, recently found her actual signatures and revealed the true spelling in her book Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly” (p. 193 n.13). I have chosen to retain the correct usage, rather than the spelling used in the copyright, in my own references to Keckly.
2 I use Xiomara Santamarina’s 2009 edited edition of A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life, published by University of North Carolina Press and Frances Smith Foster’s 1998 edited edition of Keckly’s Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White
House, published by University of Illinois Press. References to their narratives are from these contemporary reprints and cited in this chapter unless otherwise noted.

For a discussion about the emerging beauty industry in America, see Lois W. Banner, American Beauty (New York: Knopf, 1983) and Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982).

3 According to Santamarina, “Sociologists use the phrase anonymous friendship to describe the asymmetrical relations of affect and confessional intimacy that characterize salon hairdressing. It is on this basis that the analogy between hairdresser and physician is often invoked today.” See “Black Hairdresser and Social Critic: Eliza Potter and the Labors of Femininity” in American Literature 77.1 (2005), 151-177.

4 It’s worth noting at the outset that the conflation of “clients” and “employers” may be problematic as some scholars view these two groups as distinct.


7 For Ryan’s brief discussion on Potter and Keckly see the essay, “Kitchen Testimony: Ex-Slaves Narratives in New Company.”

8 Several scholars mention this work and discuss this in their analysis of Behind the Scenes. According to Elizabeth Young, this obscure, 23-page pamphlet was copyrighted by “Daniel Ottolengul,” though it pretended to be authorized by “Betsey Kickley” and “signed” with an x as “her mark.” See Young, Disarming the Nation: Women’s Writing and the Civil War (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999); Behind the Seams; By a Nigger Woman who took in work from Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Davis (New York: National News Co., 1868).

9 Quoted in Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly: The Remarkable Story of the Friendship Between the First Lady and a Former Slave by Jennifer Fleischner. The review also described Keckly’s text as representing “an offence of the same grade as the opening of other people’s letters, the listening at keyholes, or the mean system of espionage which unearths family secrets with a view to blackmailing the unfortunate victims. . . .Nothing is sacred to this traitorous eavesdropper.” For the original review, see the New York Citizen, April 19, 1868, 4.


11 See Broadview’s edition of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, edited by Christopher G. Diller.

12 Sharon Dean discovered the original edition at the Cincinnati Historical Society. She writes that the text “was bound in royal blue with only a basket of flowers embossed on its cover—and only the title on its spine—but no author’s name. On the title page, just underneath the title itself, a fine nineteenth-century hand had neatly penciled (librarians always use pencil),


16 According to Santamarina, Eliza and Howard Potter were married on December 8, 1853. See Santamarina, introduction to *Hairdresser’s Experience* (2009), xv.


18 Xiomara Santamarina “. . .so you can see, color makes not difference’ Race, Slavery, and Abolition in A Hairdresser’s Experience in High Life,” *Legacy* 24.2 (2007): 171-186.

19 Seacole’s *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* was also reprinted by Oxford University’s Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers in 1990.

20 Hine suggests that “because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variation, Black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives” (915). “The culture of dissemblance” gave black women “the psychic space” needed to “hold their own.” See “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Some Preliminary Thoughts on Dissemblance.” *Signs* 14.4 (1989), 915.


25 For a comprehensive summary of the “Old Clothes Scandal” see introduction to Frances Smith Foster’s 1998 edited edition of Keckly’s *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*.

26 Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s characterization of the domestic servant/slave’s social configuration speaks to the deep ambiguities inherent in master/slave relations: “Life in the Big House, with its affection and hatreds, its interracial attachments and intolerance, its extraordinary kindnesses and uncontrollable violence, represented in all of these contradictions paternalism in its most heightened form.” See *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 363.
Chapter Three  
Civil War, Civil Rights: Susie King Taylor’s Motherwork

There are many people who do not know what some of the colored women did during the war. There were hundreds of them who assisted the Union soldiers to escape. Many were punished for taking food to the prison stockades for the prisoners. . . . Others assisted in various ways the Union Army. These things should be kept in history before the people. There has never been a greater war in the United States than the one in 1861, where so many lives were lost—not men alone but noble women as well.

Susie King Taylor, Reminiscences of My Life in Camp

When Susie King Taylor published Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33rd United States Colored Troops Late 1st S. C. Volunteers, the only published account by a black American woman who served with the Union army, in 1902, she intervened in a struggle over the memory of the war that was reaching new levels of political urgency.¹ For blacks, the South, at the turn of the century, was a space of major racial strife, shaped by both the official segregation of Jim Crow laws and unofficial forms of anti-black violence such as lynching. Directly contributing to contemporary racism, the ideology of the Lost Cause gained greater visibility in this period.² Organizations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) oversaw and participated in the memorialization of the Confederate past through monument-building and civic celebrations, writers like Thomas Dixon celebrated the Confederacy in popular novels such as The Leopard’s Spots, published the same year as Reminiscences, and The Clansman (1905).³ At the same time, white supremacist refractions of the Civil War were not just limited to the South. In her examination of Civil War political cartoons that featured African Americans, Alice Fah argues that, “There is more than a hint here of many white Northerners’ wish. . . that African Americans would simply disappear from American life. . .” (156). Black wartime participation, treated with ambivalence by many white Northerners from the beginning, started to fade from view. Like the very public and hostile nostalgia of white Southerners, the
amnesia of many white Northerners functioned not only to sanitize the memory of the Civil War but also to stymie contemporary black struggles for citizenship and equality.

In response to this assault and historical amnesia, many black writers, male and female, strategically revived the memory of the Civil War, and particularly, of black wartime service. These writers attempted to demonstrate that wartime participation proved blacks’ worthiness for full and equal citizenship rights. For example, Frederick Douglass consistently memorialized the war in his postbellum writings; spurred by the need to “preserve for future reference an account of the part which the Negro took in suppressing the slaveholders’ rebellion,” William Wells Brown published *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity* (1867); and Booker T. Washington gathered stories of black heroism and published them in *A New Negro for a New Century: An Accurate and Up-to-Date Record of the Upward Struggles of the Negro Race* (1900).4 Like their male peers, black women writers also turned to the legacy of the Civil War in fiction, poetry, and biography. Their works include the fictional works of Pauline Hopkins, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s Civil War poems and novel *Iola Leroy* (1892); Octavia Victoria Rogers Albert’s *The House of Bondage; or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves* (1890), Kate Drumgoold’s and Annie L. Burton’s memoirs, *A Slave Girls’ Story* (1898) and *Memories of Childhood’s Slavery Days* (1909), respectively, and, of course, Susie King Taylor’s *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp* (1902).

Born “under slave law in Georgia,” as she writes early in *Reminiscences*, in 1848, Susie Baker was thirteen-years-old when the war began. According to her narrative, an uncle took Taylor, who had been living with her grandmother in Savannah, and his family, and fled to the Union-occupied St. Catherine’s Island, one of Georgia’s Sea Islands. Taylor and her relatives became one of the thousands of runaway slaves taken into Union custody, becoming
“contraband of war.” Taylor spent the Civil War with the first company of African American soldiers, the 33d United States Colored Troops (USCT), serving as a teacher, laundress and unofficial nurse. She eventually married a sergeant in the company, Edward King, and remained with the soldiers until the war ended. After the war, and the death of her husband and birth of her only son, Taylor opened a school in Georgia and taught for a few years. After she closed her school, Taylor became a domestic servant, eventually relocating to Boston and leaving her son in the care of her mother. Taylor married a second time, to Russell L. Taylor, and she continued her wartime service by organizing the Women’s Relief Corps of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) in Boston, serving as president of the group in 1893. When she was 54, Taylor wrote and published her brief memoir, which included recommendations from former Union Army colonels Charles Tyler Towbridge and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who both praised Taylor’s “unselfish devotion and service.”

*Reminiscences* is not just a memoir of one formerly enslaved woman’s war experiences of her work in the contraband camps or of her service as a company nurse to the colored troops. Scholars have made clear the importance of *Reminiscences* and its complex rhetorical strategies. In an early interpretation of *Reminiscences*, for example, Joanne Braxton argues that Taylor wrote from the position of “outraged mother,” a literary counterpart to the “articulate hero” in narratives by black men. Tracing the outraged mother as the primary archetype for black women’s writing, Braxton establishes that the most salient feature of this textual maternal figure can be found in her desire to save herself and her community. “The outraged mother,” Braxton argues, “embodies the values of sacrifice, nurturance, and personal outrage. . . .Implied in all her actions and fueling her heroic ones is outrage at the abuse of her people and her person. She feels very keenly every wrong done her children, even to the furthest generation” (300-301). In
**Reminiscences**, Taylor foregrounds the relationship with her grandmother, linking her, as Braxton argues, to other narratives written by formerly enslaved women such as Harriet Jacobs. Elizabeth Young, too, comments on the maternal concerns in Taylor’s narrative, arguing that *Reminiscences*’ “black matrilineal legacy and a female tradition of literacy” reshape the gendered contours of the war narrative and offer an alternative model for memorializing the war (276).

While recognizing the matrifocality of Taylor’s work, scholarly analyses of *Reminiscences*, however, have tended to ignore the nuances of Taylor’s maternal acts that arise from different spatial or cultural locations and Taylor’s use of the maternal trope to underwrite a patriotic femininity and a passionate critique on the ongoing “war” for civil rights.

Building on the domestic concerns raised by both Braxton and Young, I explore the operations of agency through the lens of “motherwork,” in order to illustrate Taylor’s representation of civic participation and scathing commentary on black-and-white race relations at the turn of the century. Motherwork is a concept developed by Patricia Hill Collins that describes the physical and emotional labor of biological mothers or other women in the community that aims to ensure the survival of families and communities of color in the context of the social inequalities that undermine their survival.\textsuperscript{10} Although motherwork is focused on the concepts of mothering, it reaches beyond women who are literally mothers. Because it is based on care, education, and survival, motherwork does not have to be performed only by mothers. In the masculine spaces of war (contraband camps and battlefields, for example) and the post-Civil War South (Jim Crow segregation, anti-black violence), spaces that have made black women invisible and/or marginalized. I theorize the ways “motherwork,” as represented by Taylor’s grandmother and Taylor’s nursing and postwar work, acknowledges that individual survival, empowerment, and identity require group survival, empowerment, and identity.
First, I contextualize *Reminiscences*, situating it with contemporary narratives by black men about wartime participation, which rested on a discourse of achievement and progress predicated on constructions of black masculinity. Though she honors black male heroism in her narrative, Taylor diminishes the black male presence in order to foreground black women’s maternal heroism that included teaching black soldiers and nursing wounded ones. For Taylor, black women’s wartime work was a privileged site of citizenship-making right alongside black men’s battlefield participation, and I include the cultural work of other black women who actively participated in the war. I then analyze Taylor’s motherwork with the black soldiers, contextualizing her work through an analysis of her grandmother’s motherwork. I conclude the chapter by examining Taylor’s experience in the postwar South, where her larger political project becomes clear. By reclaiming the presence of black women, by crafting public memory through the publication of her memoir, Taylor claims for herself the work of recording and narrating the past, laying claim to a new source of cultural agency and authority.

**In the Black Soldier’s and White Angel’s Shadow: Reminiscences and Narratives about Wartime Participation**

At the height of lynch-mob violence, black male writers continued to evoke the importance of the Civil War to challenge the bleak political and social realities of the period, centering the heroism of the black soldier to make the case for black rights. As Dickson D. Bruce Jr. writes, “The virulence of white racism was a powerful spur to literary activity, as black writers sought to use their pens to fight against racist practices and ideas” (1). Works by such black Civil War veterans as George Washington Williams and Joseph T. Wilson thoroughly recount the achievements of black soldiers. Williams’ *A History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion* (1888) and Wilson’s *The Black Phalanx: African American Soldiers in the War*
of Independence, the War of 1812, and the Civil War (1890) memorialized the black male soldier at a time when most of the nation would have preferred to forget or not acknowledged.

Williams, who is considered by many scholars to be nineteenth-century America’s foremost African American historian, did not write from “personal knowledge,” as he states in the preface of A History of the Negro Troops. Though he participated in many of the battles he described in his book, Williams states his intentions to write in a manner that “avoid[s] partisan feeling and maintain[s] a spirit of judicial candor” (xxxvii), a narrative tactic Taylor modified in Reminiscences, as I will show later in this chapter. In making his case for blacks’ suitability for citizenship, Williams writes, “Looking back over the centuries, there would be little else to record of the poor, patient Negro save his sufferings and degradation were it not for the luminous flashes of his martial glory, which cast a light upon the background of an otherwise sombre [sic] picture” (238). David Blight describes A History of the Negro Troops as “a spiritually reassuring form of memory . . . that helped many people cope with despair in the age of Jim Crow” (321). Williams’s “histories of African Americans are stories about the fulfillment of an ultimate and sacred American progress” (322).¹¹

Like their male peers, Black women writers, too, celebrated the black citizen-soldier. When black women were allowed opportunities to participate in this crafting of collective black memory, they were supposed to focus on black manliness; in other words, black women were expected to be vehicles for black male patriotism. For example, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, a Canadian-based journalist was asked by friend and abolitionist Martin Delaney to help recruit black soldiers. Accepting his invitation, Shadd Cary “crossed the border and traversed widely across the United States” to do so, according to Jane Rhodes (154). Sarah Parker Remond, an anti-slavery lecturer, wrote about black male heroism and fought for black male suffrage despite
the exclusion of women. Even noted writer and activist for women’s rights, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, in an 1866 speech delivered before the National Woman’s Rights Convention, invoked the black-soldier in a reference to the decision in the Dred Scott case, which deemed that blacks, whether enslaved or free, were not citizens of the United States: “When Judge Taney said that the men of my race had no right which the white man was bound to respect, he had not seen the bones of the black man bleaching outside of Richmond. He had not seen the thinned ranks and the thickened graves of the Louisiana Second” (qtd. in Long 199). In sum, black male soldiers served as universal symbols of blacks’ fitness for citizenship.

It would seem, at first glance, that black women appealed to patriotism by only celebrating black men as “defenders of home, freedom, and the values of nation,” using the words of W. Fitzhugh Brundage (83). With regards to civic participation, black women during the post-war era were expected to play supportive, subordinate roles that promoted a masculine patriotism, a situation they shared with southern white women. For example, according to Brundage, after the Civil War, elite southern white women, in public remembrances of fallen Confederate soldiers and in celebrations of the Lost Cause, became public agents by participating in fundraising for building Southern monuments and leading civic groups (Brundage 17-18). Initially concerned only with the mourning, burial, and honoring of the dead, these women’s groups grew in scope and authority; organizations such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy achieved what Brundage calls a “custodianship of memory” and, in essence, took over the remembrances of the Civil War (22). But postbellum southern women’s historical memory was a narrative of white supremacy and power. Using their authority, elite white women carved out a space of independence and agency, even while they were involved in the “perpetuation of the region’s social and political hierarchies” (Brundage 15). Much of their
emphasis was on public spaces, and over time they moved to events that celebrated their particular version of history.

Even if it seemed black women played a supporting role in Civil War remembrances, they also “took an active, aggressive role in the Civil War even when it meant tremendous sacrifice,” according to Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson (126). Susie King Taylor numbered among many black women who were at battle sites, nursing wounded soldiers, cooking and serving meals, and laundering linens in the untamed fields of army camp life. According to Jane E. Schultz, “Approximately 10 percent of the Union’s female relief workforce was of African descent: free blacks of diverse education and class background who earned wages or worked without pay in the larger cause of freedom, and runaway slaves who sought sanctuary in military camps and hospitals” (221). One notable mention is Harriet Tubman, who worked within the ranks of the army as soldier, scout, and spy, and was known as “General Tubman.” In fact, as Jennifer James explains, Tubman “designed, implemented and commanded the famed Combahee River mission, a wildly successful stealth attack on South Carolina coastal planters and the Confederate works securing the region” (106). The historical significance of Tubman’s Civil War-related activism has not been fully explored, and is beyond the scope of this chapter and project. Nonetheless, as Vivian May states, “Tubman’s narrative and political curtailment has been under-theorized, despite the fact that feminist and antiracist scholars have been committed to identifying reductive interpretive frames that distort questions of black women’s roles as knowers, political organizers, and historical agents” (30). I would extend May’s analysis to include Taylor’s cultural work as well.

Taylor, Tubman, and the ‘loyal women’ Taylor referenced in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter disrupt the narrative that enslaved people, particularly enslaved black
women, passively waited on the plantations of the South to be freed while white men of both armies fought and died on the battlefields. Though not a spy like Tubman, Taylor relates a ground-level view of the war with stories of her movement with the First South Carolina Volunteers, how battles were won, and what life was like in camp between battles. Much of Taylor’s narrative provides the reader with the truths of war, both big and small: the truth of the larger meaning of the war for black freedom, but also the truth of the risks she took personally, the truth behind the rumors about Yankees that circulated before and throughout the war, and the truth about her overall contributions to the wartime effort. Still, Taylor’s “truths” were overshadowed by a victorious record of male military service. Black women’s exclusion from commemorative texts is not surprising given that white chroniclers of the war would not have regarded blacks as important agents, and black men writing about black men’s wartime participation would likely have regarded most of the work that black women did during the Civil War—the cooking, the cleaning, the laundering—as nothing more than menial.

Touted as a rarity among the cluster of Civil War accounts published during and after the war, Reminiscences is the only memoir written by a black woman who actively participated in the war. Encouraged by friends, as she writes in her preface, “to write a book of my army life, during the war of 1861-65,” Taylor, at the age of 54, self-published her narrative. Yet, to praise Reminiscences only for its singularity and unique social position of its author risks reducing the work to nothing more than “a plain record of simple lives,” to use the words of Civil War colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who joined the war effort early on and became commander of the 1st Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers. Though Higginson is probably best remembered today as the man Emily Dickinson turned to for literary advice early in her career, he had a long and distinguished career as a Unitarian minister, Transcendentalist, abolitionist, and women’s
rights advocate, as well as editor, biographer, essayist, and literary critic. Higginson, to whom Taylor dedicates *Reminiscences*, praises Taylor’s wartime effort in two short paragraphs, calling attention to her exceptionalism and “most estimable” life and career:

> Actual military life is rarely described by a woman, and this is especially true of a woman whose place was in the ranks, as the wife of a soldier and herself a regimental laundress. No such description has ever been given, I am sure, by one thus connected with a colored regiment; so that nearly 200,000 black soldiers of our Civil War have never been delineated from the woman’s point of view. All this gives peculiar interest to this little volume, relating wholly to the career of the very earliest of these regiments,—the one described by myself, from a wholly different point of view, in my volume “Army Life in a Black Regiment,” long since translated into French by the Comtesse de Gasprain under the title “Vie Militaire dans un Regiment Noir.” (xliii)

Like the abolitionist editors before him, Higginson’s introduction, on the one hand, authenticates Taylor’s narrative, attesting to the veracity of her text and the virtuous character of its author. Higginson’s assertion that he “left *Reminiscences* wholly untouched, except as to few errors in proper names” confirms Taylor as sole author and affirms Taylor’s wartime work, which, as we learn from a letter she reproduces by another Civil War colonel, was not fully recognized by the federal government.¹⁵ Higginson’s attempt to affirm Taylor’s gendered perspective is realized as he emphasizes Taylor’s sex and gender and the traditional roles Taylor assumes as “the wife of a soldier” and a laundress who “could read and write and had taught children to do the same.” However, Higginson’s paternalistic tone reduces Taylor’s agency to just relational and functionalist roles. Though these roles were important ones that nineteenth-century black women assumed because it gave them some sense of agency, Higginson’s framing of this agency is limited and overlooks not only Taylor’s knowledge production in the various spaces Taylor comes across but also her larger political project.

In a similar way, Willie Lee Rose, in his introduction to the Marcus Weiner edition of *Reminiscences*, positions Taylor’s text as a “small volume of random recollections.”¹⁶
historian, claims that Taylor does not “seem fully aware of the not-so-subtle economic
disadvantages her race endured in the North in this ‘nadir’ of race relations” (16). Though
Taylor’s strategic reserved tone punctuate the first half of her narrative, I believe Rose seems to have missed, surprisingly, the impassioned condemnation that mark the last chapters of Reminiscences. Throughout the narrative, Taylor makes it known that she is fully aware of the economic devastation following the war, making specific references to the failures of the Freedman’s Savings Bank, where her grandmother “placed her savings” of three thousand dollars, which was “the result of her hard labor and self-denial before the war, and which, by dint of shrewdness and care, she kept together all through the war” (3). Taylor also references the unpaid service that she and other African Americans provided. Like the other women under study, Taylor worked as a domestic servant in the North, and she was likely well aware of the limited economic opportunities available to black women, and her ability to travel between North and South enabled insightful observations about the realization of freedom and liberty in different regional spaces.

Rather than being not “fully aware” and writing the opposite of a “volume of random recollections,” Taylor references major developments of the war and Reconstruction, captured in the powerful “I have seen the terrors of that war” (51). Because women have been traditionally seen as “exterior to war, men interior” as Jean Bethke Elshtain writes, “men have long been the great war-story tellers, legitimated in that role because they have ‘been there’ or because they have greater entrée into what it ‘must be like’” (212). Because of this construction, women have been reduced to passive onlookers to war rather than as active agents, a predicament more pronounced for black women like Taylor. As such, black and white women’s war literature is often characterized as secondary in importance to men’s war texts. By writing about war, women
writers change traditional constructions of home and family, merging representations of war with that of private life, and, in the process, they reshaped perceptions of what constitutes war. Taylor’s narrative challenges traditional thinking about the homefront, enabling a social and political voice that may not be a readily apparent marker of her authorial persona.

The Legacy of Motherwork in *Reminiscences*

From the beginning, the interplay between the military and the maternal emerges in a variety of forms in *Reminiscences*. The opening chapter, not unlike Nancy Prince’s description of her paternal genealogy, introduces the interweaving of mothers and war. Her first chapter, “A Brief Sketch of My Ancestors,” begins: “My great-great grandmother was 120 years old when she died. She had seven children, and five of her boys were in the Revolutionary War. She was from Virginia and was half Indian. She was so old she had to be held in the sun to help restore or prolong her vitality” (1). Taylor moves on to her great-grandmother, “named Susanna,” who gave birth to 24 children and was “one of the noted midwives of her day” (1). In these series of opening statements, Taylor establishes an important connection: She illustrates the intersection of her lineage with that of the body politic, but instead of privileging the patriarchal figure to present this relationship, as Prince does, the connection is made through her great-great-grandmother, whose sons fought in the Revolutionary War. This assertion challenges the narrative that patriotism equals patriarchal sacrifice in which citizenship is a result from black fathers who fought and died in the war. Taylor defines her people by their names, the dates of their lives, what they were known for, what happened to them, and whom they married and gave birth to. These opening descriptions strike a complementary chord in the context of Taylor’s eventual Civil War experiences because she sets the stage for a patriotic femininity that is maternal and activist, constructed from a black woman’s perspective.
Central to this maternal story is the role that Taylor’s grandmother, Dolly Reed, plays in passing down a legacy of motherwork. The black grandmother, as a literary trope, exemplifies motherwork: She has been guardian and caregiver for her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and as well as fictive kin. She represents wisdom and strength while serving as keeper of the family values and conveyer of black culture. It was the grandmother who reminded family members of their obligations and goals, and have played major roles in the socialization of children and the stabilization of families. The strength and resilience of Reed is imbedded in her ability to withstand the harshness of slavery and oppression, her ability to perform multiple roles, her love of family, and her strong religious beliefs.

Reed, whose nurturance, self-reliance and mobility served as model for Taylor through her adulthood, paved the way for the development of Taylor’s own voice and self-definition, much in the same way Aunt Martha provided a model to her granddaughter Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Both Dolly Reed and Aunt Martha insisted on protecting their grandchildren, providing for their family, and proving that slavery did not destroy blacks’ capacity to create and nurture vital familial relationships that provided the foundation for black citizenship.

Reed assumed the big responsibility for the care and welfare of her family. Taylor writes that, “When I was about seven years old, Mrs. Grest allowed my grandmother to take my brother and me to live with her in Savannah” (2). Praising her grandmother as a “hard laborer” and a “practical” woman, Taylor writes that her grandmother “made a good living” for herself, making several trips a year to and from her Savannah home and the Grest Farm, where her daughter remained: “She would hire a wagon to carry bacon, tobacco, flour, molasses, and sugar. These
she would trade with people in the neighboring places for eggs, chickens, or cash, if they had it” (3). Reed’s motherwork serves a crucial role for the survival and stability of the black family, providing an important model for the motherwork Taylor would eventually pursue herself.

Reed’s motherwork as a political project is even more evident in her attempts to secure instructors to teach Taylor and her brother how to read. Reed sent Taylor and her brother to a family friend, a free woman of color who kept a secret school: “We went every day about nine o’clock with our books wrapped in paper to prevent the police or white persons from seeing them. We went in, one at a time, through the gate. . . . The neighbors would see us going in sometimes but they supposed we were there learning trades” (5). Reed then arranged for Taylor to be taught by another free woman of color and then is advised to “better get some one else who could teach [Taylor] more,” after the teacher informed her that she had taught Taylor all she knew. Reed, according to Taylor, then sought out her landlord’s son, “who was very fond of grandmother,” and she asked him to give Taylor some lessons, which he agreed to do.

Reed’s aspirations for her granddaughter to become literate emphasize the political aspect of motherwork because learning to read and write when it was illegal to do so empowered black subjects. In numerous slave narratives, the themes of literacy and freedom were consistent across texts and revealed that teaching and learning literacy were often depicted as a “communal act,” according to Theresa Perry:

While learning to read was an individual achievement, it was fundamentally a communal act. For the slaves, literacy affirmed not only their individual freedom but also the freedom of their people. Becoming literate obliged one to teach others. Learning and teaching were two sides of the same coin, part of the same moment. Literacy was not something you kept for yourself; it was to be passed on to others. (14)
Taylor’s representation of her literacy brings into view this communal act that forges the crucial link between literacy and civic participation, bringing into view motherwork’s purpose for both individual and communal survival.

Taylor “often wrote passes” for her grandmother, referring to the “slave pass.” The slave pass was a brief handwritten note from the slave owner that included the enslaved person’s name and the dates and destination of the carrier, and it had to be carried at all times and given up when demanded from whites. Failure to have the pass could result in getting thrown in jail, getting beaten, or even death.

I often wrote passes for my grandmother, for all colored persons, free or slaves were compelled to have a pass; free colored people having a guardian in place of a master. These passes were good until 10 or 10:30 PM for one night or every night for one month. The pass read as follows:---

Savannah, GA, March 1st 1980
Pass the bearer______ from 9 to 10:30 P.M.
Valentine Grest

Every person had to have this pass, for at nine o’clock each night a bell was rung, and any colored persons found on the street after this hour were arrested by the watchman, and put in the guard-house until the next morning, when their owners would pay their fines and release them. (7)

Taylor’s ability to write passes for her grandmother contributed to her survival and that of her community, and she recognized early on, not only the relationship between literacy and social mobility, but also the implications her literacy had in terms of individual and collective agency. The ability to write the name of someone other than herself on the pass granted her an authority to not only enable the safety of one’s movement but also manipulate, potentially, an identity and to represent someone as someone else, though Taylor does not indicate whether this was the case and does not mention that she wrote passes for anyone other than her grandmother. On one level, through the act of writing passes, Taylor is speaking in the “master’s” language, which potentially caused her to remain trapped within a system of discourse that denied her a self-
defined agency. On another level, this act of writing is enveloped within an antebellum black agency that sanctioned her grandmother’s mobility, though within a limited range and distance. Even so, Taylor writes about her grandmother going to church at night, emphasizing the pervasive emotional and mental preoccupation with freedom by people in bondage:

I remember, one night, my grandmother went out into the suburbs of the city to a church meeting, and they were fervently singing this old hymn,—Yes, we all shall be free/yes we all shall be free/yes, we all shall be free/When the Lord shall appear, when the police came in and arrested all who were there, saying they were planning freedom and sang “the Lord,” in place of Yankee to blind any one who might be listening. (8)

Reed also taught her granddaughter the “truth” about the war. Taylor had been reading “so much about the “Yankees”” that she was “very anxious to meet them,” but she was told by some white people that the Yankees were dangerous and planned to “harness [blacks] to carts and make them pull the carts around, in place of horses” (7). Taylor asked her grandmother whether this was true, and her grandmother set her straight and reminded her to read the signs the Southerners put up to warn the North. Reed advised Taylor to ignore “what the white people say” (8).

In becoming more aware and knowledgeable about the Civil War, thanks to her grandmother’s teachings, Taylor realized the war was not just something she read about; it quickly became a more protracted and engulfing conflict than Taylor could have imagined: “I remember what a roar and din the guns made. They jarred the earth for miles” (8-9), Taylor writes, referencing the Union soldiers’ firing on Fort Pulaski. Two days after Fort Pulaski fell, Taylor fled with her uncle and his family and came “under the protection of the Union fleet” when she and her relatives boarded a boat for St. Simon’s island (9). Taylor and her relatives found themselves transformed from slaves to “contraband of war,” a title given to escaped slaves who sought Union army protection. With this new status, enslaved blacks were no longer under
the control of their masters, but they were not exactly free, either. As Michael Cohen writes, “The status of being ‘contraband’ equated these former slaves with goods seized from the Confederacy, such as weapons and cotton, and thus constrained the dimensions of their humanity” (274-75). Though contraband were not seen as citizens, and Northern army officials weren’t necessarily any less racist than their Southern counterparts, Union Army protection still provided a way to establish a new life for Taylor and her relatives, including the continuation of the communal act of literacy. No longer hiding her literacy from whites, Taylor was encouraged to showcase her skills:

[Captain Whitmore] asked if I could read; I said, “Yes!” “Can you write?” he next asked. “Yes, I can do that also,” I replied, and as if he had some doubts of my answers he handed me a book and a pencil and told me to write my name and where I was from. I did this; when he wanted to know if I could sew. On hearing I could, he asked me to hem some napkins for him. He was surprised at my accomplishments (for they were such in those days), for he did not know there were any negroes in the South able to read or write. He said, “You seem to be so different from the other colored people who came from the same place you did.” “No!” I replied, “the only difference is, they were reared in the country and I in the city.” (9)

In this passage, Taylor attempts to minimize any marker of exceptionalism by attributing her literacy acquisition to her urban environment, emphasizing that the move from the country to the city offered her more opportunities to learn in spite of learning undercover. By framing her literacy acquisition in this way, Taylor illustrates that black illiteracy is not indicative of an innate black intellectual inferiority or lack of a desire to learn, a position she maintains throughout the narrative, particularly when she describes the eagerness of the contraband to learn how to read.

For example, on St. Simon’s Island, Taylor is asked to run a school for the contraband, which she agrees to do so after her request for books is honored. Within two weeks, Taylor “received two large boxes of books and testaments from the North,” and taught “about forty
children” in addition to adults, “all of them so eager to learn to read, to read above anything else” (11). At the tender age of fourteen, Taylor commands not only respect from white male authorities but also evokes her grandmother’s effort and determination to secure lessons for her, linking back to the idea that literacy was a pathway for empowerment. Taylor emphasizes blacks’ eagerness and self-determination, dispelling any stereotypes about contraband as helpless, lazy and intellectually inferior.19 Taylor’s school continued into the late fall of 1862 until the black “refugees” were relocated to Beaufort, South Carolina where Taylor officially “enrolled as a laundress” and became an unofficial nurse to black troops (Taylor 35).

The disruption of her teaching opens up space where Taylor extends her motherwork and shapes it to serve a more recognizable patriotic role, the Civil War nurse. Nursing seemed a sure path to that goal because “during the nineteenth century,” as Libra R. Hilde writes, “nursing was associated with femininity and motherhood” (57). Though Hilde focuses on white Southern women who performed nursing duties, her description captures how Taylor practiced nursing. Wartime nursing allowed otherwise excluded groups, i.e. women of color, access to these familiar tropes of middle-class womanhood. If Civil War nursing, with its patriotic inclinations through the act of healing sick and wounded men so as to return them to battlefield, fulfilled one of the key duties of gendered citizenship, then Taylor, through the presentation of her nursing experience, reasoned that society could not justly deny her rights to citizenship. Additionally, the major responsibilities associated with Civil War nursing—cleaning wounds, administering medications, and assisting in surgeries, cooking and serving meals—presented her with public domestic labor that was valued in ways that private domestic servitude wasn’t.20

Presenting herself as nurse anchored Taylor’s feminine identity in a way that exemplified motherwork’s concern with the empowerment of others and motherwork as a site of agency and
authority in spite of potentially oppressive notions of feminine self-sacrifice and duty: “I was very happy to know my efforts were successful in camp, and also felt grateful for the appreciation of my services. I gave my services willingly for four years and three months without receiving a dollar. I was glad, however, to be allowed to go with the regiment, to care for the sick and afflicted comrades” (21). Within this subtle critique, a point I will return to later, Taylor tries to reassure her readers that she understood, and perhaps, accepted the patriotic imperatives of self-sacrifice and felt a particular affinity for and claim to this definition of patriotic service. The soldiers’ recognition of these traits as well-suited to war further encouraged Taylor’s interest and involvement:

Our boys would say to me sometimes, “Mrs. King, why is it you are so kind to us? you [sic] treat us just as you do the boys in your own company.” I replied, Well, you know, all the boys in other companies are the same to me as those in my Company E; you are all doing the same duty, and I will do just the same for you.” “Yes, they would say, “we know that, because you were the first woman we saw when we came into camp, and you took an interest in us boys ever since we have been here, and we are grateful for all you do for us.” (29-30)

The use of “our boys” and “us boys” foregrounds the nurse’s maternal identity and positions the black soldiers as Taylor’s children to protect and take care of. While the masculine space of army camp life may have imposed a patriarchal structure and order, Taylor was able to move through and within these spaces as a maternal body in order to take care of her boys:

I gave my assistance to try to alleviate their sufferings. I asked the doctor at the hospital what I could get for [the wounded soldiers] to eat. They wanted soup, but that I could not get; but I had a few cans of condensed milk and some turtle eggs, so I thought I would try to make some custard. I had doubts as to my success, for cooking with turtle eggs was something new to me, but the adage has it, “Nothing ventured, nothing done,” so I made a venture and the result was a delicious custard. This I carried to the men, who enjoyed it very much. My services were given at all times for the comfort of these men. I was on hand to assist whenever needed. I was enrolled as company laundress but I did very little of it, because I was always busy doing other things through camp, and was employed all the time doing something for the officers and comrades. (35)
The demanding physical work of Civil War nursing, as this passage shows, does not take away from the Taylor’s ability to produce material and metaphoric nutrients that infuse the wounded bodies of men. Coupled with her resourcefulness and some basic domestic items such as a condensed milk and turtle eggs, Taylor demonstrates the rehabilitative power of her nursing, illustrating motherwork as a site of agency and authority.

Taylor’s nursing acts take on even larger, heroic dimensions as well. Her devotion is such that she risks her own life to attend to a diseased soldier. Whereas no one else will go near the man’s tent, Taylor visits him every day. She proclaims, “I was not in the least afraid of small-pox. I had been vaccinated, and I drank sassafras tea constantly” (45). Taylor evinces an almost superhuman belief in her resistance to disease. Unfortunately, the small-pox sufferer dies, yet Taylor’s body is well-fortified.

While emphasizing her own heroism in these two passages, Taylor makes the effort to praise male heroism of the regiment she travels with, attesting to the dignity and courage of the men with whom she lived and worked with. For example, she writes how “One night, Companies K and E on their way to Pocotaligo to destroy a battery that was situated down the river, captured several prisoners. The rebels nearly captured Sergeant King, who, as he sprang and caught a ‘reb,’ fell over an embankment” (27). Continuing, Taylor writes that, “In falling he did not release his hold on his prisoner. Although his hip was severely injured, he held fast until some of his comrades came to his aid and pulled them up. These expeditions were very dangerous. Sometimes the men had to go five or ten miles during the night over on the rebel side and capture or destroy whatever they could find” (27). Though Taylor includes these brief descriptions that illustrate the bravery of the black soldiers, whom she frequently refers to as “comrades,” the significance of her autobiographical narrative, as she writes in her preface, lies
in the presentation of a black female heroism that has been largely ignored. Taylor wants readers to know that “there were ‘loyal women,’ as well as men, in those days,” as she writes in her preface, “who did not fear shell or shot, who cared for the sick and dying; women who camped and fared as the boy did, and who are still caring for the comrades in their declining years” (xlii).

If, as I have argued, that Taylor’s presentation of black female heroism supersedes her presentation of black male heroism, it is unsettling that the existing criticism on *Reminiscences* focuses on Taylor’s alleged self-erasure. Joycelyn K. Moody claims that Taylor “supplants a community of black military men in place of the author as its focal point” (53). Moody suggests that Taylor was still being influenced by ideological “Cult of True Womanhood,” pointing to Taylor’s alleged submissive approach to the writing of her text and the supposedly modest way she refers to her husband as “Sergeant King” within her narrative (53). In a more recent assessment of *Reminiscences*, Johnnie Stover argues that, “Susie King Taylor is not the real subject of this autobiography” (92). In Rose’s introduction to the Marcus Weiner edition of *Reminiscences*, Rose comments that Taylor, rather than writing about herself, submerges herself within descriptions of the soldiers of the 33rd: “One wishes,” she writes, “that Taylor had written as much about herself as she wrote about ‘our boys’” (13).

Moody places *Reminiscences* into a larger tradition of “self-effacement” that, arguably, marks nineteenth-century black women’s autobiography. Claiming that black women purposefully “withdraw” from their narratives, Moody argues that this rhetorical strategy allowed black women, whether born free or enslaved, whether writing before or after the Civil War, to “adopt deliberately subversive means of rendering self-inscribed black American female lives acceptable to nineteenth-century readers” (59). “Acceptable” meant, of course, creating identities that were circumscribed by prevailing definitions of white femininity, and Taylor,
likely knew that an audience of white readers would receive her text—one written and published by a black woman claiming citizenship rights at the turn of the century—with caution, and that’s putting it mildly.

Like the other women in this study, whose narrating ‘I’ pervades the self-referential narrative, Taylor is also very much present in her work. On almost every page of Reminiscences, Taylor asserts the ‘I’ repeatedly; indeed, her readers do not have to be reminded through whom the events of the Civil War are being filtered:

Fort Wagner being only a mile from our camp, I went there two or three times a week, and would go up on ramparts to watch the gunners send their shells into Charleston (which they did every fifteen minutes), and had a full view of the city from that point. Outside of the fort were many skulls lying about; I have often moved them one side out of the path. The comrades and I would have quite a debate as to which side the men fought on. . . . They were a gruesome sight, those fleshless heads and grinning jaws, but by this time I had become accustomed to worse things and did not feel as I might have earlier in my camp life. (31)

In response to Moody’s assertions, I’d like to point out that Taylor’s first husband, Sergeant Edward King, is barely mentioned in these moments. Only Taylor remains to tell the war stories, and she insists in occupying the narrative space of her own making. This sometimes translates to her literal movements through space, and she utilizes different strategies, such as presenting herself as “one of the guys,” at different moments in the narrative. Taylor’s willingness to become part of what Yael A. Sternhell describes as the “peripatetic nature of warfare” contributes to this idea (6). Particularly during the war, this movement relates to the risks and courage associated with travelling with the 33rd Regiment. The titles of these chapters often explicitly announce place names that correlate with the topics and events covered in the respective chapter: “On St. Simon’s Island, 1862,” “Camp Saxton – Proclamation and Barbecue, 1863,” “On Morris and Other Islands.” In these chapters, Taylor employs “we” frequently, which conflates—temporarily—her identity with the black soldier: “We were ordered to Jacksonville,
FL” (32); “We remained a few weeks longer” (25) “We arrived at Seabrooke” (25) “we landed on Morris Island” (32). If Taylor secretly felt any sense of displacement or lack of belonging, she did not express it. Rather than depriving herself of a voice, these moments of movement with the troops accomplish the triple purpose of drawing the reader in with tales of adventure, showing her dedication to the troops, and positioning herself as a credible witness to the socio-political landscape of war.

While I do not agree with Moody’s assessment of Taylor’s alleged narrative of self-effacement, I am in agreement, in part, with Moody’s claims of Taylor’s deployment of true womanhood. Taylor was only fourteen when she took up work with the South Carolina regiment. Despite the fact that she was still a young teenager, Taylor emphasized that the soldiers addressed her as “Mrs. King,” which acknowledged her sexual unavailability as a married woman and associated Taylor with the respect accorded a “moral” woman. One might even speculate that Taylor married Sergeant King at a young age to escape the suggestion of impropriety in the work she had taken up following the camp; the threats of sexual exploitation of black women were real. For example, during her time in the Sea Islands, Esther Hill Hawks, a white doctor and abolitionist from the North, was outraged by the shameful conduct of white officers toward black women:

No colored woman or girl was safe from the brutal lusts of the soldiers—and by soldiers I mean both officers and men. . . . The Col. [of the 55th Pennsylvania Infantry] for a long time, kept colored women for his special needs—and officers and men were not backward in illustrations of his example. Mothers were brutally treated for trying to protect their daughters, and there are now several women in our little hospital who have been shot by soldiers for resisting their vile demands. One poor old woman but a few months since, for trying to protect her daughter against one of these men, was caught by her hair and as she still struggled, shot through the shoulder. She is still in hospital. No one is punished for these offences for the officers are as bad as the men. Many such instances have come to my knowledge. (qtd. in Jane Schultz 16)
If Taylor was aware of or experienced what Dr. Hawks described in the passage, her reticence could likely be attributed to what Darlene Clark Hine describes as a “culture of dissemblance,” which I briefly mentioned in chapter 2. Hine describes how tightly regulated discussion concerning black women’s personal lives emerged as a tool of political and personal protection against the overwhelming discourse of black women’s assumed sexual immorality. Hine argues that these ellipses manifest themselves as a “culture of dissemblance” wherein Black women protect themselves by creating the “appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors” (912). Participating in a “culture of dissemblance” would make Taylor, returning to Moody’s argument, “acceptable” to a white readership. Perhaps, as Karen Nulton argues, Taylor “conceals as she reveals” (75) as a right of possession. Nulton refers to Taylor’s presentation of her first and second marriages and birth of her son in a non-descript, matter-of-fact manner; Taylor mentions her first husband and marriage in a passing reference: “Charles O’Neal was an uncle of Edward King, who later was my husband and a sergeant in Co.E., U.S.I.” (13); of her second marriage thirteen years later, when she is a live-in domestic worker in Boston, she writes: “I lived next with Mrs. Gorham Gray, Beacon Street, where I remained until I was married, in 1879 to Russell L. Taylor” (57). Even the birth of her son is presented in equally scant detail right along with the death of her first husband: “In September 16, 1866, my husband Sergeant King, died, leaving me soon to welcome a little stranger alone” (54). One paragraph later, Taylor explains that she left her baby—given neither gender nor name—with her mother in 1868 to “enter into employ with a family” after the school she had opened four years earlier closed (54).

Though I am presenting a series of conjectures, I think there is a more compelling reason for Taylor’s brief references to her family life as an adult. I would argue that Taylor strategically
includes details that she believes are relevant to her larger political argument. For example, when Taylor writes that “I was the wife of one of those men who did not get a penny for eighteen months for their services, only their rations and clothing,” she is trying to not only emphasize blacks’ practice of patriotism but also foreground black disenfranchisement in general. When Taylor writes about her dying son, she emphasizes the injustices associated with Jim Crow, which prevented him from travelling home to Boston with her:

He was very anxious to come home, and I tried to secure a berth for him on a sleeper, but they would not sell me one, and he was not strong enough to travel otherwise. If I could only have gotten him to Cincinnati, I might have brought him home, but as I could not, I was forced to let him remain where he was. It seemed very hard, when his father fought to protect the Union and our flag, and yet his boy was denied, under this same flag, a berth to carry him home to die, because he was a negro. (71-72)

Perhaps, Reminiscences’ lack of family details can be better explained by Stephen Butterfield’s arguments regarding the purpose of black autobiography. Butterfield argues that the typical black autobiographer is generally “not an individual with a private career, but a soldier in a long, historic march toward Canann. . . . [This autobiography] is characterized by political awareness, empathy for suffering, knowledge of oppression, and a sense of shared life, shared triumph, and communal responsibility” (3). Butterfield’s use of the soldier metaphor is appropriate, and more importantly, his definition of the purpose of black autobiography is very much in line with Taylor’s overall motherwork, which includes the writing and publishing of her memoir. Throughout her narrative, Taylor has tried to show her readers how she has fulfilled her duties to her nation to make a compelling claim for full citizenship rights.

**Journeying through Jim Crow: The Outraged Mother**

In the last several chapters that deal with Taylor’s postwar life, Taylor employs the outraged mother figure, a primary archetype, according to Joanne Braxton, in black women’s
writing. This figure, according to Braxton, embodies the values of sacrifice, nurturance, and personal courage—values necessary for survival, values that are in line with motherwork. Braxton locates the most salient feature of the outraged mother in her desire to save herself and her children. Though Braxton labels Taylor as an “outraged mother” in relation to her biological son, I would argue that Taylor epitomizes Braxton’s construct of the outraged mother in her overarching concern about the inequalities her comrades faced as soldiers and now as veterans whom the world seems to have forgotten.

In “A Visit to Louisiana,” the last chapter of Reminiscences, Taylor’s voice as the outraged mother is at its most political and reproachful. Writing about her journey to Shreveport, Louisiana in 1898 to nurse her dying son, Taylor personalizes the brittle state of race relations in the South. Upon arriving in Cincinnati, Taylor was instructed to switch to a segregated car, the smoking car, which had become the designated place for black travelers in the era of Jim Crow:

Soon after I was seated, just before the train pulled out, two tall men with slouch hats on walked through the car, and on through the train. Finally they came back to our car and stopping at my seat said, “Where are those men who were with you?” I did not know to whom they were speaking, as there was another woman in the car, so I made no reply. Again they asked me, standing directly in front of my seat, “Where are those men who came in with you?” Are you speaking to me?” I said. “Yes!” they said. “I have not seen any men,” I replied. They looked at me a moment, and one of them asked where I was from. I told him Boston; he hesitated a minute and walked out of car to the other car. (70)

Astounded by the disrespectful treatment she received, Taylor asks the conductor “if they allowed persons to enter the car and insult passengers.” Taylor tells the porter, a black man, about the incident. He tells her, “Lady, I see you do not belong here; where are you from?” (70). The porter’s response, with its’ specific address to Taylor as “lady,” coupled with Taylor’s maternal desires that impel the journey, put Taylor’s femininity into sharp focus against the backdrop of the masculine space of the smoker car, “where,” according to Mia Bay,
accommodations were not only inferior but also lacked any amenities for women, including women’s restrooms” (153). More threatening than inferior accommodations was, in the words of, Virginia Scharff, a “geography of thwarted action, of arrested motion, for African Americans (143). In attempts to reconcile her identity with the “gendered geography of Jim Crow” to borrow Amy G. Richter’s phrase, Taylor, as autobiographer, negotiates between assuming a reserved feminine demeanor and the outrage mother, whose tone is much more stern and strident.

Before this final chapter, Taylor presents a relatively comfortable life in the North, where she seemed to be shielded from the realities of Jim Crow. As Taylor continued to travel between Boston and the South in her job as domestic to a domestic for a travelling family, Taylor saw how the North and South were becoming two distinct regions: “I have been in many states and cities, and in each I have looked for liberty and justice, equal for the black as for the white; but it was not until I was within the borders of New England, and reached old Massachusetts, that I found it” (62). Taylor directs her praise towards the North, where she is able to create a seemingly comfortable life. Before she permanently settled in the North, Taylor, as she writes in her narrative, deposited some of the money from her husband’s pension of 100 dollars into the Freedmen’s Savings Bank, and later, in the same paragraph, she writes that she won a cooking prize at a fair on Rye Beach, which is where her employers spent the summer.

Taylor reminds us that, “All this time, my interest in the boys in blue had not abated. I was still loyal and true, whether they were black or white. My hands have never left undone anything they could do towards their aid and comfort in the twilight of their lives” (59). In Boston, Taylor helped to organize Corps 67, Women’s Relief Corps, auxiliary to the G.A.R., and “it is a very flourishing corps today,” she writes. Taylor held several offices and completed a roster of surviving black veterans residing in Massachusetts, a list she included as the appendix
to Reminiscences. She worked with Boston women to supply soldiers with packages for the Spanish American War “because there were black soldiers there too” who were “just as brave, loyal and true as those other black men who fought for freedom and the right; and yet,” adding, “their bravery and faithfulness were reluctantly acknowledged and praise grudgingly given” (63).

Even as Taylor’s postwar activities contributed to the memorialization of black civic participation, Taylor was fighting another war, one over the cultural meanings and representations of war:

Foremost among them was the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), whose dramatic growth in the 1880s and 1890s fueled publications that stressed the military experience of the war. A masculinized culture of Civil War remembrance focused on the conflict as a war of white “brotherhood,” as Theodore Roosevelt put it in 1901, contributing to a nationalizing project of sectional reconciliation that stressed the shared heroism and bravery of white soldiers of “the blue and the gray.” At the same time, interest in a woman’s war moved south, as novelists and memoirists focused on southern slaveholding women’s antebellum and war experiences, contributing to highly racialized “plantation” literature that bathed slavery in a nostalgic glow. (Fah 1464)

These factors, along with the death of her son, inevitably led Taylor to publicly critique the postwar South where whites drove blacks out of politics, locked a system of segregation in place, and destroyed the memory and possibility of any interracial cooperation.

Leading up to this moment of her full critique of the postwar South is the penultimate chapter, “Thoughts on Present Conditions” where Taylor’s sustained restrained outrage up to this moment finally reaches a breaking point where she denounces a call by the UDC to ban the play “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” She explains, for the first time in her narrative, how the memory of slave auctions and their terrible emotional consequences haunt her:

I read an article which said the ex-Confederate Daughters had sent a petition to the managers of the local theatres in Tennessee to prohibit the performance of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” claiming it was exaggerated (that is, the treatment of the slaves), and would have a very bad effect on the children who might see the drama. I paused and thought back a few years of the heart-rendering scenes I have
witnessed; I have seen many times, when I was a mere girl, thirty or forty men, handcuffed, and as many women and children, come every first Tuesday of each month from Mr. Wiley’s trade office to the auction blocks. . . . The route was down our principal street, Bull Street, to the court-house, which was only a block from where I resided. . . . I remember as if it were yesterday, seeing droves of negroes going to be sold, and I often went to look at them, and I could hear the auctioneer plainly from my house, auctioning these poor people off. (65-66)

This passage reveals much about Taylor’s experiences of slavery, as a witness and not necessarily as a participant, which are details that she strategically does not include in the first part of her memoir. She saves these unsavory details for the end of her narrative to lend support to her claims about anti-black sentiments and treatment. Taylor responds to the UDC with not only her testimony about witnessing the atrocities of slavery but also with questions related to current atrocities, asking, “Where were their objections to lynching? “Do you ever hear of them fearing this would have a bad effect on their children?” (66)

Jim Crow continued to be revelatory in another way during Taylor’s journey leaving the South to return home. Taylor witnessed a lynching in Clarksdale, Mississippi: “It was a terrible sight, and I felt alarmed for my own safety there.” (74). The brevity in Taylor’s description is curious enough, however, the fact that she doesn’t condemn the South as an unviable place for blacks is even more curious:

While in Shreveport, I visited ex-Senator Harper’s house. He is a colored man and owns a large business block, besides a fine residence on Cado Street and several good building lots. Another family, the Pages, living on the same street, were quite wealthy, and a large number of colored families owned their homes, and were industrious, refined people; and if they were only allowed justice, the South would be the only place for our people to live. (75)

This description and Taylor’s optimistic and hopeful tone almost redeems the postwar South. Taylor seems to be using her social and political voice not just for condemnation but also for
promoting the idea of a real Union, one where the citizenship rights of blacks would be honored throughout the United States of America.

Conclusion

Taylor’s narrative demonstrates that the war did not fully grant blacks true freedom in the form of mobility or otherwise. Taylor embeds the civil war in a narrative of maternal agency and outrage, using the reshaped war narrative to call for a racially harmonious America in which blacks would assume their place as equal and full citizens: “Justice we ask,” as she begins the last sentence of her narrative, “to be citizens of these United States, where so many of our people have shed their blood with their white comrades, that the stars and stripes should never be polluted” (76).

Notes

1 I use the edition of Taylor’s narrative published by the University of Georgia Press under the title Reminiscences of My Life in Camp: An African American Woman's Memoir (2006). References to Taylor’s narrative are from this contemporary reprint and cited in this paper unless otherwise noted.

2 “Lost Cause” is a name given to an ideological movement or set of belief that promoted, celebrated, and memorialized Confederate memory of the War. See Gaines Foster, Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865-1913. (New York, Oxford University Press, 1987).


5 As noted in chapter two, General Benjamin Butler of Massachusetts was the first to refer to a group of escaped slaves, whose owners demanded their return, as “contraband of war.”

6 According to the African American Civil War Memorial & Museum’s web site, “The United States Colored Troops made up over ten percent of the Union or Northern Army even though they were prohibited from joining until July 1862, fifteen months into the war.” See https://www.afroamcivilwar.org/about-us/usct-history.html
The Women’s Relief Corps, according to Francesca Morgan, was an example of what she calls a “woman centered nationalism”—the belief that women had a vital role to play in creating and transmitting the culture of the nation. See Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

See Taylor’s Reminiscences—the letters from Towbridge and Higginson appear before the narrative proper.

Robert B. Stepto positions narrators such as Frederick Douglass as the intellectual equal to the white abolitionist editors who authenticate his narrative. See From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979).


Brundage argues that, like their white counterparts, black women were seen as “guardians of the past” because of their assumed innate morality.

Contrary to popular belief, the 54th Massachusetts, led by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, was not the first regiment of black soldiers to fight in the war; the First South Carolina Volunteers was the first official black regiment of the Union Army. Early in the war, Union general Benjamin F. Butler made the decision to label enslaved persons fleeing to the Union army lines “contraband of war” because they were considered the confiscated slave property of Confederates and could be reclaimed by their masters as property. However, Butler realized the “contraband” were critical to the Union’s war effort. The term “contraband” was a discriminatory label according to Ella Forbes, who has observed that the label carried the power of a racial slur among Union officers, while Thavolia Glymph has argued that “contrabandist” would have been a more accurate term. See Forbes, African-American Women During the Civil War, 10-12; Glymph, “This Species of Property,” 58. And Russell Duncan, Freedom’s Shore: Tunis Campbell and the Georgia Freedman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 20–21.

In a letter dated April 7, 1902 addressed to “Mrs. Susan King Taylor” and reproduced in Reminiscences, Lt. C. T. Towbridge writes, “I most sincerely regret that through a technicality you are debarred from having your name placed on the roll of pensioners, as an Army nurse.”

Jennifer James writes that “Even Harriet Tubman, who worked for the Union as a laundress, cook, nurse, spy, and scout in the South Georgia islands was initially unsuccessful in securing a pension despite the letters written on her behalf by several well-respected army officers” (106). See A Freedom Fought with Blood (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).


Fiona McWilliam analyzes national discourses regarding contraband, focusing on Vanity Fair’s anti-black sentiments regarding contraband. She writes, “Cartoons along with mocking sketches and poems lampoon not just the figure of the contraband slave, but anyone who takes the prospect of emancipation seriously. In its critical take on contrabands, the magazine communicates clearly that the possibility for ex-slaves to participate in society is impossible.” (57). See McWilliam, “Louisa May Alcott’s “My Contraband” and Discourse on Contraband Slaves in Popular Print Culture” in Studies in American Fiction 42:1.

According to Lisa A. Long, “The role of the female Civil War nurse cannot be imagined in modern terms. Nurses had no clearly defined duties, little training, and no professional status. For all practical purposes Civil War nurses had no military rank; consequently, their place in the hospital chain of command remained ambiguous. African American women who nursed were not even granted the dubious title of “nurse,” listed instead as “laundresses” in regimental records.” See Rehabilitating Bodies: Health, History, and the American Civil War (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 184.
Chapter Four
Post-Marital Agency, Collaborative Authorship, and Mobile Couplehood in *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed*

The people that came to the meetings in their testimonies would frequently say, “Sister Ray’s Mission,” as they always found me there and Brother Ray out working. I did not feel that it was fair, because Brother Ray made it possible for me to get out to the day meetings to work with the children, by going out and making the means of our living. I always said, “Don’t say Sister Ray’s Mission and work. It is Brother and Sister Ray’s Work.”

*Emma Ray, Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed*

In a black-and-white photograph that serves as frontispiece to *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed: Autobiography of Mr. and Mrs. Ray* (1926), wife and husband Emma and L.P. Ray pose together, softly gazing and smiling at something to the right of the camera (see figure 1). We do not know what input the Rays had into their portrait, but the level of intimacy and familial warmth the photo conveys is not ambiguous: their shoulders touch, wife leaning into husband. What may, perhaps, seem ambiguous to the reader is the clothing Emma wears: a simple and unadorned white shirt, topped off with a clerical collar under a dark suit jacket, similar to the one her husband wears in the photo. To those unfamiliar with *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed*, Emma’s mannish style of dress and close-cropped hair would appear to disrupt visual self-representations of early twentieth century African American femininity.¹ To those familiar with their story, Emma’s manner of dress could be seen as a way to subordinate physical gender difference, emphasizing, simultaneously, a self-defined Christian femininity and a spiritual and authorial partnership with her husband. The photograph captures Emma’s renunciation of “keep[ing] up to the fashion,” which followed the life-changing experiences of conversion and sanctification that both Emma and L.P. experienced, and like the epigraph that opens this chapter, it offers a narrative featuring a revised, mutually beneficial marital relationship.²
Nonetheless, the structure of the narrative also suggests issues related to marital gender roles, authorial relationships, and feminine individuality. Though *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed* is subtitled “Autobiography of Mr. and Mrs. L.P. Ray,” only one chapter contains “Mr. Ray’s Testimony”—a six-page narrative of L.P.’s early struggles, eventual conversion, and evangelist preaching with his wife. The other thirty-six chapters constitute Emma J. Ray’s first-person narrative about Emma’s spiritual development and the empowering character of evangelicalism in creating expanded opportunities for her while also creating a unique form of collaboration through the intricate relationship she establishes between herself and her husband.
For Emma, who, like L.P. was born into slavery, self-determination was more difficult to achieve and came after many turbulent years of confronting adversity, including the loss of her mother at an early age, poverty, and struggles with her appearance. Following a religious conversion early in her marriage, Emma was empowered by her husband’s eventual spiritual and emotional support, her developing leadership skills, and in partnership with her husband, identifying a role for herself in interracial social work and evangelism. These experiences, sustained by the Rays’ break from the African Methodist Church of Seattle and eventual membership to the largely white Free Methodist Church, confirmed the Rays’ partnership both in marriage and enabled them to envision the spiritual and moral objectives of their urban mission work throughout the Pacific Northwest and Emma’s home state of Missouri. Focusing on temperance work in a region shaped by the culture of alcohol, the Rays travelled together, preaching, praying and inviting to their home “dope fiends,” runaways, prisoners, prostitutes and other lost souls they thought needed saving.  

Considering that black feminist scholars have worked to recuperate the history of black marriage and courtship before the twentieth century, reading a narrative about a husband-and-wife evangelist team, who were in the business of bringing spiritual and moral uplift to white and black communities during the Progressive Era adds much to our burgeoning understanding of black marital relationships. Works such as Claudia Tate’s *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century* (1992), Ann duCille’s *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction* (1993), Frances Smith Foster’s *Love and Marriage in Early African America* (2008), and Tess Chakkalakal’s *Novel Bondage: Slavery, Marriage, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century America* (2011) have explored the representation of marriage in nineteenth and twentieth-century black-authored works. These
representations were opportunities to present the stable black household as an achievement in itself and as a site for political mobilization for a group of people who were long denied the right to marry legally. In her analysis of the marriage trope in black women’s domestic novels, Tate explains the political currency of marriage: “Late-nineteenth-century black as well as white people were well aware of the social value invested in marriage as a sign of meritorious citizenship. Both groups staunchly sanctioned civil marriage as the vehicle for promoting family stability, social progress, and respectability; indeed, marriage was the sanctioned sign of civilization” (91). “Black people in particular,” Tate continues, “regarded marriage as an important index of their propensity for civilization and as incontestable evidence of their moral commitment to social progress” (91-92). duCille argues that for newly freed slaves, marriage was an ideal because it had been a “long-denied basic human right” (duCille 14), and for black women in particular, it was an important social contract that promised to fulfill their desires for respectability. Yet, according to duCille black women in marital relationships were often required to adhere to what duCille refers to as a “discourse of deference,” which arose in “an era in which gender conventions and racial imperatives combined in creating an ideology of deference that demanded twice over the subordination of women whose labor histories alone should have made them not-so silent partners in the gender, marital, and familial relations” (50). According to duCille, much of the late nineteenth-century prescriptive literature written by and disseminated to blacks, “not only placed these women firmly in the private sphere but also made it the black woman’s duty to home, hearth, and black humanity to offer her husband unconditional support in pursuit of his manhood rights: suffrage in the public realm and dominion in decision making, discipline, and fiscal affairs in the private” (50; emphasis in original). I will be reading *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed* in light of duCille and Tate’s theories.
about black marriage in order to see how adequate or appropriate these models are to analyze a non-canonical text. I am interested in their arguments that post-emancipation many bourgeois black women crafted a notion of “black domesticity” in an attempt to negotiate their hopes of national assimilation and inclusion, which becomes a highly restrictive and socially ambitious project that many working-class black women like Emma Ray would be unable to achieve, particularly because of the sociocultural landscape of the Pacific Northwest.

Despite ongoing recovery projects in feminist and African American literary studies to advance more complex and inclusive understandings of the intersections between race, sex, class, and region, *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed* has been virtually ignored; it is the only text in this project that has not been republished by the Schomberg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers. Though it was published in the twentieth century, *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed*, told mainly from Emma’s perspective and voice, illustrates the continued relevance of spiritual autobiography to black women’s self-representation and authorial agency, which links Ray to both Amanda Berry Smith and Nancy Prince, as well as Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote. In spite of its engagements with critical themes that feminist scholars have organized themselves around, *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed*, because it features an unfamiliar regional setting and was published in a period that valued a particular kind of black literary and cultural production, slid under the radar.

Eric Gardner, for example, argues that black literary studies “still favors and still expects primarily Southern (and occasionally northeastern) stories that were published in northeastern urban venues; in this vein, it has largely dismissed ‘western’ stories as inherently not black” (76). In reference to the “particular kind of black literary cultural production,” I point to *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed*'s 1926 publication date, which coincided with the burgeoning literary
aesthetic and cultural outpouring known as the Harlem Renaissance. Scholars herald this
movement as a defining moment in the creation of a distinct black cultural identity in America,
and beyond Harlem, the geographical contours of the Harlem Renaissance included other major
cities along the eastern seaboard such as Boston and Philadelphia, where artists and writers
produced visual art and imaginative literature that seemingly captured the world’s attention. As
a result of these specific geographical boundaries, the history and literature of African Americans
in the West has been traditionally treated as anything more than an afterthought.

Still, the existing but scant scholarly criticism on *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed*, which
was published by the Free Methodist Publishing House, is a result of a recent shift in scholarly
thinking about the study of black cultural and literary productions beyond the South and
Northeast. In his brief assessment of *Twice Sold* in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature
of the American West* (2016), Gardner writes that *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed* “has elements of
both spiritual autobiography and missionary tale. . . . But *Twice Sold* is much more—a
postbellum slave narrative, a temperance story, a study of urban poverty and an argument for
reform, and a book about African American evangelists” (208). Referencing the Rays’ slave
past, Gardner writes that “their representation of the West, tightly linked to the language of
slavery and yet curiously distanced from it, both complicates their remembrance of chattel
slavery and opens up spaces for African American engagement with the West” (209).

Another literary scholar, Nina Baym, references *Twice Sold* in a section about Emma Ray in
*Women Writers of the American West, 1833-1927* (2011), and writes that “Emma Ray’s *Twice
Sold, Twice Ransomed* is unique because Ray was urban, evangelical, and African American”
in the great fire of 1889, the business downturn in the recession of 1893-94, the razing of hills
and building of houses, and the recovery occasioned by the Alaskan gold rush’’ (52). Though both Gardner and Baym do not focus on the Rays’ marital partnership, they explore the cultural and creative possibilities when black subjects move into unexpected territories, and their assessments begin a nascent conversation about *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed* that I continue, focusing on the interconnections between marriage, agency, and mobility—the latter of which I explore more in this chapter than in previous chapters. If, as Gardner argues, we need theories to fully understand the “chaotic mobility embodied in many western African Americans’ lives and textual presences” (88) then black feminist theory is a useful analytical lens that can provide us a fuller understanding of the relationship between marriage and mobility—two important themes in *Twice Sold*. Furthermore, because the Rays’ mobility was a joint venture unlike the solo practices undertaken by the other women writers in this project, understanding how the Rays’ couplehood shapes and is shaped by a politics of mobility opens up our understanding of black women’s agency. *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed*’s representation of what I call “mobile couplehood” provides insight to strategies of African-American feminine identity-formation and the processes of transformation in the meanings and practices of marriage. Specifically, I examine how Emma reinforces and reimagines the domestic ideals of marital love and duty while also making visible her own individuality outside the couple. I argue that mobile couplehood both detaches and reattaches the husband and wife from traditional hierarchical power relations against a Western landscape that has been a symbol of white hegemonic masculinity. Thus, examining *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed* and understanding the Rays’ shared vision and mobility furthers our understanding of the emancipatory potential of black marriage.

My analysis of *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed* begins with a brief discussion of Emma’s relationship to another spiritual autobiographer, Amanda B. Smith. Both women were associated
with white holiness Methodist churches in the Progressive Era and both worked closely with
white women on social reform and moral uplift projects. However, an important difference is
that Smith’s widowhood enabled an agency that she did not possess while she was married,
whereas Emma’s agency hinges on her marriage. I examine both the Rays’ spiritual and physical
journeys, singling out the stages of their respective quests for feminine and masculine agency
that ultimately register the shifts in the gendered operations of their marriage and the ongoing
negotiation of the definitions of both marriage and collaborative authorship.

Twice Sold’s Collaborative Authorship

As I briefly discussed in the introduction, most black women’s spiritual autobiographies
follow a traditional narrative format that includes some details about their early life, conversion
experience, call to preach, and a public evangelical career marked by a remarkable itinerancy.
Emma Ray, however, modifies this textual tradition in two ways: First, she joins her own history
with her husband’s, ensuring that L.P. plays a key role in the narrative while keeping him from
fully taking center stage in this history; second, Emma presents a mobile couplehood that
displaces the solo itinerancy that black spiritual women usually undertook.

Beginning with its memorable opening lines, where Emma writes, “I was born twice,
bought twice, and set free twice. Born of woman, born of God; sold in slavery, sold to the devil;
freed by Lincoln, set free by God” (15), Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed situates itself within the
traditional patterns of black women’s spiritual autobiography and shares similar rhetorical
strategies with Amanda B. Smith’s An Autobiography. In particular, Emma shares with Amanda
B. Smith (whom the Rays entertained in their home during Smith’s visit to Washington) a life
born into slavery, and like Smith, she represents this experience focusing on the black nuclear
family rather than the oppressive institution of slavery or the indictment of white Southern
slaveholders. Another link to the tradition of black women’s spiritual autobiography that *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed* has is the belief that the narrative would help lead others to the true light of Christian doctrine. One of the ways spiritual black women writers put forth a compelling case was through the narrative presentation of their inner stages of growth and self-realization, detailing their sense of personal inadequacy and sinfulness that led to conversion and sanctification.

Additionally, Emma’s sense of purpose and constant motion link her to these nineteenth-century black women writers. These women mapped their self-representations through the belief that God authorized their movements from place to place, by foot, stagecoach, train and boat in order to preach the gospel, believing to be divinely appointed to do so. Spending much of their time on the road, these women were often unaccompanied though sometimes they travelled with other female church members. Their spiritual narratives are, in the words of Susan Roberson, “full of the language of movement and spatiality,” and forge the “connections between mobility and knowledge, power, and freedom” (74).

Still, *Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed* doesn’t just detail Emma’s spiritual progression and physical movements. Challenging the “concept of monologic representation,” using the words of Rocio G. Davis to describe singular first-person narratives, the narrative includes, and in fact, depends upon the spiritual struggles of L.P., Emma’s husband. Emma, unlike Smith, Lee, Elaw, Foote, and other black evangelical women, puts her marriage at the center of her identity, acknowledging, the role and representation of her husband in shaping her spiritual work and agency. Erica Armstrong Dunbar argues that “the impediments to religious work that arose from family obligations, in particular, the problems of marriage” and “the hurdles of disagreeable husbands” (113) are consistent themes in nineteenth-century black women’s spiritual narratives,
but *Twice Sold*, however, creates an image of a husband and wife who rely on each other in both the private realm of the home and the public realm of urban mission work.

At the same time, *Twice Sold* as a collaborative text provides a nuanced understanding of Emma’s individual agency. For example, in the text’s preface, Emma shares details concerning the publication of the narrative: “For many years it has been laid upon our hearts to write our experiences and to tell about some of the incidents in our lives. Many of the pilgrims have persuaded us to do so. We bowed in prayer and inquired of the Lord if this would glorify Him, and the answer came, ‘Ye are my witnesses’” (11). These statements foreground “we” and present, seemingly, a marital relationship of symmetry and balance, harkening back to both the frontispiece and the text’s subtitle, “Autobiography of Mr. and Mrs. Ray.” Yet, it is also in the preface that Emma individuates herself from her husband, shifting from the plural “we” to the singular pronoun “I”:

Just after we received this text, doubt came into my mind, which caused me to wonder if it really was the Lord who spoke to me. I felt I could not afford to make a mistake. Again I sought the mind of the Lord. After fasting and earnestly praying, I asked him to forgive me for coming to him the second time, and to give me one more passage of scripture; and to let it be a word concerning writing, and I would not doubt again. I turned to the twenty-sixth Psalm, and, not knowing what was in it, I began to read at the seventh verse. My eyes fell upon these words, “That I may publish with the voice of thanksgiving, and tell of all Thy wondrous works.” My heart became hot within me and while I mused the fire burned. I said, “Oh, praise the Lord! The Bible says that I may publish it, and tell of all His wondrous works.” (11; my emphasis)

Indeed, this narrative of the struggle over whether to publish the couple’s autobiography seems to be Emma’s solely, which anticipates that the narrative proper will be from her perspective mostly. Though Emma’s narrating “I” dominates *Twice Sold*, the narrative continuously shifts between “I” and “we,” as if Emma wants to remind her readers that she and her husband created this text.
If we read *Twice Sold* through the lens of collaborative autobiography, in which we imagine two people involved in creating a story, questions are raised about the terms of collaborative life writing, highlighting that positions of narrative power do, in fact, emerge. Dispelling any notion of an inherent “narrative equality” in collaborative autobiographies, G. Thomas Couser argues that, “The inherent imbalance between the partners’ contributions may be complicated by a political imbalance between them; often, collaborations involve partners whose relation is hierarchized by some difference—in race, culture, gender, class, age” (336). Couser raises an important point about the nature of collaborative texts—one person typically controls the representation even if the term “collaborative” indicates otherwise. An exemplary text that supports Couser’s argument is William and Ellen Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860). The Crafts are well-known for their remarkable escape where Ellen, a very fair-skinned black woman, cross-dressed, posing as William’s slaveowner. Though some scholars recognize William as the sole author and narrator of *Running a Thousand Miles*, other scholars such as Barbara McCaskill, Daneen Wardrop, and Charles J. Heglar insist that the narrative is a collaborative work. In particular, Heglar argues that Ellen Craft represents the “understated narrator”:

> Even though William signs his name as author and is the referent for the infrequently used “I” of the narration, the account, given under his name, includes episodes that occur when he is not present, incidents that come from Ellen’s recounting of events for which she alone is the witness and participant. . . . The shifts of narrative control from William to Ellen are noticeably marked in the text by shifts from the first-person singular, “I,” to the first-person plural, “we,” to a mixed third- and first-person narration, “my master” or “my wife.” Ellen is the understated source for William’s mixed third- and first-person form of narration. (81)

In the case of *Twice Sold*, L. P. would be considered the understated source in Heglar’s narrative paradigm. For instance, aside from the preponderance of Emma’s narrative “I” in the text, the
copyright of *Twice Sold* is in Emma’s name and the dedication concludes with “the author” instead of “the authors.” It is important to note that in chapter 5, “Mr. Ray’s Testimony,” the narrating “I” belongs to L.P., who shares the events of his childhood, struggles with alcohol, and subsequent conversion, though the details are sparse and the chapter is less than seven pages. Except for chapter 5, the “I” throughout *Twice Sold* belongs to Emma. More importantly, the narrative emplotment—beginning with Emma’s childhood and detailing her life post-emancipation and the revelations of her gendered struggles over her physical appearance, spirituality, and marriage—points to narrative inequities that ultimately create a space where Emma, the individual, emerges.

Contributing to this space where Emma the individual emerges is the representation of a life that existed before marriage. Emma Ray was born “of slave parents” on January 7, 1859 in Springfield, Missouri. As I have shown through the works of Amanda B. Smith, Elizabeth Keckly, and Susie King Taylor, the post-emancipated subject is strategic in what she chooses to write about. Like Smith, Ray writes about the close relationship between her father and his owners, highlighting her father’s strong will, desires to keep his family together, and his resourcefulness in learning how to read. According to Jennifer Fleischner, the end of enslavement in America did not end the production of slave narratives, and the “enduring presences” of slavery continued in other genres well into the twentieth century (133). Ray employs this theme to anticipate the extended metaphor equating spiritual bondage with material realities. She also focuses on the black family unit rather than the labor her parents had to perform as slaves; her parents’ “privileged” experiences and marriage organize her brief discussion of her life in bondage: “My father was never sold, but lived in the same family where he was born until he became free. He was very much troubled at the prospect of seeing his wife,
my mother, sold, and became restless, consequently his young master bought us in [sic] just to please my father, as he threatened to run away” (15). Ray, like Keckly, emphasizes both intra-racial and interracial familial bonds in describing black domestic life in bondage. As I mentioned in chapter 2, the tone of these so-called postbellum slave narratives was informed by the reality that slavery had ended, and the idea of North-South reunification was etched onto the politics of post-emancipation black writing.

In her account of post-emancipation life, Ray represents the legacy of slavery by showing examples of resiliency, hope, and poverty. Her family and other freed slaves built a shantytown out of scraps, and Ray comments on their resourcefulness and desires for literacy and spirituality, and her mother’s leadership role during this period: “My mother helped to build the little church within a few blocks from our home, and to get a little Sunday school started. How earnestly they prayed for means to build that church. They wanted the church more than homes to live in” (23). Shortly thereafter, Emma’s mother dies, and the loss and maternal absence shape her narrative and quests to claim a feminine agency.

Emma’s journey to define and value her feminine identity is shaped by her mother’s absence and the harsh realities of the post-emancipation period. When white missionary-sponsored schools were created, Emma enrolled, and she often arrived with little to eat because the family lived in poverty. Emma points out that the other black families had mothers, suggesting that even poor mothers somehow managed to feed their kids: “All the ex-slaves did not fare as hard as we, having mothers to help them shoulder the responsibilities; but my father’s was a lone man’s struggle, with nine motherless children, and it was a struggle to pay for our home” (32). Ray attended school until the fourth grade then quit to work as a domestic servant for a white family. Her wages helped her family, but she also wanted to fulfill her individual
I soon got to the place where I wanted pretty clothes, and I was ashamed of my dresses,” (26-27). As Emma “wanted to dress and keep up to the fashion” she also began wearing artificial hair, “a great amount of hair with wires run through to hold it on and make it light and puffy. . . .From that time on, for upwards of 27 years, I wore some style of false hair, changing as the fashions changed. As I grew older, I became more vain” (36).

Emma presents the secular details—the hardships of her girlhood—not only as a means of contrast of the life before and after conversion but also as a means to individuate herself from her husband. In other words, the lack of maternal guidance and the insecurities about her appearance are presented as struggles that are eventually overcome by personal conviction and salvation, which follows the standard narrative of black women’s spiritual autobiography. More importantly, I would argue, Emma delves into the interior life of her black girlhood, unlike other spiritual nineteenth-century black women writers, and shows readers the thoughts, reasoning, and decision-making processes of a black girl who struggled to define her feminine subjectivity. In addition to these struggles, Emma includes experiences that she presents as preemptive weapons against her complete victimization, namely, channeling the maternal absence in her life by playing a maternal role in the life of her employers’ child, which anticipates the evangelical maternal role she assumes as an adult. Anticipating this future role is a photograph Emma includes in the narrative, which she titles “Nurse Emmy and The Child Who Loved Her” (see figure 2):

You will notice the picture with the child in my arms. She loved me almost as well as she did her mother, and I loved her like a mother. Her mother desired to have the child’s picture taken. She didn’t want to sit for it. The photographer couldn’t get her to sit still; she cried for “Emmy,” as she called me. They told me to take her and to get her pacified. I did so. She put her hand against my face and pressed her cheek against mine, and the mother said, ‘There, take her just as she is.’ (35-36)
This period in Emma’s life, as a house servant and nursemaid for Mrs. Timmons, connects her spiritual struggles with the quest for a feminine agency. Though she receives some religious training from Mrs. Timmons, who regularly had morning and evening prayers and was “very consistent” in her Christian womanhood, Ray writes that she grew restless and “wanted to go to dances and parties” (28-29). To repeat, these experiences, similar to those of Amanda B. Smith’s before conversion, speak, simultaneously, to Emma’s spiritual development and the journey toward a feminine self-definition. Emma creates a series of thematic parables based on her early life, namely, the loss of her mother and the insecurities about her gendered appearance. The next section examines how Emma maps onto her life, her marriage, the development of her husband’s spiritual progression, and the shift in his conceptualization of black masculinity.
Against the backdrop of the Pacific Northwest, where she continues to rework the patterns and language of conversion, Emma confronted the emotional and familial crises caused by her husband.

“I wanted to become a man so I began to drink”: The Path to Christian Masculinity

The chapter entitled “Meets Mr. Ray” is misleading because a courtship narrative does not follow. The first several sentences of the chapter are non-descriptive and straightforward and harken back to Nancy Prince’s relation of her marriage: “I met my future husband, L.P. Ray, in Carthage, Missouri, in ’81. He was young like myself and had not been from home very long. Mr. Ray’s home was in Emporia Kansas. We were married in Fredonia, Kansas, in ’87. He learned the trade of stone-cutter and mason. We were very happy for a short time” (37). Before turning to Mr. Ray’s testimony and the representation of their mobile couplehood in Seattle, where they move to in 1889, the same year Washington Territory, as it was known then, was admitted to the Union, it is important to briefly discuss Washington’s unprecedented relationship to the expanding nation, particularly the opportunities it offered black Americans. Though the Rays were part of only a small percent of the population of Washington during this time period, black Washingtonians contributed to the culture of the state. The term “Black Pacific,” suggested by Eric Gardner, is useful to describe the Rays’ relationship to region as it describes both a migratory pattern that has been overlooked, in which blacks moved to the West and also recognizes the actual and imaginative role black labor played in the constitution of the Pacific Northwest.

Those who moved to the Pacific Northwest, as suggested by historical studies, viewed it as a “Promised Land.” Historian Gerald D. Nash argues, “America as well as people around the world have looked to the West of reality—whether frontier, region, or urban civilization . . .
[T]hey have also contemplated another West—the West of imagination, the West of myth” (198). The promise of free land, better jobs, and first-class citizenship were major reasons blacks initially embarked upon this journey West. The Rays likely viewed the West as a place of possibilities, where they could potentially gain greater freedom both privately and publicly as a married couple and as free black citizens.

Though the West was imagined as a place of possibilities, dominant narratives of this region, nonetheless, offered a romanticized version of the “Wild West” that rendered blacks invisible. According to Nash, “Before 1960 blacks were rarely mentioned by writers of textbooks about the West” (47). Cheap dime novels and Wild West shows featuring stars such as “Buffalo Bill” Cody in the late nineteenth century and American motion pictures of the twentieth century popularized and canonized images of the white American male conquering both land and savage. As Linda Ben-Zvi points out in her essay “‘Home Sweet Home’: Deconstructing the Masculine Myth of the Frontier,” the iconic markers of the frontier have been repeated over and over: [It’s a] “particular story, i.e., it’s always the man’s story” and “The male of a particular type: hard, stoic and a killer who needs to conquer and settle” while “Woman is other,” and “She is the passive recipient of his action” (219). Inclusion of the Rays into a western narrative ultimately makes the narrative of the West more complex. An inclusion of Emma, a black evangelical woman, who tirelessly worked to transform the region’s moral culture, fundamentally shifts how we think about the West and de-centers the masculinist slant of that narrative of the West.

According to Dale Soden, the Pacific Northwest’s male culture was “the natural outgrowth of economic forces that dictated much of Northwest life in the middle to late nineteenth century” (ix). Building, logging, fishing, and mining all attracted young men looking
to work for a living wage, according to Soden. This was the case for L.P. Ray, who after “wander[ing] from place to place” settled in Seattle, where he was a stone mason and cutter by trade, as he writes in his testimony (56). Inevitably, small towns and emerging cities provided fertile environments for the cheap entertainment desired by working men in the form of saloons, gambling halls, and brothels. L.P. Ray writes that Seattle “was first built up of tents, and saloons were everywhere. Beer by the buckets was on the job from morning until night” (56). As L.P. indicates, workplace drinking was the norm, and it seemed to be particular to a male working-class culture. According to Soden “most Americans today can hardly imagine the scale of alcohol abuse that existed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Americans consumed a staggering amount of alcohol compared with today, and the social effects were observable everywhere” (67-68). As L.P.’s narrative indicates, heavy consumption of alcohol was a badge of masculinity.

Initially, the rugged and masculine backdrop worked well with the Rays and their lifestyle, which consisted of attending dances and drinking. Emma writes, “I thought it looked manly for him to smoke a cigar and I didn’t give it much thought, until it began to come so often—then our trouble began. When I woke up, I found that he had become a drunkard. The class of men that he worked with was made up of drinking men, and he always said that he felt he had to be a man among men” (37). According to Emma, L.P. would spend all his wages on “drink,” and L.P. denied it: “He got despondent afterwards, and declared that he would never take another drink, but it would not be very long—a space of possibly a week—until he would be at it again and I got to a place where I had no confidence in him” (37). Throughout their heated arguments, according to Emma, L.P. would invoke the rhetoric of manhood, making claims such as the following: “And he would say, “I’ll prove to you that I will be a man yet,” and then he
would get morbid [sic] and say, “I’ll leave this town if I can get away, I’ll go where I am not so
well acquainted, and I will do better” (37).

Both wife and husband, according to Emma, were living in sin. For L.P. it was alcohol, and for Emma it was her desires for material things and activities such as dancing. Nonetheless, Emma did not forsake her wifehood: “Although a sinner, I did my cooking on Saturday. The influence of Mrs. T. stayed with me, and I never worked on Sunday. I always kept my little house clean and did everything to make it attractive, hoping that I could win him” (39). Here, it seems that Emma invokes, in part, duCille’s discourse of deference, providing her husband, or at least trying to, unconditional support. Despite L.P.’s belligerent alcohol-induced behavior, Emma performed her wifely duties with the hopes that she could win him. Though duCille defines the discourse of deference as a method to uplift the race, in the case of the Rays, the discourse of deference is connected to spiritual uplift. The Rays’ relationship was marked my jealousy and insecurity as Emma describes it: “I was of a jealous disposition, and then after attending dances we came home and quarreled. I got so sick of it, that one time after he was arrested for drunkenness, I said to him, “Let’s get religion” (39). Emma, however, struggled to get her husband to go to church with her, and for a while, she rarely attended because she did not want to go without him.

As with many black women’s narratives of conversion, Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed chronicles Emma’s sense of guilt and almost paralyzing anxiety. After periods of religious training and backsliding, after moments where she feels her sinfulness greatly and contemplates suicide, Emma becomes converted after hearing a visiting young preacher’s sermon, though doubtful thoughts ran through her mind: “You can’t be a Christian and live with that man, and you know the Odd Fellows are going to have a dance. If you get saved, your husband will go to
the dance, and he will be flirting, and you will have to go and watch.” She writes the following: “We never went to any place alone. With all our troubles, one would never go without the other. This helped to hold us together” (42). Overwhelmed with spiritual desire, Emma runs to the church altar, falling on her knees and says, “Yes, Lord, have mercy on me and I will serve you all my life” (43). After this moment, L.P. continually mocked her and ignored her requests to attend church with her. What Emma realized subsequently was that the more convinced she became of her spiritual self-realization, the more independent she felt of L.P.’s censure and the more confident she became in judging her behavior by a higher authority than his.

Initially, L.P. did not take his wife’s spiritual ideals seriously. Living during a period where husbands tried to bring their wives into compliance with what a majority of people would have termed female decorum, L.P. had no reason to expect that the woman he had married would defy him. After some times passed, Emma asked L.P. to attend church with her, and he agreed to. At church, Emma watched her husband shift in his seat, and as the preacher tells the church members to talk to the sinners, Emma sees an old lady “speaking to my husband, and he was all broken up and was standing there weeping” (50). Emma witnesses not only L.P.’s spiritual conversion, but also a transformation of a new kind of masculinity, one where crying signaled an evolution in spirit, body and mind. Masculinity is no longer associated with alcohol consumption—it is based in spiritual liberation. In her observation of his spiritual conversion, Emma writes, “I could see that the Lord was dealing with him and after the prayer services he came, walked up to the front where I sat and sat down by me, and I felt I had a real man” (51).

The Rays’ conversions transformed their lives from one rooted in sin to one centered in the Christian faith and on Christian constructions of femininity and masculinity. It also confirms their intimacy as a couple. Basking in this moment, after both have been converted, Emma
writes, “I assure you there was no sleep that night. We talked and sang and prayed and cried and laughed all night long. Then we begin to confess our sins to each other” (52). Immediately afterward, they head to the saloon to find acquaintances with whom they “had danced, drank beer, and played cards,” and they sang, prayed, and shared their experience, leaving them “weeping” (53).

While L.P. experienced the spiritually-induced evolution of his masculinity, Emma similarly experienced an evolution of her femininity. For 30 years, according to her narrative, Emma attached fake hair to her own hair, and referring back to the “Nurse Emmy” photograph: “The reader will notice on page 36 a picture of me when I was eleven years of age, the time that I put on false hair. I wore this for over twenty-five years and it became a part of me. As I had no mother and as I was very proud, after wearing it for a certain length of time, I was ashamed to take it off” (92). Having worn her hair in this style for many years caused her to become partially bald, as she writes in her narrative, because the wires that ran through to “hold it on and make it light and puffy” killed the roots of her hair. Even worse was the time, energy, and money to maintain it:

It took me a long time to get my hair all fixed and curled. I had to dye it to keep it black. I spent many dollars upon invisible pins and nets, besides a whole lot of worry as to whether I had it on straight or not. I did not want anyone to know I wore it, and many times I was late getting to church Sunday morning because I would stand before the glass to see if I had it good and secure, and I often tried my husband by taking so much time. I began to get tired of it and I would do it up Saturday nights all ready for Sabbath, but somehow I could not fix it right. (93)

After her sanctification, Emma became increasingly convinced that her obsession with her feminine appearance separated her from God. In order to grow in holiness, therefore, she felt she had to remove the false hair. Initially, L.P. was not supportive of her decision to not wear the hairpiece anymore, and Emma writes, “He said that he prayed the Lord to give him grace to go
out with me, because it brought such a change in my looks” (94). Emma’s reaction to L.P.’s comments illustrate the evolution of her self-esteem: “I went to the stove and threw it onto the fire and said, “‘Praise the Lord, Amen’” (94). The story about her hair ended with these words: “I took my comb and brush and brushed what little hair I had. I made me a little bonnet and put streamers of ribbon and tied them under my chin. The ribbons covered the bald places on the back of my head, where the hair pins had worn the hair off. That night my sleep was so peaceful” (95). What’s implicit in Emma’s dramatic “makeover” is the realization of her longtime struggle with white beauty standards. After all, this awareness stemmed from a comment a fellow white church member made during her testimony:

One time while in Mt. Carmen Mission, a sister gave her testimony and she said that she wondered that if when Jesus came, she would be ready to meet Him, and she thought, ‘What if I should be curling one side of my hair and should run out to meet Him with the other side uncurled, I wonder if He would take me up,’ and it brought her under conviction, and she decided to wear her hair as the Lord gave it to her. (93)

Hearing this testimony, as she writes in Twice Sold, forced Emma to think about herself and her attitude toward beauty ideals: “[The sister] did not know I wore false hair but, if she had taken a hammer and struck my heart, she could not have hurt me worse. I said, ‘That’s all right for her; she is a white woman and has got plenty of hair’” (93). Emma prayed about her struggles, highlighting a moment in church where she states that she heard the devil say, “Woman’s hair is her crowning glory.” (94) Emma’s self-empowered decision shifted her ideas about black femininity beyond the entrapments of white standards of beauty, linking the connections between knowledge, power, and freedom. She experienced a physical conversion akin to her spiritual conversion.

William L. Andrews defines the link between conversion and movement, writing that, “Whether written by blacks or whites, American spiritual autobiography chronicles the soul’s
journey not only from damnation to salvation but also to a realization of one’s true place and
destiny in the divine scheme of things” (Sisters of the Spirit 10-11). For Emma, this identity is
both individual and relational, and even communal because her personal quest was intermingled
with the journey she outlines for the larger community: “We felt very free when we went to
minister to the poor. They always received us gladly. We were made to feel some of the
sufferings of Christ. . . .It was a great pleasure for us to go on the streets, for there we had willing
hearers, and it rejoiced our hearts to sing and testify to the poor down-and-outs on the streets. . .
. The Lord wanted to use us in the slums” (91). The Rays heeded the call to go out into the
that reflected Christian
values despite feeling “misunderstood, by many, both white and colored” (91).

Prompted by their spiritual experiences, the Rays immersed themselves in evangelistic
work among the poor, oppressed, incarcerated and homeless in Seattle. They interpreted living in
holiness as taking care of the spiritual needs of the family of God—that is, all of the people with
whom the Rays came in contact during their travels. Addressing the needs of their communities
involved moving freely, between homes and among streets, leading prayer meetings, preaching
to large gatherings, engaging in informal one-on-one teaching, and counseling those with
personal problems.

In her work on nineteenth-century itinerant women evangelists, Elizabeth Elkin Grammer
uses the phrase “breaking up housekeeping” to describe how nineteenth-century itinerant
preachers responded to the presumptively pressing domestic ideology in order to follow God’s
call to preach. She explains further that “they were compelled by their circumstances to replace
the central metaphor of home with the countermetaphor of homelessness or itinerancy” (34).
Jarena Lee, for example, left home for a week, up to thirty miles away, even though her son was
ill. In *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady*, she explained that “during the whole time, not a thought of my little son came into my mind; it was hid from me, lest I should have been diverted from the work I had to do, to look after my son” (45). This statement clearly describes that her work—“the work I had to do”—at least for that week revolved around being an evangelist, not a mother. Then she used the phrase, one that Grammer picked up on, “breaking up housekeeping,” writing, “I now returned home, found all well; no harm had come to my child, although I left it very sick. Friends had taken care of it which was of the Lord. I now began to think seriously of breaking up housekeeping, and forsaking all to preach the everlasting Gospel” (46). It is telling that Lee chose to use a pronoun—“it”—to refer to her son.

Rather than “breaking up housekeeping,” Emma, along with her husband, created a public domesticity to embody her work with the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), an organization that Amanda B. Smith was also a member of. Emma joined the Women’s Christian Temperance Union after some members visited her church to organize a union among black women. The “colored” unit, as Ray referred to it, was called the Frances Ellen Harper branch of the WCTU, named after the famous poet, abolitionist, and women’s rights activist. When Emma became president of the Frances Ellen Harper unit, she took an active role, going out “and hunt[ing] those that were sick,” and she held weekly prayer meetings and visited jail, testifying to the prisoners, “how the Lord had delivered my husband from drink” (68). Emma’s church minister complained that the group should be doing more church work and less work among those “class of people.” Unfettered, Emma ignored his complaints until one by one, members of her unit dropped out, and the WCTU unit was no more: “After a while some of the sisters began to drop out; though their first duty was to their church, and this was only a
WCTU. Oh! How sorry I felt when they began to get discouraged, because the Lord had saved so many at home and we had our mothers’ meetings. . .our pastor did not believe in the work of the WCTU” (71). Emma continued to do “slum work” with her husband, and also attended the white chapter meetings of the WCTU with her husband because “he was an honorary member” (72).

Emma continued her movement into urban areas because it was another way for her to grow in holiness. She worked with white women mostly, such as Olive Ryther, who was locally known as “Mother Ryther.” Emma and Mother Ryther reached out to prostitutes and held meetings in brothels with the owners’ permission. In the narrative, Emma describes the building as the “octoroon house,” where most of the inhabitants were “bright mulattoes” (75). Emma and Mother Ryther went to great lengths to look for drug addicts, living “under the wharves, upstairs in old deserted buildings,” and any place “they could hide in the daytime from the police” (77). Ray described her work with Lucy, “a bright mulatto” who was a morphine addict and the one-on-one attention she provided to her, which ultimately helped Lucy recover.

After Emma was elected County Superintendent of Jail and Prison Work (of the WCTU), the Rays began temporarily housing released prisoners. Emma explains their decision to do so: “Some of the prisoners who started to serve the Lord, having no home to go to after coming out, would go down into sin again. The policeman would hound them and tell them to move on out of town, and they would often commit crimes since they had no place to which they could go” (74). Though most of the ex-prisoners were white, the Rays recognized a need in the community, established a support system for the most vulnerable and attempted to transform destructive male behaviors in order to support social norms that broadly reflected a Christian worldview. Undaunted and religiously-motivated, the Rays, who were quintessentially outsiders to the
prevailing culture of single white men, eventually brought their public domesticity to Missouri, where they would run a home mission for two years.

In 1900, Emma traveled alone to Missouri to reconnect with family and share with them her religious experiences. She writes, “I had been praying for a long time that God would open the way that I might go back and tell the good news, to my relatives and friends, as to what the Lord had done for me. I had left there in sin and darkness” (103). The plan was for L.P. to join later. While in Kansas City visiting her sister, Emma discovered a lack of outreach, religious and social, to the black community: “There was no work being done among our people in the slums. There was Salvation Army work among the whites and lots of missions, but no rescue work of any kind in the slums where the colored people were. We could see sin and vice ” (106). Her first visit to the Kansas City jail left her heartbroken because she saw “so many of my own women, men and girls from fourteen up, also boys. . . .How my heart went out to them, and I coveted those bright talents for the Lord (114). That experience confirmed for her to “work among our own people,” a phrase she repeats throughout the chapter in order to emphasize her loyalty to her race. Like her decision to stop wearing her false hair, the decision to create a mission in Missouri is her idea; in other words, Emma does not rely on her husband to make these important calls. For the next two years, Emma and L.P. Ray worked “among our own people in the slums, jails, and workhouses” committed to racial uplift and community-building.

The Rays set up their mission in Hicks Hollow, a poverty-stricken area where a substantial number of blacks lived. The Rays focused their work on racial uplift, emphasizing in particular, outreach to black children. Racial uplift, the collective self-advancement of black Americans was an endeavor typically pursued by black women active in the 1890s club movement such as Mary Church Terrell, first president of the National Association of Colored
Women. Terrell, who was highly educated and the daughter of a millionaire, articulated a philosophy that anti-black racism could be diminished by improving the education, manners, and dress of blacks.\textsuperscript{13} As historian Jualynne E. Dodson explains, “The black community universally felt that only collective success could counter white society’s hostility. Committed women whose lives personified devotion to uplifting the race would be important weapons in combatting the attitudes asserting black inferiority.”\textsuperscript{14} Though many have commented on the elitism of uplift rhetoric, Emma, as representative of the black working poor, practiced this rhetoric. She provides the children of Hicks Hollow with clothes, meals, Sunday School, trips to the park in the summer, and as the following excerpt describes, even a warm place to spend the day in the winter:

> Their mothers would leave them without fuel, early in the morning, to go to work, and then they would come into the Mission, poor naked little tots, with their shoes untied and their hair unkept and often times they would be holding their ragged clothes together with their hands. . . I remember our first New Year’s night. The room was packed with children. We had to keep the windows up and we kept chloride of lime in the room because some of them were so unclean. That time we held a meeting almost all night. Quite a number of the children and one or two of the older people were saved. (118)

Thus, as did members of the NACW, Ray provided childcare, education, and moral formation for the children—characteristics that contributed to racial uplift.

Because they lived at the mission, located on the most notorious corner in Hicks Hollow, the Rays shared with their neighbors unsanitary and undesirable conditions. According to \textit{Twice Sold, Twice Ransomed}, the Rays had to walk through mud in winter and summer on dirt streets with no sidewalks, they were awakened by noise from all-night gambling games, and they had to request a visit from quarantine officers every day for a week before the officers finally responded to a smallpox epidemic. Emma wanted to leave the deplorable conditions and move to a more upper class area, but a dream about rescuing “a great many human souls struggling in the muck
and slime” extinguished her eagerness to relocate. She interprets the dream as a divine directive to stay in Hicks Hollow, which the Rays did for two more years.

**Conclusion**

Connecting mobility, marriage, and spirituality, Emma opens up our understanding of a black women’s agency beyond the traditional geographies of 1920s black literature. Contrary to the notions we might have about the marital constraints on spiritual black women, Emma shows the emancipatory potential available to women who heeded a higher call and take to the road—with her husband. Emma frames her life story and the narrative as one of service to God, intentionally highlighting her selfhood, giving voice to her marriage and communities.

Partners both in marriage and in the spiritual and historical objectives of their religion, the Rays chart their mission and autobiography on the terrain of their movements. Emma locates herself in a kind of fluid positionality in which the legitimacy of her spiritual mission, the new self created in her mobility and the place of black women in Progressive Era West are contested and negotiated frequently. Propelled to urban mission work by their conversion and desires of sanctification, itself a movement of the spirit, the Rays enact a rhetoric of mobility that interrogates the spatial and ideological limits of race, sex, and region.

Although her writing could not have influenced the writing of any of the other black women in my study, I suggest that the themes, tropes, and modes of discourse found in her work are, nevertheless a legacy from which black women continue to draw strength and inspiration. She locates and writes the spiritually powerful within the discourses of Christianity, its symbols and truths. Because, however, Emma privileges her spiritual and marital partnership, her representations of the marriage is closely connected to collaborative authorship, and I would argue that she creates a unique form of collaboration through the intricate relationship she
establishes between herself as an author and her husband, who appears as both a character in, and a second author of, her texts. Ultimately, their relationship emerges as one of mutual influence, construction, and cooperation, and provides readers with a more complicated understanding of the dynamic, dialogic interactions between marriage and mobility. Spirituality and mobile couplehood gives her the pattern and language with which to structure her subjectivity and to make sense of the world.

Notes


2 Sanctification within Methodism is a process that follows conversion, and is described as spiritual perfection—a life free of sin. William L. Andrews describes it as “a purifying of one’s inner disposition to willful sin, a liberation of the soul to follow the indwelling of Christ” (4). See “Introduction” in Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century.

3 The Pacific Northwest was known for being “a seemingly masculine region of loggers, longshoreman, and gold hunters” (5), according to John Putnam. Emma Ray writes in the chapter “The Alaska Gold Craze” that “People came in from all parts of the world and outfitted in Seattle” (98). As urban communities began to develop, so did the consumption of alcohol, and what Dale Soden describes as a “rough and bawdy, wild and open” nature characterized the region. See John Putnam, Class and Gender Politics in Progressive-Era Seattle (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008); Dale Soden, Outsiders in a Promised Land: Religious Activists in Pacific Northwest History (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2015).

4 The end of the book includes many letters of support attesting to their well-recognized urban missions. It’s important to note that the first republication of the text is forthcoming from West Virginia University Press, edited by Barbara McCaskill and Nina Baym.

5 In recent years, scholars have reimagined the geographies of the Harlem Renaissance to include other major cities outside of Harlem that experienced a heightened level of artistic and literary productions during the 1920s-1930s. See Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Glenda R. Carpio and Werner Sollors, eds., African American Literary Studies: New Texts, New Approaches, New Challenges (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2011); and Cary D. Wintz and Bruce Glasrud, eds., The Harlem Renaissance in the American West: The New Negro’s Western Experience (Rutledge, 2012).

6 In general, within the last decade, scholars have become more invested in researching the lives and works of blacks in the West. See Quintard Taylor, In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528-1990 (New York: Norton, 1998); Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California. Eds. Lawrence Brooks De Graaf, Kevin


10 The most active grassroots women’s organization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Pacific Northwest was the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The story of the WCTU reveals a complex movement, and one that exerted a much broader influence than simply the effort to prohibit alcohol. Led by Frances Willard, the WCTU focused their attention on a strict temperance program that emphasized education through moral persuasion. Willard’s philosophy centered on the belief that individuals should work to create a Christian kingdom, and the WCTU adopted the motto “Protection of the Home,” with much of their work focused on protecting women and children from predatory male behavior. Local chapters or unions, as they were called, found working women, single women, and single mothers vulnerable to destructive male behavior, particularly in the urban West. The WCTU established homes and shelters for unwed mothers, hoping to instill domestic skills and Christian virtues among these women.

11 Harper worked with the WCTU for over 30 years in important positions and created many black units of the WCTU.

12 See http://www.ryther.org/history-stone-way-home/


Unsettling Traditions is concerned first and foremost with broadening the list of authors, texts, and themes we consider in discussing not only black women’s writing but also black feminism, a point I’d like to explore in this section. While working on this project, I’ve often wondered whether it would be productive and accurate to label Amanda B. Smith, Nancy Prince, Eliza Potter, Elizabeth Keckly, Susie King Taylor, and Emma Ray as “first-wave” black feminists. First, however, it is important to recognize that “feminism” is a historically specific concept, though it is typically not treated as such. Nonetheless, thinking through a nuanced view of how to redefine the term in order to link nineteenth century and contemporary critiques of patriarchy is imperative. Thus, I rely on Ann duCille’s thinking on this subject since the history and political presence of black women urges us to reconsider a broader conceptualization:

Nineteenth-century black women activists, for example, were the vanguard embodying a sophisticated interpretation of power relations that recognized decades before it became intellectually fashionable to do so—the insidious interplay and interdependence of racism and male supremacy. Nevertheless, my use of the term “feminist” is meant to be [. . .] descriptive rather than prescriptive. (11)

Returning to the waves metaphor, I want to point out that although some feminist scholars have questioned whether it is time “to jump ship,” the waves metaphor continues to remain a dominant conceptual framework for thinking through the continuities and discontinuities with the past as women shaped theoretical understandings for their generation, circumstances, and time in history.¹ It is important to note, however, that the waves metaphor makes complex, transformative movements seem much more neater and more static than the reality. While the connection between white first-wave feminism and the second-wave feminism that came into fruition in the late 1960s and 1970s is clear, the link between first-wave black feminists, if we
can use that term to describe black women who were abolitionists, suffragists, anti-lynching crusaders, and temperance advocates, and second-wave black women involved in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements is less clear. I’d like to take a moment to reflect on this disjuncture, contemplating how the women in this study might fit into the conversation, and, how they might, perhaps, help us understand black women’s agency through Valerie Smith’s arguments that black feminism is “a series of overlapping, discontinuous, and multiply interpretable discursive sites” (xviii).

During the second-wave feminist movement, many black women faced a dilemma their assumed predecessors seem not to have confronted—that is whether to choose between a movement of white women or a black movement aimed at liberating black people. Black women such as Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Pauline Hopkins, Frances E.W. Harper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Harriet Jacobs were not blind to racism in white organizations, nor were they insensitive to the sexism existing in black organizations. They confronted these issues as they struggled for justice. In a speech before the Eleventh National Women’s Rights Convention in 1866, Harper related the facts of her situation following her husband’s sudden death, and concluded that she would have been treated differently had she not been a woman. Moreover, she also told the white women that while they spoke of rights, she spoke of wrongs and related the injustices suffered by African Americans and the many insults suffered by women because they were black.²

The recognition of a unique black women’s standpoint in the United States predates the label black feminist. When Patricia Hill Collins compellingly and dynamically theorized a “distinctive Black women’s standpoint” in the most influential scholarship in black feminist theory, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*
(1990), she built upon a legacy of the aforementioned nineteenth-century women, and numerous others, theorizing, conceptualizing, documenting, and exploring the historical and lived experiences of black women. If we describe the women in this project as having a black feminist standpoint, then we can accurately state that their narratives offer readers analyses of the national and transnational (in the case of several of these texts) sociopolitical landscapes from a particular viewpoint, where black women’s lives and experiences are centralized in the critical assessment of the worlds in which they live. “These voices of African American women,” as Collins argues, “are not those of victims but of survivors. Their ideas and actions suggest that not only does a self-defined, articulated black woman’s standpoint exist, but its presence has been essential to black women’s survival” (93).

In appropriating the language of domesticity in their narratives, Amanda Berry Smith, Nancy Prince, Eliza Potter, Elizabeth Keckly, Susie King Taylor, and Emma Ray revised and expanded upon the concept of womanhood while insisting upon telling their own stories. Does this make them feminists? I struggle with providing a definitive answer, and perhaps, that’s less important than locating black women’s agency, understanding their lives and actions in historical circumstances that produced them rather than debate their lives—or their histories—in anachronistic terms. Nineteenth-century black women used their pens and voices to enter public discourses on issues that ranged from diasporic kinship, domestic servitude, the role of women in wartime remembrance, and intra-racial marriage.

At times, their narratives read like one long struggle to find meaning and give order to lives for which there were few precedents. Speaking the language of their culture, the language of domesticity, these women found themselves, perhaps inevitably, constructing their lives on paradoxical or competing terms. And yet, they creatively responded to the problematic contexts
they encountered as writers and narrators, and this offers us a rich archive about race, gender, and class that illustrates the multidimensionality of black women’s lives. Even if some narratives are more popular than others, it is important to recognize that these texts do not comprise a monolithic tradition.

While Amanda Smith lived a relatively long life (1837–1915), and many significant events of American national history took place during this period, none of these events became an identifying context for her life and thoughts. For example, although she lived during the time of the Civil War and Reconstruction, she devotes hardly any attention to the anti-slavery movements. And while she self-identifies as a Christian woman and feels particularly at home in Holiness meeting and Methodist churches, her sojourns were not sponsored by any church or denomination. She does, however, place much emphasis or value in her identity as a woman, and a black woman at that. Her title reinscribes both her gender and race with the title of “Mrs.” and the word “colored.”

Because feminist criticism has privileged a certain narrative of black female agency, contemporary readers may find unsettling that Smith, who was born into slavery, utilizes problematic binaries between Christian/heathen and civilized/savage, for example, as part of imagining herself as an active agent within the context of public life. Throughout her narrative, however, Smith responded, both subtly and emphatically, to patriarchal treatment towards her. For example, she often commented on the disapproval of male clergy in the United States and in the countries that she visited: In 1870, when the African Methodist Episcopal church held its first general conference in the South (after having it only in the North), Smith, who was making a name for herself travelling alone to different churches and camp meetings, was looked on with suspicion. “I was eyed with critical suspicion [sic] as being there to agitate the question of the
ordination of women. All about, in the little groups that would be gathered talking, could be heard, “‘Who is she?’” “Preacher women” and “I mean to fight that thing” were the answers (200). While preaching in England, Smith was attacked “because I was a woman; not that I was a black woman, but a woman.” (281). In India, she was again confronted by hostility by those “who were much disturbed because I was a woman. . . . so they had nice articles in the daily papers; when they wrote me kind letters, and bombarded me with Scriptural texts against women preaching” (321). Smith’s responses to these hostilities are one of subdued surprise and annoyance, where she draws upon the tenets of Christian perfection, which she tried to embody at all times. In thinking about Mahmoud’s theories of agency, we could interpret Smith’s practice of these so-called feminine virtues such as resignation and obedience as a means to carve out space for herself and emerge as an active participant within organized Christianity’s ranks.

I want to look at another example from Smith’s An Autobiography that is noteworthy in Smith’s representation of her gendered agency. According to her narrative, in 1887, some recently arrived African American emigrants arrived in Liberia. A welcome meeting had been planned for them. When Smith heard of the meeting, she wanted to greet them but she had been told no women could attend that meeting. “Then I was anxious than ever,” she writes and “womanlike, I became suspicious, as well as curious” (414). Claiming her rights, she says to herself, “Why can’t I go? These emigrants are from my country, and I have a right to go, and I will” (414). Smith relates a conversation she has with another woman who asks Smith whether she will be attending the meeting.

“Yes, I said.
“Oh, my husband says there are no women going, and he will not let me go.”
“Well,” I said, “you have a husband to obey, but I have not, so I am going.”
“The seats will be full,” she said.
“All right, I will take my own chair.” (415)
And Smith was good on her word, musing, “They all knew I was a kind of privileged character anyhow, and generally carried out what I undertook” (415). Upon her arrival at the meeting, Smith placed her chair in the middle of the aisle, stating, “I think they thought that I wanted to talk; but that was a mistake. There was talking enough done to have build a tower, if there had been anything in it” (415). By emphasizing her silence and the decision to place herself in the middle of this space, Smith challenged the male exclusion and drew on silence as an empowered gendered communication. I don’t want to sidestep the detail where Smith seemed to subscribe to the idea that husbands were allowed to control their wives, but even the most progressive thinkers at that time assumed that women needed to be controlled by men. Here, her commentary is laced with a pithy sarcastic critique of the settlers’ criticalness of white people: “When they were all through expressing themselves and heartily welcoming the emigrants to their country, this free country where they were not oppressed by white men, the country where they could be men where they had the rights of the law, and were independent, and all the other big things we can say, then they asked the emigrants to speak” (415; Smith’s emphasis). Here again, we see Smith entering in these debates about black citizenship, offering a perspective that has been overshadowed by the opinions of prominent black male leaders of the period.

On the somewhat opposite end, there exists those radical moments where perhaps the nomenclature “feminist” might be appropriate. Though we think of the transnational work of Nancy Prince as operating within the bounds of accepted feminine activities, an account in *Women’s Era* demonstrates that Prince’s actual labors were far from restricted to those deemed properly feminine, according to Carla Peterson (98). This short article, according to Peterson, recalled Prince’s successful rescue of a fugitive slave from slave catchers in Boston in 1847—a significant event she withheld from all three editions of her narrative. Moreover, as other critics
have noted, Prince is equally silent regarding her activities with the suffragist movement and does not recount her participation in the Fifth National Woman’s Rights Convention in 1854, where she lectured on the firsthand experiences and observations of American slavery witnessed during her inadvertent journey along the American southern coast while returning from Jamaica.

**Black Feminism in the Reconfiguration of American Literature**

This project has grown out of a belief in the possibilities that black feminist literary theory creates, particularly as a strategy of reading, as I mentioned in the introduction.

For example, in 2010, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, published Ann duCille’s essay, “The Short Happy Life of Black Feminist Theory.” duCille explores the following question: “What does black feminist theory have to offer to that which is not its own?” (32) The title of the essay plays on Ernest Hemingway’s canonical short story “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” which as duCille points out has received ample critical attention because of its gender politics—its overt display of heroic manhood and its negative treatment of womanhood—yet little attention, in terms of its racial dimension, despite its African setting. While the story seems not to have much to offer with respect to an “Africanist” presence—there are black characters but they are not entrusted with any written lines beyond “Yes, Bwana,” and thus they only serve to provide “local color” or to “add atmosphere.” Even the animals (the wounded lion) are given a voice while the Africans are not. Recalling Toni Morrison’s argument that the Africanist presence is most often experienced as an absence, and attending to her call “for a critical praxis that analyzes the effects of racial ideology,” i.e. “racist inflections on those who perpetuate racism,” (35) duCille sets out to examine the story from a black feminist perspective, which, to her, adds to the story a level of complexity that would be otherwise lost.³ She argues:
Black feminist theory might expose and explore the flip side of this silence—not the black presence that is absented from the text, but the white omnipresence that pervades every page and yet is all but silent about itself, as whiteness perennially has the privilege of being. We need to interrogate how whiteness works not merely as a “racist inflection” in “The Short Happy Life” but ultimately as the single most deadly presence in what is arguably literature’s most notoriously exotic and dangerous scene: the African landscape. Put another way, black feminist theory brings to the critical fore the textual fact that in Hemingway’s Africa, it isn’t conventionally wild animals, venomous snakes, deadly disease, or savage natives who kill the white man; it’s his own white male privilege gone wild. More succinctly still, it’s whiteness itself that kills, whiteness in the figure of the most civilized of all creatures: the white woman. (40)

Demonstrating, in a compelling way, the application of black feminist theory to non-black texts, duCille shows that as a mode of analysis and a strategy of reading, black feminist criticism has lost none of its strength and potential, and that there are still new paths to take, new trajectories to chart in the twenty-first century.

The selection of autobiographical works by Nancy Prince, Amanda Berry Smith, Eliza Potter, Elizabeth Keckly, Susie King Taylor and Emma Ray is intended to contribute to ongoing debates in the fields of African American literature about its changing canon and praxis. For example, Kenneth Warren’s radical and controversial What Was African American Literature? (2011) reinvigorated conversations about methodologies and historical periodization. Though Warren’s text has a strong masculinist slant, I find his investment to “unsettle” African American literature’s current narrative opens new possibilities for analyzing writing by nineteenth-century black women.

The broader field of American studies—namely literary studies—becomes a forum for a variety of narratives and a testament through which seemingly marginal subjects claim a subjective agency not necessarily grounded in being black, male, and privileged. More strikingly, perhaps, as the autobiographical texts in this project suggest, this project contests an early truism that conceptualizes domesticity—as constructed by separate spheres logic—as private, white,
and apolitical. Concepts and issues thought to have been in opposition to one another, these texts show, are in fact interdependent and mutually constitutive, and domesticity as deployed in these narratives unsettles what we know about the conceptualization and intersections of race, class, nation, empire, and citizenship as it does about gender.

Together, these six narratives challenge easy assumptions about what black women were doing during the mid-nineteenth century through the early-twentieth during the “high” points of early black literary productions. Collectively, they challenge our assumptions about what characterized their pursuit of action and agency in public worlds, the worlds of labor (spiritual and physical), and professional work, and the worlds beyond the borders of the expanding nation. Even when these women reflect on domestic life in the home, they do not simply recall an early life but they tell a story about coming of age as a process of experiencing and negotiating constraints and possibilities of gendered, sexual, and classed difference. These writings foreground the continually mobile and fluid social locations occupied by black American women during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They also expose the variety and unpredictability of becoming national subjects and the gendered and racialized identities subsumed in the national narrative.

By grouping the narratives of Nancy Prince, Amanda Berry Smith, Eliza Potter, Elizabeth Keckly, Susie King Taylor and Emma Ray, I argue against the tendency to overinvest in the slave narrative as the mode of nineteenth-century black literary and cultural production and call for a more nuanced understanding of agency, subjectivity, experience, and identity available in nineteenth-century black women’s autobiographical writing. I challenge a reading of the black nineteenth-century as predominately a period of anti-slavery agitation or “race” work and call for
approaching this time as one generating heterogeneous narratives of accommodation and resistance, particularly, within sites and practices of domesticity.

Twenty-first century scholars have, in many ways, heeded this call. Regis Mann’s essay “Theorizing ‘What Could Have Been’: Black Feminism, Historical Memory, and the Politics of Reclamation” (2011) points to the ways in which contemporary black feminists are reclaiming the past and seeding the future of black feminist criticism. The anthology *Black Women’s Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (2007), edited by Kristin Waters and Carol B. Conaway is but one example of a work including essays by contemporary feminist critics who take seriously the intellectual feminist traditions of the nineteenth century. Resurrecting black women writers from the past is part of the necessary work that feminist critics still undertake, just as they continue to take diasporic perspectives, as visible in *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (2015), edited by Mia Bay, Farah Griffin, Martha Jones and Barbara Savage, and Donna Weir Soley’s *Eroticism, Spirituality and Resistance in Black Women’s Writing* (2009), which makes use of feminist theory in reading women writers of the African diaspora.

In 2006, duCille wrote: “[B]lack feminist literary studies emerged on some level as a politics of reading without a particular politics, a discourse diverted from the essential task of defining its own interpretive strategies by the need to jockey for position within American, African American, and women’s literary traditions” (42). To be real, that is, authentic, black feminist theory must be diverse, flexible, able and willing to embrace unique ways in which creative ideas emerge from the pens of black women writers. Slowly, perhaps, but definitely, the work of black feminist theory is taking place.

177
Notes


2 http://www.blackpast.org/1866-frances-ellen-watkins-harper-we-are-all-bound-together-0

3 duCille explains that her own understanding of the story thirty or forty years ago was simplistic and naïve and that the difference between her understanding then and now “has everything to do with the black feminist critical lens through which [she] read[s]” (34).
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Vita

Martha Pitts grew up in a black working-class suburb of New Orleans, Louisiana, affectionately known as “New Orleans East” or “Da East.” She took her chances and “went up North,” enrolling in Princeton University in 1997. She graduated in 2001, and she eventually earned her Master’s Degree in English from George Mason University in 2008. In the years between graduating college and enrolling in Louisiana State University’s doctoral program, Martha got married, gave birth to two amazing children, and got divorced. She will receive her Ph.D. in English in December 2016. Martha plans to continue teaching at Towson University in Towson, Maryland.